Pathways to Play: An Observational Study of an Inclusive Outdoor Play Space

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Abstract

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This observational study explores how children interact with the built environment in inclusively designed outdoor public play spaces, focusing on Pathways Park in Seattle, Washington. Redesigned in 2023 through a community-driven process, the park reflects inclusive design principles that support diverse play needs. Using the Playability Model (Lynch et al., 2018) and Play as a Spectrum framework (Zosh et al., 2018), this paper examines how the park's design shapes children's engagement and play behaviors. While not comparing children with disabilities to peers or analyzing identity groups, the study emphasizes how inclusive features promote engagement for diverse users. By acknowledging the historical exclusion of children with disabilities, it highlights how intentional design can counter ableist narratives. These findings contribute to research on inclusive design by offering insights into how children benefit from thoughtfully constructed play environments.

Literature Review

Play and Built Environments

Children spend approximately 80% of their time at home or in community and public spaces (CoC Playful Minds, 2020). This statistic highlights a significant opportunity to integrate learning and play activities into the environments where children already spend much of their time. Play is a fundamental aspect of childhood, influencing all areas of development. This paper will specifically explore outdoor play, although analyzing how children engage within built indoor environments is also a critical area of study. While this paper focuses on outdoor play, it is important to note that many benefits of play exist regardless of location; specific benefits of outdoor play will be analyzed.

Outdoor play is linked to increased physical, cognitive, and social development in young children (National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC], 2022; Pesch et al., 2022; Schlesinger et al., 2020). Oh (2024) analyzed the specific and direct benefits of outdoor play across major developmental areas, including social, physical, and emotional development. He noted that outdoor play has direct benefits on children's development and stressed the importance of teachers' awareness of their views on play in outdoor spaces. Schlesinger et al. (2020) also examined the benefits of various types of play and built on Zosh et al. (2018), who argued that viewing play as a spectrum allows for analyzing various aspects of cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development. This paper will investigate how intentionally designed outdoor play spaces impact children's interactions within them.

There is a belief that play and learning are separate; however, this false dichotomy is not supported by current research on playful learning (NAEYC, 2022). Playful learning as a concept "embraces the idea that children and adults learn from play and learn best when play includes intentional learning goals, what we call guided play" (Schlesinger & Hirsh-Pasek, 2019). Since play is such an integral part of development and learning, research on how to promote playful learning in publicly designed spaces is growing. An example of intentionally built playful learning spaces is Playful Learning Landscapes (PLL), an evidence-based initiative that applies research-backed science to transform public spaces into playful learning environments designed with community-based research models (Pesch et al., 2022). Research highlights how playful learning landscapes, such as those described by Schlesinger and Hirsh-Pasek (2019), can transform existing public spaces into learning and skill-building environments that encourage creativity, collaboration, and problem-solving. Although this paper will not focus on PLL, it will incorporate ideas informed by the initiative, encouraging a deeper understanding of intentional design and the power of building spaces for and with the community. This sentiment is also echoed by the concept of playful minds, reinforcing the idea that built environments can actively inspire curiosity and engagement when intentionally designed to foster learning and play (CoC Playful Minds, 2020).

Co-Design and Community-Driven Play Spaces

When designing spaces for and with communities, it is crucial to consider the principles of co-design and how built environments reflect the communities they serve. Pesch et al. (2022) emphasize the importance of involving community members, including children, in co-design processes that create spaces reflecting cultural relevance and inclusivity. It is essential to

consider whose ideas are included when designing spaces meant for all. Pathways Park, the focus of this paper, was intentionally designed with a teen advisory board contributing to its planning and development (Eli's Park Archived Website). Co-creation and co-production, as explored by Williams, Smith, and Ward (2023), further emphasize the importance of involving community members, especially children in designing environments that promote health and well-being, ensuring that spaces are meaningful and accessible to diverse users. Their research on co-creation and co-design also highlights the need for clearer terminology and operational definitions in the field (Williams, Ward, & Smith, 2023). While this paper does not explore the broader development of co-design, co-creation, and co-production, it will examine how people interact with an inclusively designed play space.

Benefits to Inclusive Design

Intentionally designed outdoor play spaces support children's development while addressing historical inequities in access to play, particularly for marginalized groups. Inclusive design in public play spaces extends beyond physical accessibility to foster a sense of belonging and equitable engagement for all children, regardless of ability. Pesch et al. (2022) demonstrated how inclusive, culturally informed co-design processes can transform public outdoor play spaces into community hubs that invite diverse types of intentional interactions and learning. Similarly, Williams, Smith, and Ward (2023) highlighted the importance of designing environments that accommodate varying needs, illustrating how such spaces promote health, social interaction, and developmental benefits for children with and without disabilities.

Inclusively designed outdoor play environments challenge ableist narratives by creating opportunities for all children to experience playful learning, joy, and the developmental benefits

that play offers. It is critical, when thinking about play, to use inclusive definitions and ideas such as those offered by Zosh et al. (2018) in their paper "Accessing the Inaccessible: Redefining Play as a Spectrum." In their paper they present an alternative framework (Figure 1) that was used to inform the structure of my observations.

Figure 1- Zosh et al. 2018

Zosh et al. (2018) examined various definitions of play and how these concepts have evolved over time. They reference foundational scholars such as Piaget, Vygotsky, and Garvey, as well as modern scholars like Smith and Pellegrini, Hirsh-Pasek, Stuart Brown, Weisberg, and Hassinger-Das. Building upon these theories, they present an alternative approach by defining play as a spectrum. This definition emphasizes that play experiences are not one-size-fits-all but exist in a multitude of forms, all equally valued. In their framework, depicted in Figure 1, they illustrate a horizontal spectrum rather than a hierarchical system, indicating that one type of play experience is not inherently better or higher than another. They define play using graphic in Figure 1, and their model as follows:

> *"Play as a spectrum – that ranges from free play (no guidance or support) to guided play and games (including purposeful adult support while maintaining playful elements), we better capture the true essence of play and explain its relationship to learning." (Zosh et al, 2018, pg, 1)*

Their framework highlights the spectrum of play experiences and the factors that might affect play, such as who initiated it, who directs it, and if there is a specific learning goal attached. Viewing play across a spectrum helps remove some of the harmful stereotypes and ideas about play that occur when only one definition or type of play is included and valued.

When play spaces are created using a similar framework, it allows for the development of spaces that offer different play experiences across this spectrum. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the intersection of various play types using this framework, it was utilized to inform the creation of the data analysis sheet. By employing inclusive frameworks and understandings of play, such as those offered by Zosh et al. (2018), various types of play can be supported, leading to the development of play spaces that include structures and designs reflecting this inclusive framework.

The Playability Model and Frameworks for This Paper

In this paper, I will utilize the Playability Model from Lynch, Moore, Edwards, and Horgan (2018) and incorporated insights from Zosh et al. (2018) on "Play as a Spectrum" to analyze Pathways Park from both structural and interactional perspectives. OBJ

In inclusively designed play spaces, it is essential to incorporate various locations and structures that offer different types of play value. Therefore, I chose to use the Playability Model and focused my analysis on the play values observed in the park. The model, included in Figure 2, lists 19 different play value dichotomies that highlight different types of play and the tension between competing play values within a space. When considering play value, it relates to viewing play as a spectrum and recognizing that different types of play have different play values (Zosh et al., 2018). If a park is designed to promote only one type of play or definition of

play, it does not encompass the spectrum of play experiences. Schlesinger et al. (2020) echo this sentiment and highlight how different values of play and viewing play as existing on a spectrum embrace the idea of how children learn while also respecting the whole child and supporting their development across domains.

