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College of Human Sciences™

Play Types and Children's Outdoor Learning Environments

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Introduction

Children use play as a tool for development and to learn about the world around them. Outdoor play is associated with improved social relationships (e.g., Li et al., 2016), increased physical activity (e.g., Baranowski et al., 1993), and better emotional regulation (e.g., Gill, 2014). The outdoor learning environment is rich with new experiences and offers preschoolers new ways to explore. Given that young children spend a lot of time outdoors while at preschool, understanding outdoor play in this environment is important.

Aim

To examine how particular areas of the outdoor learning environment are associated with preschool children's play types.

Research Question

How are elements of the outdoor learning environment associated with preschool children's body play, object play, learning play, and pretend play?

Methods

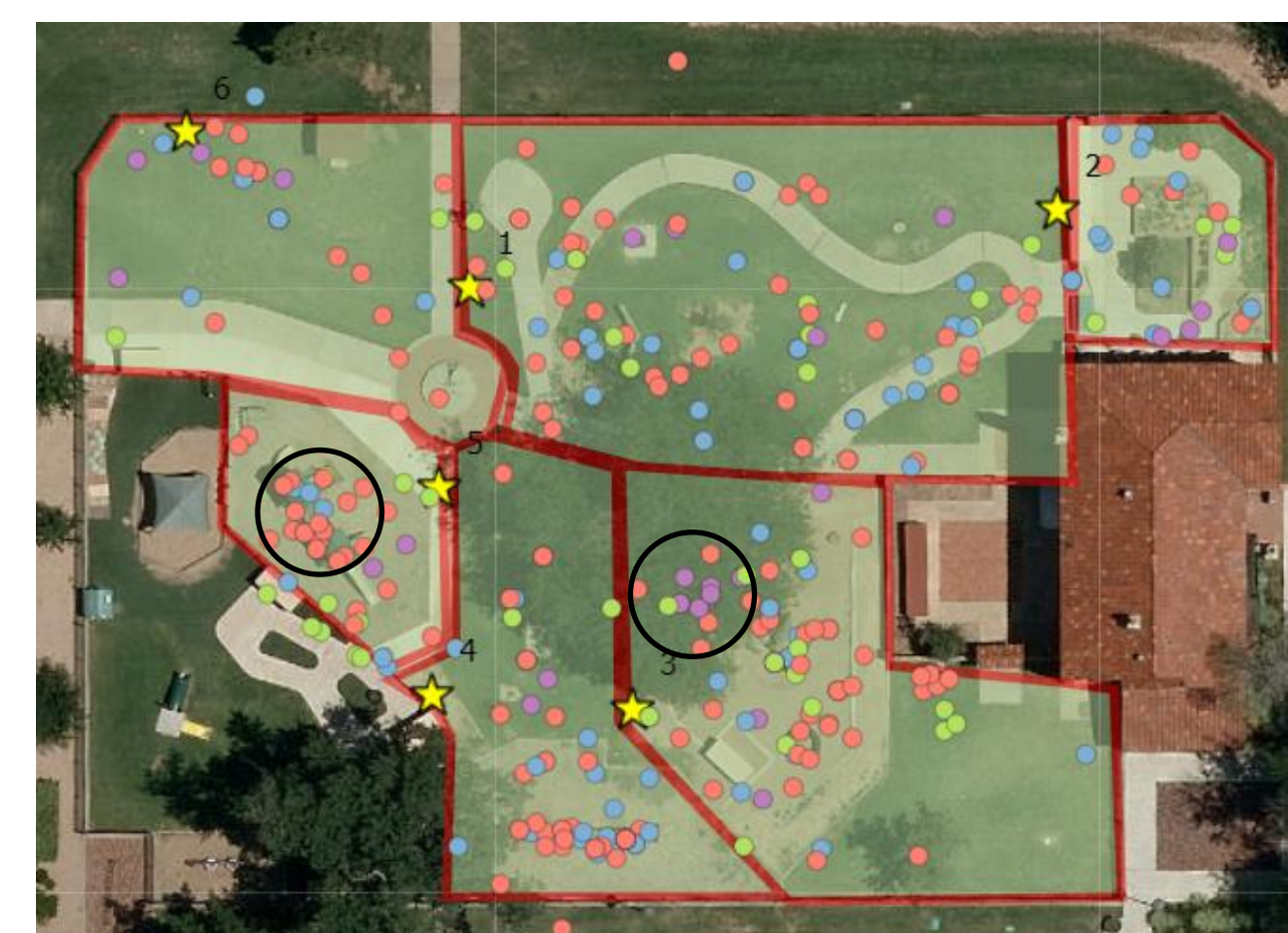
Participants

33 Preschoolers between 3 – 5 years
(observations were completed on 30 children across the 4 days)
16 Female; 17 male

Measures

Behavior Mapping (ArcGIS Mapping Software)-
observing and collecting data about the behavior patterns of those in a specific location

| | Day 1 | Day 2 | Day 3 | Day 4 |
|-----------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Total Number of Data Points | 97 | 67 | 107 | 43 |
| Type of Play | | | | |
| Body Play | 33 | 17 | 71 | 33 |
| Object Play | 43 | 23 | 13 | 8 |
| Learning Play | 7 | 16 | 16 | 2 |
| Pretend Play | 14 | 11 | 7 | 0 |
| Interaction | | | | |
| With Child | 39 | 38 | 32 | 12 |
| With Adult | 21 | 5 | 26 | 7 |
| With Adult & Child | 28 | 12 | 15 | 9 |
| No Interaction | 9 | 12 | 14 | 9 |
| Group Size | | | | |
| 1 | 28 | 12 | 35 | 15 |
| 2 | 46 | 20 | 46 | 11 |
| 3+ | 23 | 35 | 26 | 17 |

