Preschool children's play opportunities and outdoor learning environments: Association between various elements and cognitive play behaviors

Zahra Zamani

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Abstract

The provision of certain environmental features can foster, or hinder children's play behavior opportunities within outdoor preschool environments. Additionally, natural environments provide diverse spaces that can stimulate children's imagination, learning, and interaction. However, limited research has explored the association between children's cognitive play behavior and the provided elements or behavior settings within outdoor learning environments. This study aimed to understand the potentiality of natural elements incorporated in outdoor preschool settings for children's cognitive play incitement. For this purpose, the research observed the cognitive play behavior interaction of 36, 4-to-five year olds with 23 different elements within a diverse outdoor learning environment. The outdoor learning environment was encompassed of different natural and manufactured elements. Overall, 6801 data points were collected during 14 observational sessions. Based on the chi square analysis, ropes, and rocking equipment afforded the most functional play behaviors. Constructive play was mostly afforded by available natural loose elements, such as flower and sand. In general, the rocks and tree trunks supported the existence of small creatures, such as worms or bugs, affording many exploratory play behaviors. The integration of multi-functional manufactured elements, such as play structures, within a natural environment supported many dramatic play activities. In addition, sticks, mulch, sand, leaves, flowers, and toys were intensively associated with children's dramatic play activities. Games with rules behavior was not extensively afforded by the outdoor environments. However, tires, the play structure, and trees were the most capable elements that afforded this behavior.

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