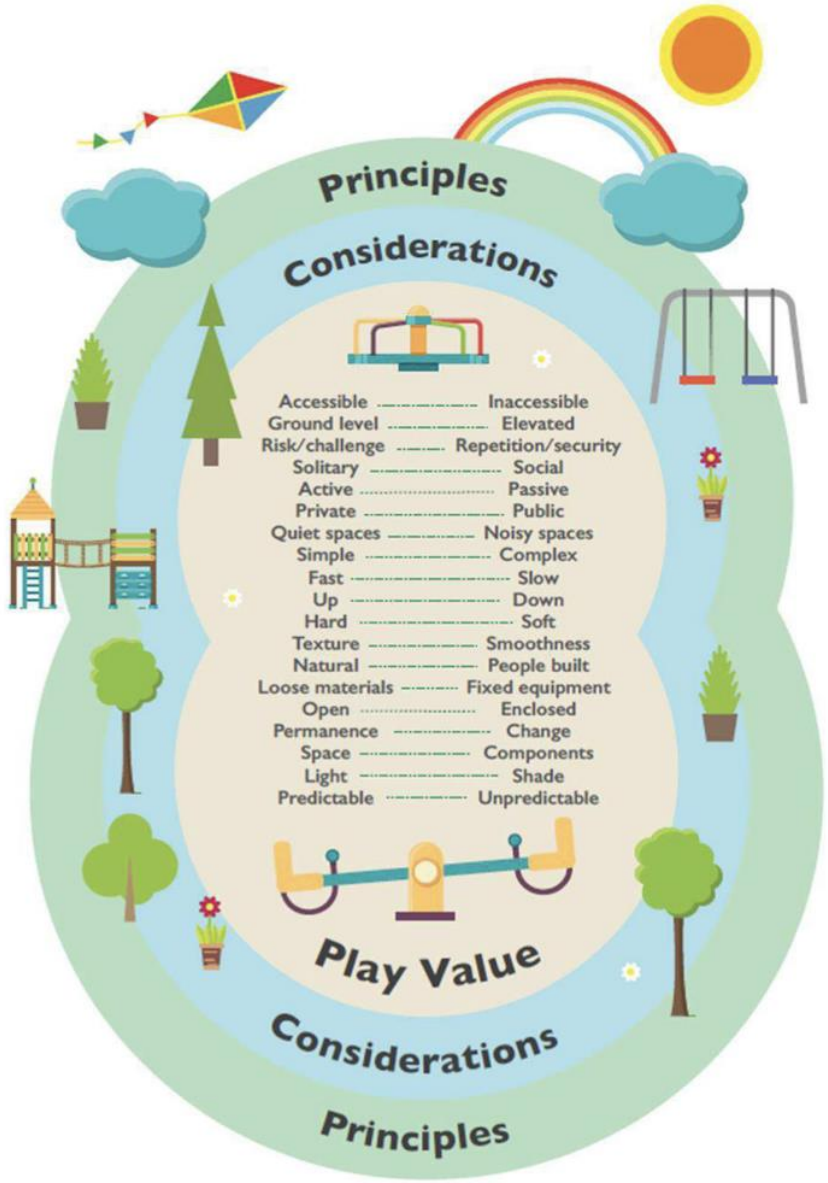

Figure 2 -PlayAbility Model, Lynch, Moore, Edwards, & Horgan, 2018

Playability Model: Core Considerations and Principles

This project utilized the Playability Model from Lynch, Moore, Edwards, and Horgan (2018) as a foundational element of data collection at Pathways Park. To understand inclusive play spaces using the model depicted in Figure 3, it is essential to examine the outer two rings and how they inform and facilitate various types of play value.

The outermost layer addresses core considerations fundamental to the design and planning of outdoor play spaces. These core considerations prompt designers to consider factors such as location, cost, size, free access, maintenance, vandalism, surfacing, and fencing (Lynch et al., 2018). While these foundational elements are crucial, they fall outside the scope of this paper, which focuses on the existing structures, play values, and interactions observed in Pathways Park.

The second ring of the model encompasses principles of inclusive design. Lynch et al. (2018) outline seven principles in their paper, as seen in Figure 3. Although all of these principles are integral to inclusive design, this paper will concentrate on play value as its central lens and core aspect of the model.

Play value is defined as:

> *"Play value is used to describe the value of an environment, object, or piece of equipment for play. Something may be described as having high play value if children are able to play with it in many different ways, integrate it into their own play, or use it to expand or elaborate on their own ideas and actions. Simple play things (for example, sticks, balls, sand) and 'classic' toys or games (for example, Lego™ or playing chasing) often have*

higher play value than complex or expensive toys or equipment" (Lynch et al., 2018, p. 15).

This definition emphasizes that play value is not solely determined by the complexity or cost of equipment but by its capacity to engage children in diverse and imaginative ways. High play value items encourage children to explore, create, and integrate them into various play scenarios, thereby supporting holistic development.

Box 1 Community playspaces should be designed with the following 8 principles in mind

- Principle 1: A rights-based perspective, underpinned by inclusive social policy
- Principle 2: Respect for diversity of age, gender, size, ability, socioeconomic, ethnicity and cultural differences
- Principle 3: Intergenerational spaces: Incorporating amenities as well as play opportunities
- Principle 4: Play value
- Principle 5: Positive approach to risk and challenge in policy and provision
- Principle 6: Design by inclusion: Involving users in the design process
- Principle 7: Inclusion by design: Universal Design
- Principle 8: Designed for inclusion but 100% accessibility and usability is not the goal

Figure 3 - Lynch, Moore, Edwards & Horgan, 2018

Role of Play Value and Inclusive Design

Play value is central to the Playability Model, identified as an essential consideration in the design and development of quality play spaces (Lynch et al., 2018). When parks or public play spaces are designed with only one type of play value in mind, they may exclude children

who could benefit from or need other types of play experiences. This model aligns with the ideas presented by Zosh et al. (2018) in their concept of play as a spectrum, emphasizing that play is not a one-size-fits-all experience and that a range of play values should be present in a space. The Playability Model includes 19 play value dichotomies that reflect competing ideas within a space. When evaluating a play space, it is important to ensure that no single type of play value dominates over others, and that there is a range and spectrum of play experiences. This paper will use these 19 play values and incorporate ideas from Zosh et al. (2018) to inform data collection within Pathways Park.

Designing for various play values is an inclusive practice, as it ensures a spectrum of play experiences that can meet the wants, needs, and interests of all children. This approach ensures that diverse play preferences and abilities are represented and welcomed in the park. By using the Playability Model (Figure 2) and ideas from Zosh et al. (2018) on "Play as a Spectrum" (Figure 1), this paper aims to analyze the structure of Pathways Park and how its design promotes various play experiences.

A Local Example: Pathways Park, An Inclusive Designed Play Space.

Pathways Park, formerly known as The Burke-Gilman Playground Park, is a 7-acre public park in Seattle, Washington. Situated along the popular 27-mile Burke-Gilman Trail, the park connects multiple cities and neighborhoods in the greater Seattle area. It is near Seattle's only children's hospital, the University of Washington, and a large shopping center. Additionally, it is situated within an affordable housing development and is only a few blocks away from the Ronald McDonald House (Shen, 2018; Grygiel, 2024).

History of the Park

The park was revitalized through a community-led effort to create an inclusive outdoor public play space (Shen, 2018). The transformation was inspired by the memory of Eli, a young boy with Down syndrome who passed away due to pneumonia complications. His family and the broader community collaborated to create a space honoring his "superpower of inclusion" (Eli's Park Project, 2020; Grygiel, 2024). The fundraising project in Eli's honor raised nearly $7 million for the park's redevelopment, making Pathways Park, Seattle's second fully inclusive playground (Grygiel, 2024). The park's name, Pathways Park, reflects its design, two looping trails that intertwine and intersect at multiple points, prompting visitors to choose between a smooth, flat path or a bumpy, wobbly one (Grygiel, 2024). This intentional design prioritizes accessibility, considering factors such as terrain, restrooms, seating, size, texture, color, and maintenance.

The project was guided by a design team, a teen advisory board, and a leadership team, all working to ensure that the park reflected community needs. Before its transformation, the park was often underutilized, but today, it serves as a vibrant community gathering space (Shen, 2018).

Structure of the Park

Pathways Park features a thoughtfully designed layout that embodies principles of inclusion and accessibility. The park is organized into five primary zones: Welcome, Play, Explore, Gather, and Sense, each reflecting core values of the park's development, as seen in figure 5. These zones highlight various play values, ensuring diverse experiences for all visitors. The park's design includes 21 distinct features, blending natural elements like grass mounds with built structures such as swings, spinning apparatuses, and climbing pockets. This integration of natural and constructed elements provides a spectrum of play opportunities, catering to different

preferences and abilities. The comprehensive development plan, detailing these features, is illustrated in Figure 4.

Figure 4 - Seattle Parks and Recreation, 2021

Figure 5 - "The Eli's Park Project at Burke-Gilman Playground Park." (n.d.). [PDF]

The Welcome Section. This section highlights that designers want all visitors to feel welcome and invited into the park. It contains features such as, a Gratitude Grove, increased ADA parking, covered picnic and BBQ area, and all gender bathrooms.

The Play Section. This section includes various types of features that provide a range of physical and sensory experiences. Features such as a spinning and climbing play pocket and sand and water features can be found here.

The Gather Section. This area is centrally located within the park and offers community space with seating, shaded and sunny areas, as well as open space. Turf spaces are wheelchair friendly. Wood chips, a common feature in parks is considered ADA compliant but it is hard to

navigate with a wheelchair so Pathways Park invested in wheel-friendly turf to ensure that they went above the bare minimum so that all wheelchair users could access this part of the park (Seattle Time, 2024).

The Sense Section. This part of the park is focused on sensory experiences and offers features such as a sensory garden with different sounds, textures, and visually stimulating elements.

The Explore Section. This area has many features that spread out across the park and incorporate many types of nature and built play structures. This includes things like an elevated council ring, picnic meadow, natural climbing structures, hillside slides, and a hillside play pocket (cove).

All these features and sections are connected by two paths that interweave each other and are designed to offer two different experiences. One smooth and flat, the other rough and bumpy (Grygiel, 2024). This is a symbol of how inclusion and connection mean providing different experiences that can interact with each other: not everything needs to be for everyone but there needs to be things for everyone ("The Eli's Park Project," n.d.). The intentional design reflects that community-centered approach and commitment to inclusion and accessibility on a deep level. The collaborative process exemplifies how inclusive design frameworks can result in equitable, engaging, and intentional play spaces.

Purpose of the Current Study: Playability at Pathways Park.

The purpose of this study is to analyze Pathways Park using the PlayAbility Model and concepts from Zosh et al. (2018) Play as a Spectrum. The research will focus on the play values embedded in the park's design and how visitors interact with its features. By prioritizing

inclusivity and a community-centered approach, spaces like Pathways Park provide all children opportunities for playful learning, peer interaction, and meaningful engagement within their communities. The project was guided by one core research question: How do children interact with the built environment in inclusively designed outdoor public play spaces?

Methods

This observational study was conducted at Pathways Park to assess its play value and examine interactions between children, adults, and materials. All observations were carried out by the student researcher with planning support and supervision from the graduate advisor. Data was collected on five different days during the park's public hours: March 9, 2025; March 16, 2025; April 4, 2025; April 9, 2025; and April 13, 2025.