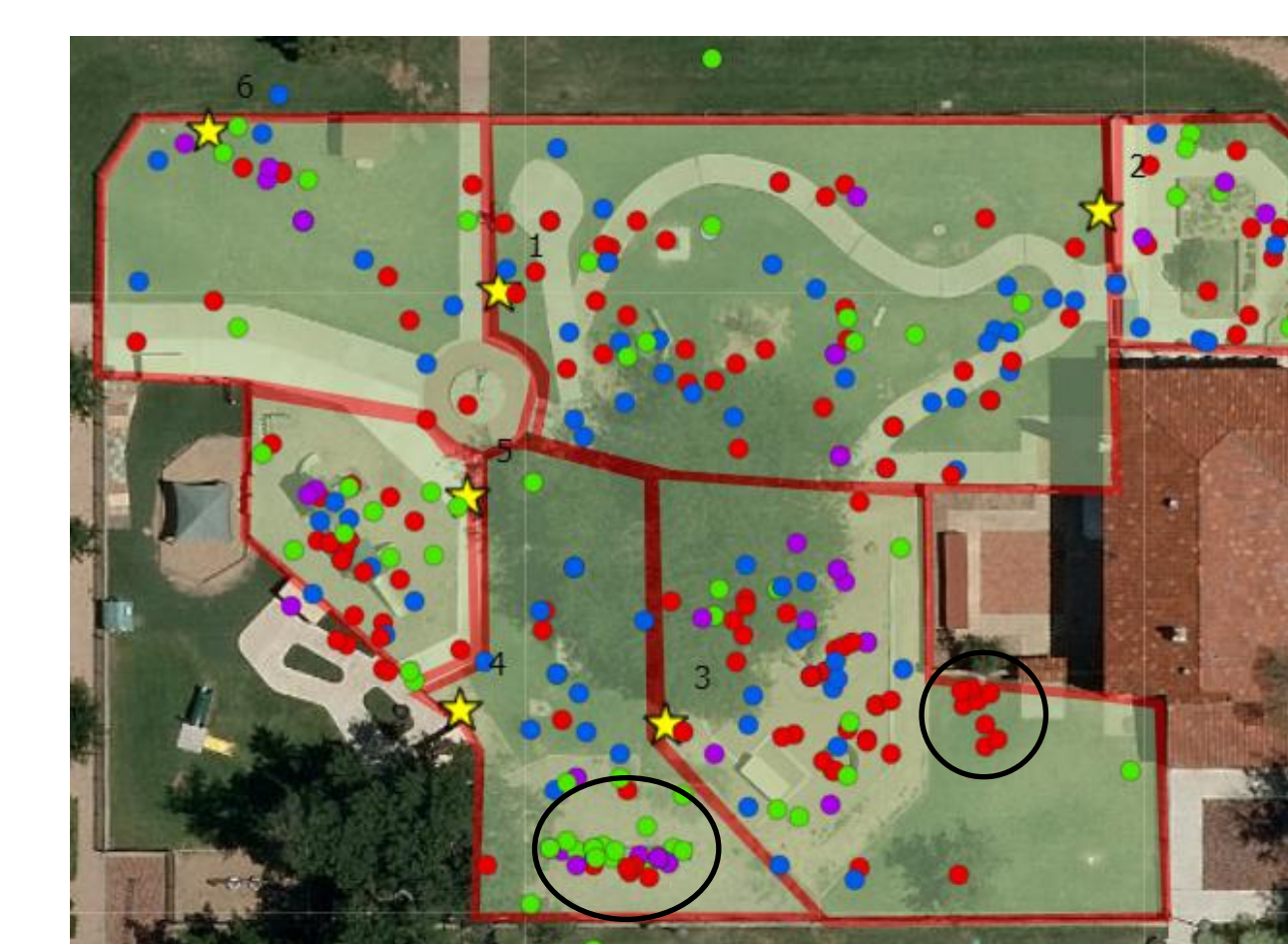


Play Type

- Body Play
- Object Play
- Learning Play
- Pretend Play

Interaction Type

- With Child
- None
- With Adult
- With Adult and Child



Group Size

- 2-Target Child + 1 other
- 1-Just Target Child
- 3+

Impact

Analysis of how children's type of play and social interactions vary by location in the outdoor learning environment (OLE) would indicate what type of play features best promote children's social development. Knowledge of the association between elements of the OLE and children's play behavior could inform how designers of outdoor play spaces for children design those spaces in the future.

Conclusions

Across the four days of observation, body play and object play were the most commonly recorded types of play. The black circles on the pictures show the areas of most interest in terms of play type, interaction type, and group size. These findings provide guidance on how the outdoor learning environment is associated with different types of play, interaction types, and group sizes among preschool children.

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