The research was conducted in two phases:

Phase 1: General Whole Park Play Value Assessment

A one-time, 45-minute general assessment was conducted on March 1, 2025. This observation focused on the park's physical structures, evaluating their design, condition, accessibility, and support for different types of play values. The play values assessed during this observation were drawn directly from the PlayAbility Model shown in figure 2. I observed each play structure from a distance that allowed for clear visibility while minimizing disruption, and I noted which play values appeared most prevalent based on the structure's design and intended use.

Phase 2: Four Focused Observational Sessions

Following the initial assessment, I conducted five one-hour and fifteen-minute observational sessions. During each session, I observed four selected play features in 15-minute cycles, resulting in approximately 1 hour and 15 minutes of total observation per feature across

the five sessions. The actual time spent per feature is detailed in the Results section. All data collection involved unobtrusive observation of public behavior. The only direct interaction occurred when a child asked if I could watch her bike while she played.

Play Feature Selection

Four distinct features were observed: the Hillside Cove & Play Pocket, Sand Pit, Swing Area, and Hillside Slides. For the purposes of this study, the term "feature" refers to a specific structure or area within the park, such as the swings or hillside cove. Another word for feature could be element or play feature. These are terms I use interchangeably. A child was considered "engaged" with a feature if they made any physical interaction with it, even briefly. For example, if a child walked through a play area and touched an element before exiting that would count as engagement. All observations were conducted unobtrusively, and no personally identifiable information, including age, race, gender identity, or relationship status, was collected. This lead me the observed to make assumptions about these identifiers, I will go into more depth on this below in the discussion sections. Observational sessions were paused or rescheduled if fewer than two children were present at the start, following the pre-established data collection protocol. If additional children did not arrive within fifteen minutes, data collection was stopped for that session.

I used a systematic observation method, starting each visit by scanning the playground and selecting the play feature with the most children. I then rotated clockwise to observe each feature for 15 minutes. However, due to social and environmental factors, such as needing to sit in an unobtrusive location or avoiding occupied benches, I sometimes had to adjust this approach. While I aimed to start with the most active play feature whenever possible, situational flexibility was necessary to respect the space and its users.

Each feature was observed for 15 minutes during each session, using a structured observation sheet (Appendix A). Photos of each play feature are included in the Results section for further analysis. The data sheet was divided into five sections: play feature observation/general info, play value analysis, a running record, play observations and additional notes. Each section is described below.

The observation tools were co-developed with my advisor to ensure that is captured consistent data for both qualitative and quantitative analysis. The play observations data table included both qualitative and quantitative data. Quantitative elements included yes/no responses as well as, if yes, circle all that apply (eg. "Was solitary play observed" and "If yes, circle all that apply"). Quantitative data also included number of children at the park, weather, total children who engaged with the element, age ranges, and total time spent during observation. This allowed me to look at data points across elements and days. Qualitative data included the time stamped running notes as well as the notes and examples section in the play observations data tables. This data was then coded used co-created codes which will be discussed in further detail in the Results section.

Play Feature Observation Data/General Info. For each play feature, the following data was recorded:

- **Start and End Time**: To track the duration of the observation for each feature
- **Total Kids at Park**: A count of children present at the park at the start and end of the observation.
- **Engagement**: The total number of children who interacted with the play feature during the observation session.

- **Age Groups Engaged**: Notation of the age groups (Infant, Toddler, Child, Youth/Young Adult) interacting with the feature. These are rough estimates.

Play Value Assessment. For each feature, various qualities related to play values are observed and assessed using the table in Appendix A I marked the play value that was obvious or present during this observation based on use and engagement behaviors. After the 15 minutes I selected which of the two play value dichotomies was most present during the observation, if there wasn't a clear majority I would select both. This data was then converted into the visual PlayAbility models used in the subsequent results sections.

Running Record. A timestamped running record was completed to record observations that would not be captured in the data tables. This running record contained timestamps of which point within the fifteen minutes something occurred. For example, at 2 minutes and 35 seconds a child entered the play space.

Play Observations. Specific play behaviors were observed and recorded using the table in 1:

- **Solitary Play**: Noting whether solitary play occurs and its duration (brief or extended).
- **Cooperative Play**: Observing whether cooperative play occurs and its duration (brief or extended) & adult presence within this interaction.
  - **Adult Presence**: Whether an adult is present, and if so, their level of engagement (e.g., on the phone, monitoring, actively playing).
- **Child-to-Child Interactions**: Noting whether interactions occur, including signs of cooperative behaviors like turn-taking, sharing, and physical movement (e.g., chasing, tag) and if there was an adult present.

- **Interaction with Materials**: Whether children interact with materials or equipment (e.g., sharing toys, throwing objects, using play structures) & if there was an adult present.

Observational Notes. General notes were taken about any unique behaviors or patterns observed during the session. This space allowed for various notes and observations that did not fit into the other categories. This included things such as if a birthday party was happening, notes about additional toys or materials.

Positionality Statement:

Education and critical reflection are deeply connected to my commitment to teaching and learning. I strive toward service leadership, vulnerability, play, and joy in all things. I am an able-bodied, white, cisgender female born and raised in the Pacific Northwest. Growing up, I often felt small in the world as I struggled to learn the same way others did and was unsure why I always felt anxious. I sought nature and spent time outside to feel connected to something greater, a type of smallness that I now crave.

I am a daughter, sister, teacher, partner, friend, avid walker, student, softball player, snack enthusiast, live music lover, and a person who is always trying to connect with others. I am the child of two incredible parents who were both first-generation college students. I grew up being told about the power of learning and how education can open doors to new opportunities. My parents tried to always provide my sister and me with ample opportunities for education and extracurriculars. When I was young, I had a really hard time learning to read, and my parents put me into tutoring. When I was struggling to keep up in middle school, my parents sacrificed to send me to a private Catholic high school with smaller class sizes. When I was a sophomore in high school, I was diagnosed with a learning disability and ADHD. This was a life-changing and

eye-opening diagnosis that helped me get the help I needed. I am still learning how to advocate for myself and the support I need to succeed. Although I see now how other avenues would have supported me more, I am grateful for their love and care to help me move forward. Dedication and commitment to my learning are large reasons why I am where I am today, and I do not take that lightly.

Sensemaking & Data Code Development

After completing all observation sessions, I engaged in a sensemaking process with the support of my graduate advisor. Together, we reviewed the raw data by printing out my observation sheets and discussing the patterns, questions, and emergent ideas that stood out during data collection. This process involved revisiting the structured notes, running records, and reflections I had documented during each visit to the park. During these conversations, my advisor prompted me to begin organizing the data into Excel spreadsheets so I could visually track patterns over times/days and across different play features. This helped me see trends and compare data. It also allowed for a more comprehensive view of how children's interactions shifted based on time of day, environmental conditions, or specific features of the playground.

Through this process, we collaboratively identified three major themes that emerged consistently across the data. These categories reflected the ways in which children interacted with other children, how they engaged with adults, and how they used the materials. From these themes, we developed a set of qualitative codes that could be applied across my observation notes to deepen the analysis and draw out larger patterns. Each code was grounded in what I had seen and heard during my time at the park using the running records and data sheets, as well as in the questions and curiosities that arose during my reflections. For example, I noticed distinct patterns in how adults positioned themselves in relation to play, sometimes taking on a guiding

role, other times stepping in to manage behavior, and occasionally becoming co-players in the children's activities. Similarly, children's roles varied depending on the play structure or social dynamics, ranging from independent experiences to energetic participants in collaborative games/large movements with their bodies (running, jumping, riding bikes, etc.). I also noted moments when children used materials in creative or unexpected ways, demonstrating flexibility in how the environment supported play.

These codes were then applied to my qualitative dataset. They served as an organizing framework that helped make meaning of the data and offered insight into how inclusive design might be influencing interactions in the space. A detailed explanation of these codes and how they appeared across different play features is included in the Results section.

Personal Reflection Tools

After some of the sessions I recorded voice memos of myself talking and reflecting on the experience. This happened both during my observations as well as after my meetings with my advisor. These voice memos included noticing, wonderings, and reflections but were largely made up of larger systematic questions and wondering about what I was seeing and the data. The voice memos that were taken after two of my meetings with my advisor were uploaded into an AI platform to help synthesis the wondering and questions. I then reviewed these AI-generated notes and wonderings again to see if there was any new information or themes I was drawing out. The use of AI in this way was not to synthesis or analyze any data from the study but rather as a way of sensemaking to support thinking about large scale questions and patterns that were emerging from my own thoughts.

Results

This observational study investigated how children interacted with the physical features, materials, peers, and adults within Pathways Park, an intentionally designed outdoor public park. Data collection occurred over five observation sessions between February and early April 2025 and was guided by the central research question: How do children interact with the built environment in inclusively designed outdoor public play spaces? By examining both the structural and social dimensions of the park through the dual lenses of the Playability Model (Lynch et al., 2018) and the Play as a Spectrum framework (Zosh et al., 2018), this study generated insights into how this setting fosters diverse types of play and interaction.

Observations were conducted across four designated play features: the Sand Pit, Hillside Cove, Swings, and Slides. During each visit, I documented both the physical and social dynamics occurring at each play area, focusing on how children engaged with the environment, with each other, and with adults. The observation tool (data sheet in Appendix A) was co-developed in collaboration with my advisor to ensure that they captured both consistent metrics for quantitative analysis and emergent patterns and observations for qualitative analysis.

A summary of the quantitative contextual data is shown in Figure 6. This includes the date, start and end times, weather, noise level, and crowd size.

Date	Start Time	End Time	Weather	Noise Level	Crowd Size
3-9-2025 Sunday	12:28pm	1:35pm	Overcast, mild wind	Noisy	Busy (29 kids + 21 adults)
3-16-2025 Sunday	1:15pm	2:20pm	Overcast, had just rained	Noisy	Sparse
4-3-2025 Thursday	2:28pm	3:57pm	Intermittent Sun/Clouds	Quiet (lots of airplane noise)	Sparse
4-9-2025 Wednesday	11:40am	12:55pm	Sunny with clouds, warm	Very Loud	Busy
4-13-2025 Sunday	10:10am	11:15am	Sunny, Warm	Very Loud, lots of crying	Busy

Figure 6 – Summary Data Collection Table

Using the whole park play value assessment conducted prior to data collection, I was able to compare my initial expectations about how each feature might be used with how children actually engaged with those features during observation. This preliminary assessment, shown in Figure 7, offered a baseline understanding of the park's physical layout and the types of play experiences it was designed to support. It allowed me to form hypotheses about the kinds of play that each structure might invite based on its design elements. The shading on the image illustrates my overall play value assessment of the park and what I was noticing cross all play features. Upon reflection I would have liked to have completed a play value assessment for each feature individually as well as the park as a whole. The whole park play value assessment served more as a guide for understanding the play scape and what play values, I felt were most present in the creation of the physical space. There was a very clear presence of accessible and inaccessible features as well as up/down, and repetitive/solitary and risky/challenges. My observational notes indicated that the park was very open and social in nature very limited shade and enclosed spaces.

During subsequent observation sessions, I collected data on how each feature was used in real time and analyzed which play values emerged most frequently. This comparison between

expected and observed use provided insight into how design intentions aligned or did not align with actual behavior. In the following sections, the play value images for each feature will be referenced to further explore these findings.

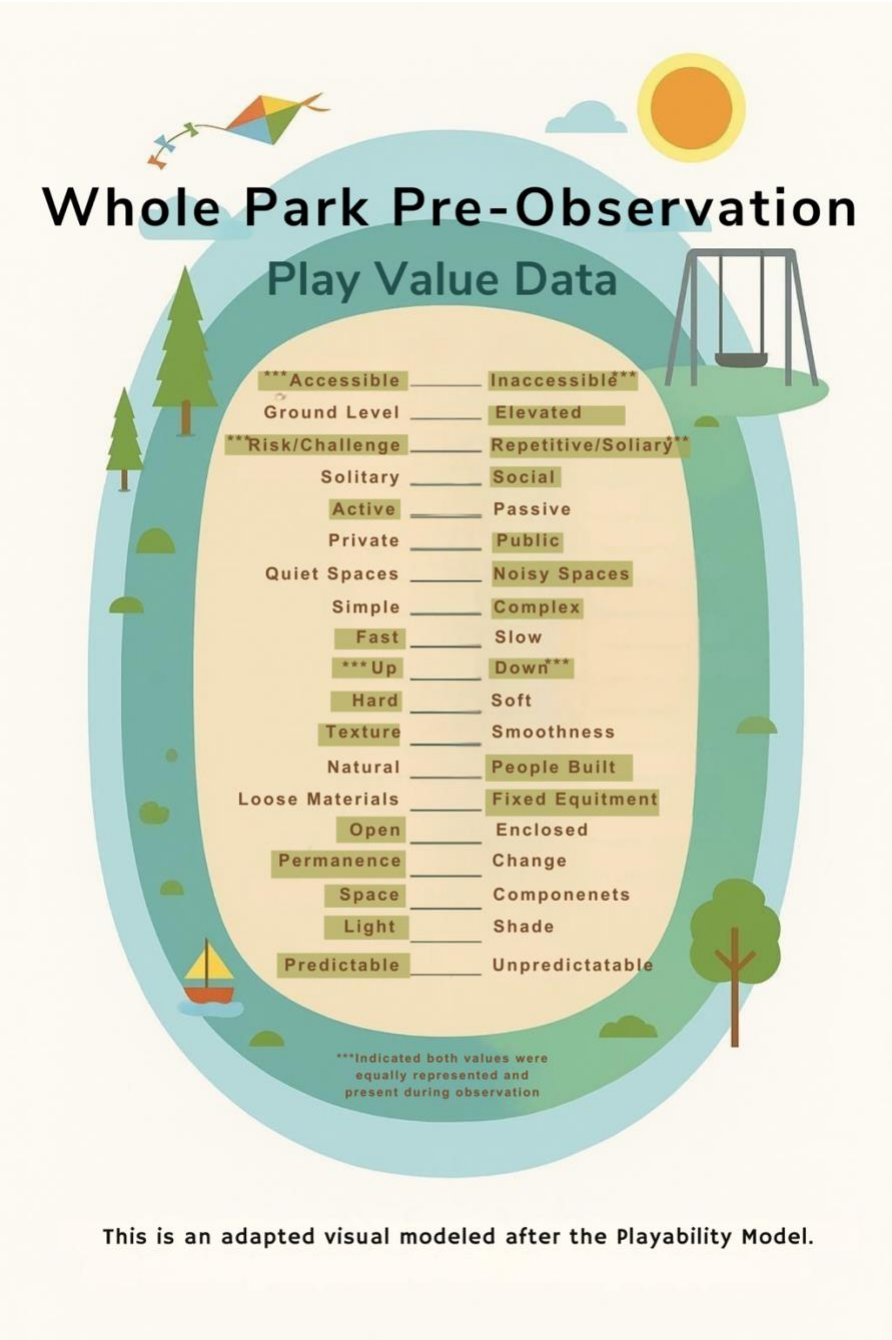

Figure 7 – Whole Park Play Value Assessment Data

In addition to quantitative data, qualitative data was gathered through time-stamped running field notes. These narrative observations allowed for the capture of spontaneous or nuanced behaviors that may not have fit neatly within the structured data tables. After completing all data collection, I worked collaboratively with my advisor to identify patterns within these field notes. Together, we engaged in a process of co-reflection that included reviewing printed data sheets, discussing key questions that emerged, and organizing the data into spreadsheets to observe trends across time and features.

Through this iterative process, three overarching categories/themes emerged: how children interacted with other children, how they interacted with adults, and how they engaged with materials. From these categories, we developed a coding framework that reflected both the observed behaviors and the questions I had begun to formulate during data collection and in meetings with my advisor. This coding system captured a range of roles and behaviors including adults acting as facilitators, moderators/managers, and play partners; children engaging as play partners, participants in large gross motor or gamified activity, and expressions of joy; and moments where materials were used flexibly or in unexpected ways. These codes, which are shown in Figure 8, provided a structure that I used to interpret the qualitative data. The numbers in the table represent the total number times that the code was noted in the qualitative data across all sessions. The data will be elaborated on further in the subsequent sections.

	Roles of Adults as Facilitator	Roles of Adults as Moderator/ Manager	Roles of Adults as Play Partner	Role of Children: Play Partner	Role of Children: Large Gross Motor/Gamify	Role of Children: Joy	Materials: Flexible Use of Materials
Sand Pit	3	11	2	1	0	0	0
Swings	5	5	16	14	5	7	2
Slide	4	8	8	8	9	5	6
Hillside Cove	5	3	3	4	6	1	3

Figure 8 – Data Table Showing Quantitative Code Results

Applying these codes helped reveal consistencies and outliers across play features and sessions. They also enabled analysis of features even in instances where no children were actively engaged with the space at the time of observation. In those cases, I documented where children were instead, and how they were engaging with the broader park environment. While these notes were valuable for qualitative reflection, they were not included in the totals or quantitative data analysis.

The data presented in the following sections is organized by play feature. Each feature-specific section includes an overview of the setting with an image, a summary of the quantitative data, the play values observed, and an interpretation of the qualitative codes.

Swings

The swing area was observed on five separate occasions, resulting in a total of 79 minutes of observation. During this time, children engaged with the swings for a total of 50.85 minutes, meaning that the swings remained unoccupied only 35.6% of the time. Weather conditions

varied across the sessions, with three days characterized by sun and two by overcast skies. These environmental factors, particularly the weather, may have influenced patterns of use and should be considered when interpreting the data. On four out of the five observation days, the overall park atmosphere was coded as noisy, with two of those sessions reaching a "very loud" designation.

Over the course of the five sessions, a total of 27 children interacted with the swing area. This included 14 toddlers, 12 children, and one youth or young adult, while no infants were observed using the swings. Engagement was recorded in four of the five sessions, reinforcing the idea that this was one of the more popular and consistently utilized features in the park. Only a single session had no interaction with the swings during its designated 15-minute window. Within the observations, solitary play occurred in two sessions, while cooperative play was documented in all four, suggesting that the swing area accommodated both individual and shared forms of engagement. These patterns were also reflected in the play values that emerged from the sessions, as detailed in the broader analysis.

The swing area, shown in Figure 9 included three different types of swings, each supporting a range of physical abilities and social arrangements.

Figure 9 – Swing Set at Pathways Park

Among them, the double-facing swing was the most popular. This swing allowed two users (mostly children due to the size) to face one another, which not only facilitated physical interaction but also created space for verbal and emotional connection. This preference was noted in an overheard conversation between a caregiver and a child, in which the caregiver suggested, “Let’s try this double swing,” and after sitting down remarked, “I like this one,” to which the child replied, “Me too, this is fun.” This small exchange shows both the appeal of the swing’s design and the important role that adult participation can play in shaping the nature of children’s engagement and excitement. Viewed through the lens of the Play as a Spectrum framework, this interaction offers an example of guided play, where an adult’s involvement helps support and extend the child’s experience.

The swings were a particularly social and physically engaging feature within Pathways Park, supporting a wide variety of play behaviors and play value. Across all observed features, the swings demonstrated the highest level of engagement, with a total of 27 children interacting with them over the course of the study. This made the swings the most frequently used feature in terms of total participation. Within this space, joy was a recurring theme, consistently observed through children's expressions, body language, and interactions. Both children and adults were regularly seen engaging cooperatively, with the swings generating the highest number of recorded instances of adults acting as play partners. Similarly, children were often observed playing alongside or with each other, highlighting the swings' capacity to support both independent and social forms of play.

Playability Model Data Results

When analyzed through the lens of the Playability Model, the swings demonstrated strong alignment with several key play value dimensions. They received the highest scores in categories such as accessible (5), public (5), fast (5), active (4), social (4), open (5), and fixed equipment (5). These ratings reflect the structure's consistent ability to draw in users (both children and adults), facilitate diverse movement-based experiences, and offer visible and inclusive engagement opportunities. In contrast, the swings scored low in categories such as Loose Materials (0), Enclosed (0), and Private (0), which is indicative of their design as an open, shared, and externally visible play element. Their structure does not lend itself to quiet, enclosed, or imaginative solitary play but instead fosters communal interaction and shared joy. This is also shown through qualitive examples of children using the materials in flexible way and the number of instances of joy that emerged in this feature.

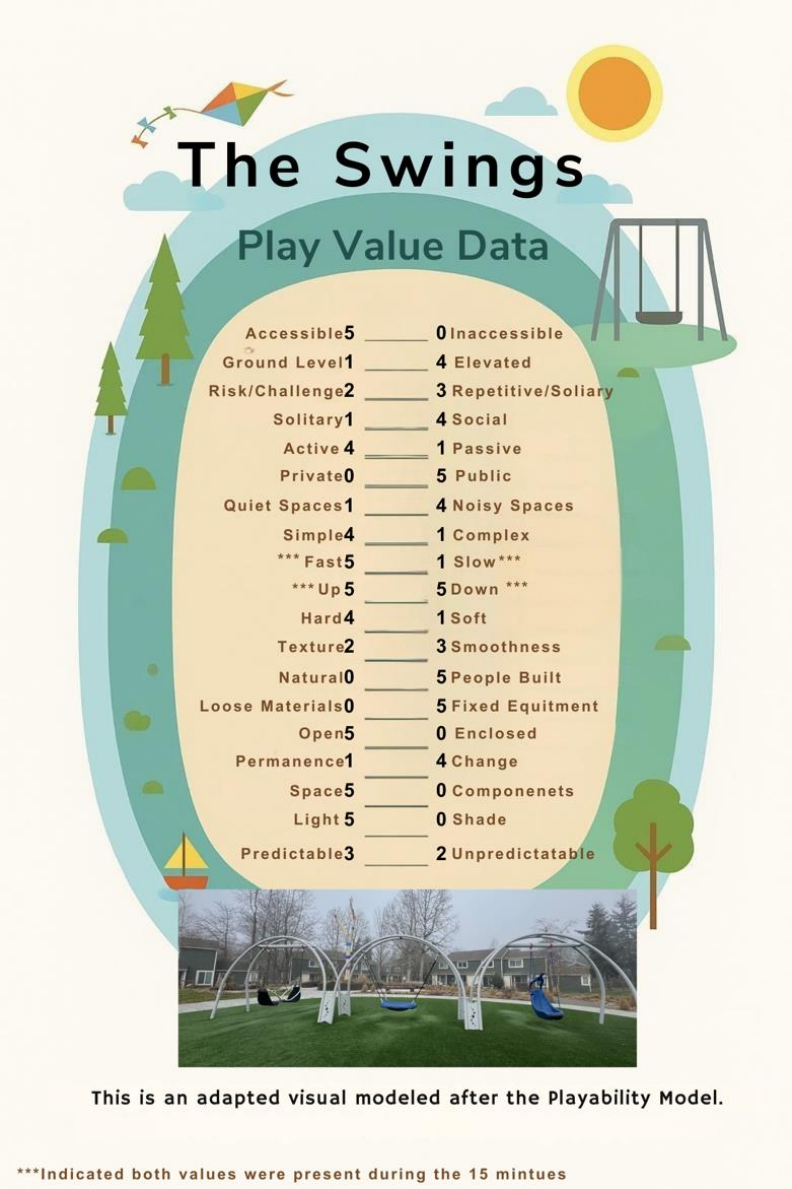

Figure 10- Play Value Data for Swings

The consistency of engagement across different age groups and the active presence of adults reinforces the idea that the swings are a particularly inclusive feature at the park. With three distinct types of swings available, shown in Figure 9, each supporting different styles of movement and levels of interaction, this space accommodated a wide range of preferences, needs, and abilities. It supported multiple ways of being and diverse forms of play. For instance,

Swing 1, the face-to-face swing, was used in creative and imaginative ways, including a moment where two children and parents pretended, they were flying like the Blue Angels. In another example, a mother and child approached and asked to join another caregiver-child pair already on the swing, initiating a shared play experience between seemly unknown families. Children also used the swing structure in nontraditional ways, such as pushing down on its outer edges and lifting themselves into the air using their arms. These examples highlight the swing area's adaptability and openness to diverse interpretations of play. The swings provide a strong example of how a single play element, when thoughtfully designed, can support multiple play values and varied forms of play. In doing so, they demonstrate the potential of inclusive design to foster meaningful and engaging experiences across developmental levels and social contexts.

Qualitive Codes

Figure 11 shows the frequency of qualitative codes observed in the swing area across all five sessions. These codes show that the swings had the highest instances of child-child interaction as well as adult-child interaction.

Roles of Adults as Facilitator	Roles of Adults as Moderator/ Manager	Roles of Adults as Play Partner	Role of Children: Play Partner	Role of Children: Large Gross Motor/Gamifying	Role of Children: Joy	Materials: Flexible Use of Materials
5	5	16	14	5	7	4

Figure 11- Qualitative Code Data for Swings

Interaction with Materials. Flexible use of materials in the swing area was documented in four distinct instances, each demonstrating how children and caregivers used the equipment in flexible and creative ways. Children were observed using the edge of the swing to lift themselves into the air, using their bodies to generate momentum. In one session, two children and two

adults used the face-to-face swing to act out an imaginative “Blue Angels” flying game. I believe that this was facilitated by the nature and design of the swing itself. Another notable example involved the wide, flat middle swing, which allowed for a caregiver/adult and three children at once to stack themselves and swing together. The design and size of this swing made it possible to create a group experience, something that would not have been possible with a standard, single-user swing. These moments of flexible use illustrate how even fixed equipment when designed with an inclusive framework can provide flexible use and many types of engagement.

Interactions Between Children. Interactions between children in the swing area were looked at with three specific codes: Role of Children as Play Partners, Large Gross Motor/Gamifying, and Joy. The role of children as play partners was observed 14 times, indicating frequent instances of cooperative and sustained interaction. Examples included children inviting peers to swing with them, asking to join others already engaged in conversations, or offering ideas of how to play. The design of the face-to-face swing, which required two users, naturally facilitated these types of interactions and encouraged children to seek out social play opportunities.

Large gross motor and gamified play also appeared in 5 recorded instances, where children used their bodies in physically expressive ways, stacking themselves, launching themselves up using their arms, or inventing movement-based games while swinging. de was another consistent theme, with 7 instances coded in this category. This joy was typically shared, rather than solitary, and was expressed through laughter, squeals, and smiling during group activity. The wide, flat swing in the center of the play area supported this sense of collectivity by accommodating multiple children at once, sometimes even being used by a group of three or four. This was also seen on the face-to-face swings since it promoted more conversations and

shared experiences. These combined codes illustrate how the swing area functioned as a highly social and inclusive environment, promoting connection, physical play, and shared delight among children.

Interactions with Adults. Interactions between children and adults in the swing area were frequent and often deeply engaged, reflecting the unique potential of this feature to foster intergenerational play. This was also higher than any other play feature. One particularly illustrative moment involved a mother encouraging her child to try the swing. Shortly afterward, another parent approached and asked if her own child could join. The two children sat together on the face-to-face swing while both mothers stood nearby, pushing them and engaging in conversation. This interaction highlights how the design of the swing not only facilitated cooperative play between children but also supported meaningful adult participation. Unlike a traditional single-user swing, which may limit shared experiences, the face-to-face swing offered opportunities for social interaction that included both children and their caregivers.

In terms of the coded qualitative data, the swings produced the highest number of adult interaction instances among all features observed. There were 16 occurrences of adults acting as play partners, most often through actions such as pushing children on the swings, offering verbal encouragement, or physically participating in shared activity. Additionally, five instances were coded as adults serving in a moderator or manager role. These moments typically involved adults stepping in for safety reasons, helping children navigate turn-taking, or signaling that it was time to leave. One such moment included a parent warning, “You’re going to decapitate,” in response to unsafe swinging behavior. Finally, 5 instances were coded as adults taking on the role of facilitator. These adults provided structure or support for the play experience, offering guidance or offering play ideas.

Hillside Slides

The hillside slide area was observed a total of five times, resulting in a cumulative observation time of 1 hour and 16 minutes (76 minutes). During this period, the slides were actively engaged for approximately 54.4 minutes, with 21.6 minutes (28.4%) left unoccupied. Weather conditions varied, including three sunny days and two overcast days, one of which was notably windy. Noise levels were elevated during four out of five sessions, with three sessions coded as “noisy” and two marked as “very loud,” including one instance described as having “lots of crying.”

Across all five sessions, a total of 24 children engaged with the slide area: 1 infant, 6 toddlers, and 17 children. There were no youth or young adults observed using the slides. Engagement occurred during four out of five sessions, reinforcing the feature’s overall popularity. The single session in which no children used the slide took place on a warm, busy day, suggesting that other features were more engaging during that time, especially since 15–21 children were present in the park.

Solitary and cooperative play were both observed during four of the five sessions where children were present, making the slides the only feature where both types of engagement occurred regularly. This leads me to believe that, due to the variety of play values and types of engagement possible, children had more ways to interact with the feature. As a result, the slides offered more opportunities and flexible choices for play than other features, like the sand pit.

Figure 12 shows the hillside slides, which include several types arranged from right to left: a wide slide, a single-lane textured slide, and plastic handle elements incorporated into the turf hillside. The wide smooth slide, which allows multiple children to descend side-by-side, is smooth and frequently used. Observations included children climbing back up the turf hill

repeatedly and sliding down on their stomachs or while holding small objects. One entry described a child sliding down “the thick arm of the slide,” while another noted a group “talking and sliding in parallel.”

Figure 12: Hillside Slides showcasing the two main slides, to a left a small grassy empty hill, and handles up the right side grassy hill.

Playability Model Data Results

The play value data collected on the hillside slides is shown in Figure 12. The space scored high in Accessibility (5), Active (5), Fast (5), Social (4), Public (5), Open (5), and Light (5). It scored low in Loose Materials (1) and received no points for Enclosed, Shade, Passive, or Private (0), indicating its highly visible and communal nature, which is similar to the swings. These findings suggest that the slides function as an inclusive play space, particularly well-suited to gross motor exploration, peer interaction, and spontaneous joy and play.

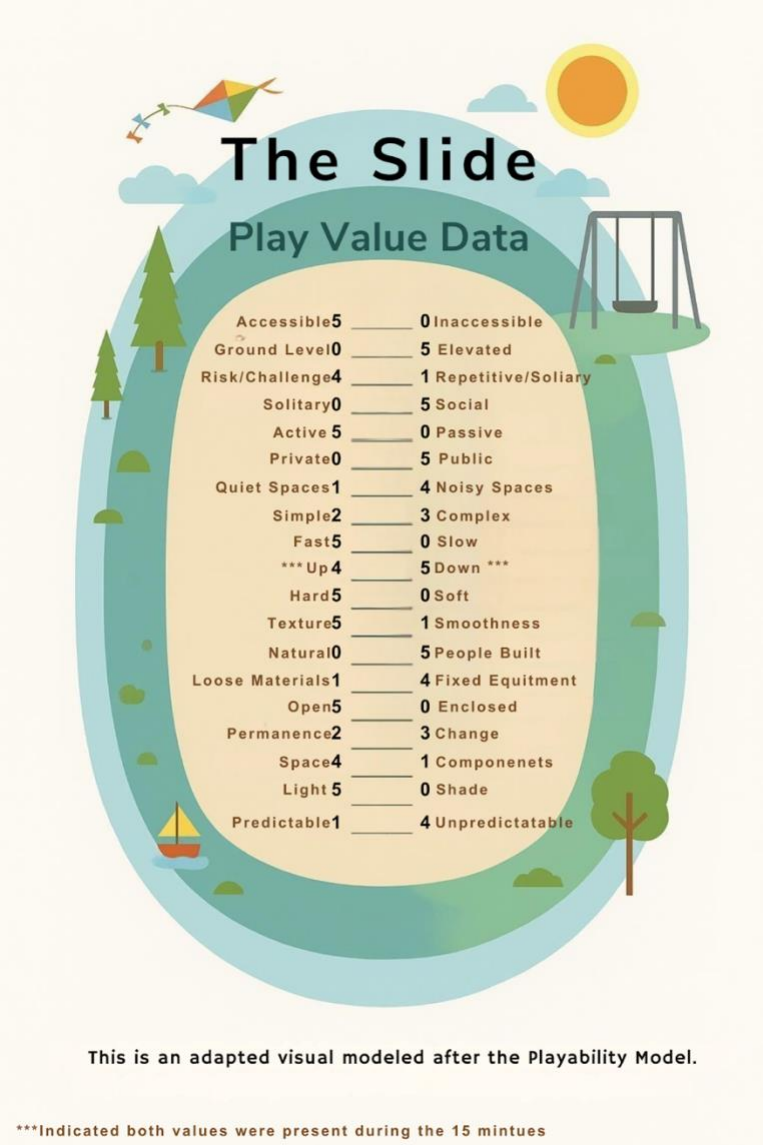

Figure 12: Play Value Data for Slide

Although there were instances of solitary or more isolated play, the space was used more frequently for cooperative play. While the slides may not meet the needs of children seeking quiet or solitary experiences, they offer sensory input that may be valuable for children who require opportunities for large gross motor movement. The open design and consistent popularity among both children and caregivers affirm the slides' value as a social, high-energy feature within the park. It is important to have play features that support a range of play values, including those that meet the needs of children looking for more physically active and sensory-

rich experiences. It also was a very unpredictable element (4) which emphasizes how people interacted with the space a variety of ways that was different and unexpected.

Qualitive Codes

Table 13 presents the qualitative codes observed on the hillside slide structure. Among all features, the slides had the highest number of recorded instances of large gross motor and gamifying play, highlighting their strong alignment with movement-based, high-energy engagement. This feature also ranked second highest in the number of observations for adults acting as play partners, children engaging as play partners, and expressions of joy. These findings suggest that the hillside slides supported a wide range of interactive and embodied play experiences, making them one of the most physically and socially engaging areas within the park. They also scored highest in flexible use of materials echoing the sentiments above how this supports a wide range of play and interactions.

Roles of Adults as Facilitator	Roles of Adults as Moderator/ Manager	Roles of Adults as Play Partner	Role of Children: Play Partner	Role of Children: Large Gross Motor/Gamifying	Role of Children: Joy	Materials: Flexible Use of Materials
4	8	8	8	9	5	6

Table 13 – Qualitative Code Results for Slide

Interaction with Materials. Engagement with materials in this area included six recorded instances of flexible use. Children were observed holding or sliding with objects, creatively using the edges of the structure, going down the slides in a variety of positions, and even using the slide and the turf hillside for riding bikes down. One particularly illustrative moment involved a child repeatedly climbing up the side of the slide with encouragement from an adult. Eventually, the child invited another to race, resulting in an emergent social game. This

kind of interaction demonstrates how the flexibility of the hillside slide feature supports both embodied and social forms of play, while also accommodating individual experiences for children who prefer to engage independently by simply climbing or sliding on their own.

Interactions Between Children. Children's play behaviors on the slides reflected a wide range of interactions and engagement styles. here were 8 recorded instances of children acting as play partners, as well as 9 instances of large gross motor or embodied gamified play. These included climbing uphill using the handles, sliding down on their stomachs, going headfirst, and riding bikes down the hillside. Children also demonstrated moments of creativity and game invention, with four observed instances of them creating rules or turning their slide use into a more structured activity involving multiple children.

Due to the layout of the park, I was not able to sit as close to the slides as I could to other features. As a result, fewer details about verbal exchanges were captured, and most data related to peer interaction was based on observation of body language, facial expressions, and physical proximity to other children. Despite this limitation, joy was a recurring theme. There were five documented instances of laughter, or other excited vocalizations, which were typically shared between children or between children and adults. These joyful expressions rarely occurred in isolation, further emphasizing the social and collaborative nature of play in this area.

Interactions with Adults. In terms of adult involvement, the slide area demonstrated a balanced range of roles. There were 8 observed instances of adults acting as play partners. This includes things like catching children at the bottom, climbing or sliding with them, and actively participating in their play. An additional 8 instances reflected adults taking on moderator or manager roles, often stepping in to ensure safety, mediate turn-taking between children, or more controlling behavior of children's movements. There were 4 observations highlighting adults

serving as facilitators, encouraging hesitant children or modeling how to use the slides by going down first. These varying roles illustrate how adults can support different types of engagement within a play environment. The diversity of adult involvement suggests that the physical design of the slides made space for a wide range of interactions and play experiences, from independent exploration to collaborative play.

Hillside Cove

The Hillside Cove area was observed five times across five different days, totaling 1 hour and 15 minutes (75 minutes) of observation. Engagement with the cove space occurred during three of those five sessions, resulting in a total of 29.4 minutes where the space was unoccupied (approximately 39.2% of the total time). Weather conditions varied across the observations. Three sessions took place on sunny days, and two were coded as overcast. Four of the five observations were coded as noisy, with two marked as very loud, including one instance that was also coded as having “lots of crying.”

Across all sessions, a total of 15 children engaged with the cove area: 0 infants, 7 toddlers, and 8 children. While no youth or young adults were observed using the space. Engagement occurred in four out of five sessions, indicating moderate popularity. The one session without child engagement took place on a warm, very loud day when overall park activity was high, potentially directing children's attention toward more active features such as the slides or swings.

Figure 14 – Hillside Cove at Pathways Park

The cove, pictured in Figure 14, is the most enclosed structure in the park. It offers a small, tucked-in space surrounded by stone walls, which can be used for chalk play, along with a bench and rocks on the right side that children can climb. Its quieter sheltered structure is in contrast to the high-energy design of features like swings and slides. Given its location next to the slide area, I initially expected that children might use the cove as a calming space to take a break from more active play. However, that pattern was not consistently observed. Instead, play in the cove tended to be slower-paced, with children engaging in imaginative, role-based interactions or exploratory gross motor activities, like climbing on top.

Playability Model Data Results

The hillside cove presented less majority than the other features, showing that dichotomous play values were represented at varying times throughout the data collection. There were only three play values that scored 5's, Slow (5), People Built (5), and Fix Equipment (5).

This is very interesting as it shows that the space offered a wide range of play experiences for children and could adapt to meet the needs and interests of the children who were engaging with it.

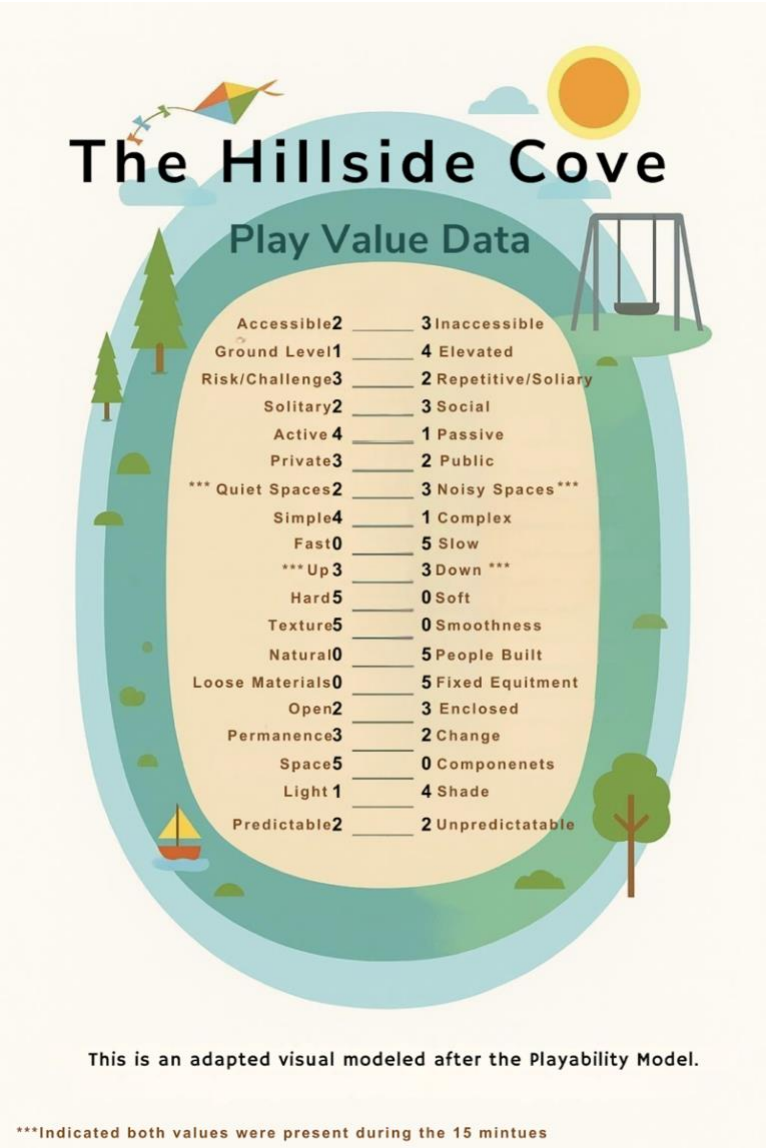

Figure 15 – Play Value Data for Cove

The play values observed in the cove aligned with a different set of priorities than those found in high-energy features like the slides and swings. It also emerged as the most inaccessible play feature in the study, given that much of the engagement occurred on top of the structure

rather than within it, something I had not anticipated. The feature displayed a range of split values across several dichotomies, including risk/challenge, repetitive/solitary, private/public, quiet/noisy, solitary/social, open/enclosed, permanence/change, and predictable/unpredictable. These shifts suggest that the cove supported a diverse array of play styles and offered a flexible environment that could be interpreted and used in multiple ways across the five observation sessions.

Qualitive Codes

The hillside cove was scored the lowest in adult as moderator/manager which is interesting given that the cove was largely used by children to climb on top of. This type of risky play I would have assumed would have more adult moderation.

Roles of Adults as Facilitator	Roles of Adults as Moderator/ Manager	Roles of Adults as Play Partner	Role of Children: Play Partner	Role of Children: Large Gross Motor/Gamifying	Role of Children: Joy	Materials: Flexible Use of Materials
5	3	3	4	6	1	3

Figure 16 – Qualitative Code for Cove

Interaction with Materials. Material engagement in the cove was relatively minimal, with only three recorded instances of flexible use. This may be attributed to the fixed nature of the cove's materials or the ways in which children were using the space without additional tools or props. The area was used for drawing with chalk, climbing on top of the structure, used as a stage/performance platform and as a designated “home base” during a father-son baseball game. There was also an instance of the cove being used as a place to store bike while children where playing in other places. These moments suggest that while the cove did not invite frequent or

varied material interaction, it still served as a meaningful space for imaginative and functional use within the broader play environment.

Interactions Between Children. Children's behaviors in the cove reflected a range of play that primarily took place on top of the structure rather than inside it, something that was unexpected to me. There were 4 instances of children acting as play partners were recorded, often involving turn-taking while climbing or collaborating on pretend play scenarios. Large gross motor and gamified play were coded 6 times, including moments where children navigated the rocks, climbed the structure repeatedly, or used the elevated space as part of imaginative games or performances. Only one instance of explicitly observed joy was recorded in this area. This may be due to the distance at which I had to sit to observe the feature, as well as the lower-energy nature of the space. These factors likely contributed to the limited documentation of vocalizations such as laughter or expressions of excitement and may have resulted in some under-recording of more subtle peer interactions.

Interactions with Adults. Adult involvement in the cove was present but less than compared to other features. There were 3 instances of adults as play partners, example included sitting with children or joining in creative games/play. A specific example is a dad and his daughter playing together. The daughter was on top of the structure and the dad was below putting his fingers in the holes in the ceiling and she as chasing them from above. Three instances were coded for adult moderators/managers, typically redirecting behavior or sitting with children appearing to have some type of conversation. Five instances featured adults as facilitators, often encouraging children to try new movements such as a dad encouraging his child to jump off the top into his arms. This suggests that while the cove did not need as much adult intervention as other features such as the swings.

Sand Pit

The Sand Pit was observed a total of five times, resulting in a total observation period of 1 hour and 22 minutes (82 minutes). During this time, the sand pit was actively used in 4 out of 5 sessions. One session had no data due to the fact I lost a data sheet for an unknown reason. I am not sure what happened to the data, but it was not present after the session, likely due to a saving or syncing issue. Of the 82 total minutes, 21 minutes and 22 seconds (26.5%) were recorded with no engagement. Weather conditions across sessions included a mix of sunny and overcast days, with four of the five sessions recorded as “noisy” and two marked as “very loud.”

A total of 19 children interacted with the sand pit over the five sessions: 0 infants, 16 toddlers, and 4 children. No youth or young adults were observed using this feature. Unlike the slides or swings, children typically did not run toward the sand pit independently but were more often guided or encouraged by adults to engage with it. The sand pit also promoted the most individual and solitary play of all the observed features.

As shown in Figure 17, the sand pit includes a walkway that cuts through the middle, with benches positioned around the edges, making it easy for parents and caregivers to sit and observe. It was also the only feature that consistently contained toys or manipulatives within it. At least one toy or additional material was present in the pit during each session, and there were also instances where families brought their own materials, such as shovels or buckets. These elements made the sand pit a more structured and sensory-rich play environment, though the nature of engagement remained relatively quiet and individualized.

Figure 17 – Sandpit at Pathways Park

Playability Model Data Results

The play value data collected in the sand pit shows that there was very little variation across observations. Only four of the sixteen play values recorded an instance where dichotomous values were observed. The sand pit consistently scored high in categories such as Natural (4), Ground Level (4), Simple (4), Open (4), Predictable (4), and Repetitive/Solitary (4). These scores suggest that the sand pit provided a consistent and familiar play environment, rich in sensory experiences and conducive to repetitive and simple forms of play.

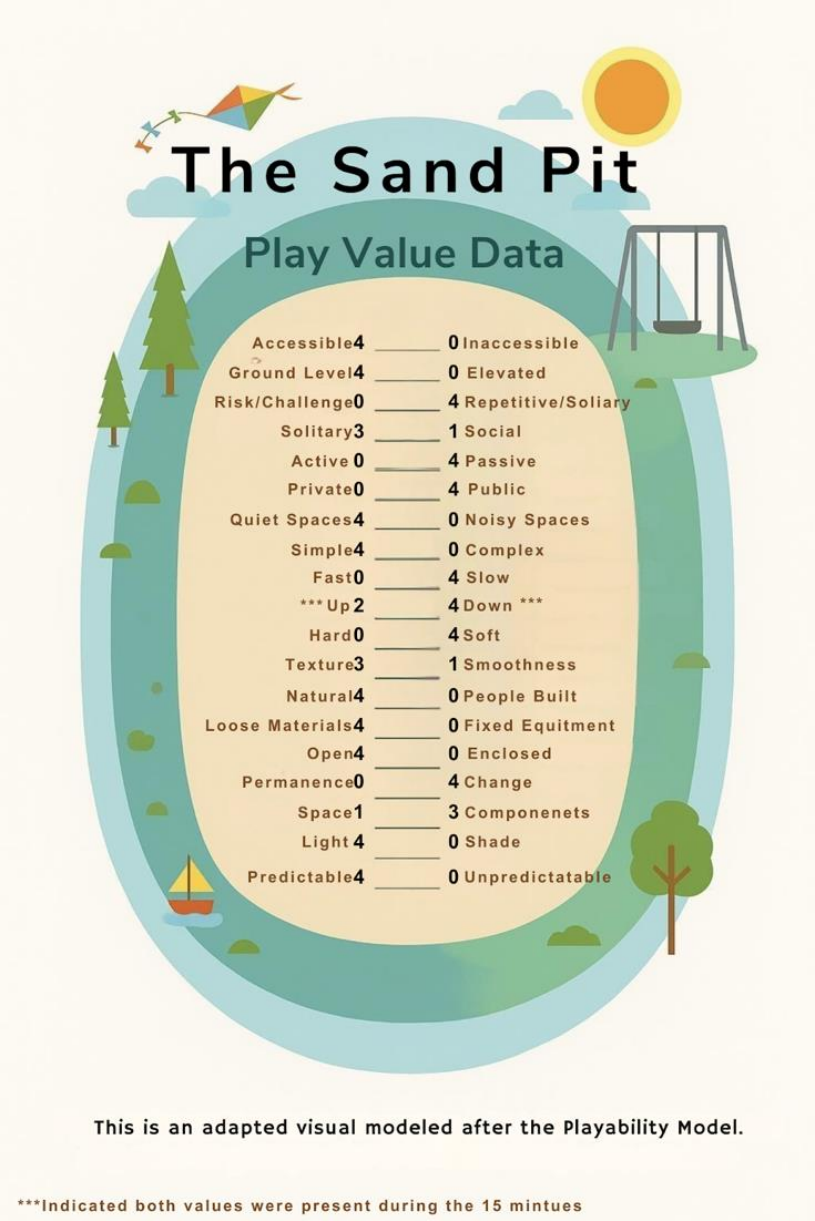

Figure 18 – Play Value Data for Sand Pit

One possible influence on this pattern is the demographic of children who used the sand pit. The space was predominantly used by toddlers, who may be more drawn to sensory and repetitive activities than older children. The physical design of the sand pit, being open, low to the ground, and situated in a public, visible part of the park also allowed for close adult supervision. This accessibility may have influenced adult behavior, with caregivers more likely to guide or direct younger children toward this quieter, more structured feature. Overall, the sand

pit supported a specific type of engagement that was consistent across sessions and aligned with the developmental preferences of younger children.

Qualitive Codes

The sandpit had the least number of recorded instances of children as play partners (1) as well as adults as facilitators (3) and play partner (2). In contrast there was the highest recorded number of adults as moderators/managers. The sand pit also had no instances of joy, large gross motor or gamified play or flexible use of materials. These findings will be discussed in greater detail below.

	Roles of Adults as Facilitator	**Roles of Adults as Moderator/Manager**	**Roles of Adults as Play Partner**	Role of Children: Play Partner	Role of Children: Large Gross Motor/Gamifying	Role of Children: Joy	Materials: Flexible Use of Materials
Sand Pit	3	11	2	1	0	0	0

Figure 19 – Qualitative Code for Sand Pit

Interaction with Materials. Material interaction in the sand pit was limited and highly consistent with the design of the feature. There were zero instances coded for flexible use of materials, making it the only play area where no creative reinterpretation or nontraditional use of materials was observed. Children primarily engaged with the sand and manipulatives in conventional ways, such as scooping, dumping, and digging. Although the sand pit included a variety of tools, some already present and others brought by families, the lack of flexible engagement suggests that the space was used as expected. This may have been influenced by the age group most observed in the sand pit (toddlers) who may gravitate toward more predictable and sensory-based forms of play. Additionally, the cold and often wet condition of the sand during observations may have reduced opportunities for experimentation or variation in play and

number of children who engage with it. Ideas for future research with seasons and weather will be talked about further in the discussion section.

Interactions Between Children. Child-to-child interaction in the sand pit was minimal. Only one instance of child-child interaction occurred and coded as child as play partner. There were no instances coded for large gross motor or gamified play or any coded observations of joy. These findings stand in stark contrast to the diverse and expressive play observed at the swings, slides, and hillside cove. The limited social engagement in this area is particularly notable given the sensory and open-ended nature typically associated with sand play. Although the environment had the potential to support collaborative or imaginative interaction, the actual engagement was often solitary and repetitive. The instance of children playing together consisted of two toddlers who appeared to know each other showing each other things and sharing materials. There was another instance where a child attempted to play with another child, but that child got upset and an adult intervened and separated them.

Interactions with Adults. Adult presence in the sand pit was significant, particularly in manager/moderator role. There were 11 instances of adults acting as moderators or managers, which was more than any other feature. These included redirecting children, managing conflict over toys, or intervening to stop behaviors such as throwing sand. Throwing sand was a more frequent and expected behavior for toddlers that often was proceeded by adult intervention. In contrast, there were only two instances of adults acting as play partners, the lowest of any feature, and three coded instances of adults as facilitators. The data suggests that adult involvement in this space was largely focused on maintaining safety and managing behavior, rather than engaging in or supporting open-ended play.

One session included multiple adult interventions aimed at limiting unsafe or disruptive behavior, like throwing toys or sand. While this supervision may have been necessary, especially given that the sand pit had the highest number of toddlers (16) it may also have unintentionally limited opportunities for spontaneous or creative play. Solitary play was present in all four recorded sessions, while cooperative play occurred in only two, reinforcing the pattern of individual, adult-managed engagement.

Despite these limitations, the sand pit still served an important function within the inclusive play landscape. Its low, accessible design and familiar format offered a sensory-rich environment that may have been particularly inviting for children who prefer slower-paced or tactile forms of play. The sand pit offered high predictability and that could have offered comfort and security to children. However, the consistently high degree of adult management raised questions about how space and materials were shared, how conflict was navigated, and whether the design unintentionally discouraged older children or more diverse types of play. Reimagining how this space is structured and supported could help better balance supervision with opportunities for autonomy, creativity, and peer interaction.

Discussion

This observational study set out to investigate the question: How do children interact with the built environment in inclusively designed outdoor public play spaces? This question stems not only from my academic and professional interests in early childhood special education but also from a personal commitment to creating more inclusive, joyful spaces for all children. As someone who has found connection and belonging through nature and movement, I see parks and public spaces as places that can foster learning, belonging, and play. The purpose of this

research was to observe and reflect on how children engage with other children, materials, and adults within an intentionally designed public space.

Inclusive play spaces matter because they challenge historical inequities in access and opportunity. Children with disabilities have often been excluded from the planning and use of public playgrounds and public spaces. When spaces are designed for and with people with disabilities, everyone benefits. Inclusive design in a space like a playground, when done well, creates play opportunities for a wide range of bodies, abilities, relationships, and forms of play. When all play values are represented and taken into consideration, everyone benefits. It is important to note that inclusion does not mean that every feature is fully accessible to all people at all times, but rather that the space as a whole offers something meaningful for everyone and provides a variety of choices for people who want to engage in different ways. This connects to the idea that inclusive spaces promote joy and belonging.

Throughout this study, I drew on two key frameworks to shape both my observations and my analysis: the Playability Model (Lynch et al., 2018) and the Play as a Spectrum framework (Zosh et al., 2018). Both frameworks emphasize the importance of diverse play values and types of play within a space. The Playability Model helped me look structurally at the park and ask larger questions around design intent and play value. Meanwhile, the Play as a Spectrum framework helped me shape my observational data, guiding my questions around the types of interactions and engagement that occurred between children, materials, and adults.

During my observations, I paid close attention to the types of interactions that were occurring, whether they were solitary or cooperative, the presence of adults, how children used materials, as well as keeping a running record of things I was noticing or hearing. My data collection method relied on unobtrusive observations of public behavior and was designed to

center what was observable, while acknowledging the limits of what can be known without asking questions or engaging in conversation. Importantly, I was not attempting to assess whether the design of Pathways Park was "successful" or whether what I observed matched design goals; rather, I aimed to examine how the space was actually used and what that might tell us about inclusive design in practice.

What emerged from my data were three interconnected themes: (1) the role of adults, (2) social dynamics among children, and (3) the use of materials and space. These larger questions prompted key themes for my qualitative data and served as the framework for the quantitative data I collected as well. In the following sections, I will explore each theme in detail, highlighting both patterns and surprises that I noticed from my observations. While these findings are unique to the context of Pathways Park, they offer insights that may inform future research, practice, and the design of other play and public spaces.

Theme 1: How Children Interacted with other children

Pathways Park supported a wide range of child-to-child interactions that varied significantly depending on the play feature. Some features, such as the swings and the hillside slides, consistently supported cooperative play, while others, like the sand pit showed far fewer instances of children engaging with one another. As an inclusively designed space, Pathways Park offered diverse opportunities for different types of peer interaction. However, since this study focused on only four features, it is likely that additional types of child-to-child engagement occurred in areas that were not observed, such as the merry-go-round, the bike paths, or the sensory garden. This limitation is addressed later in the limitation section, but it is worth acknowledging here that the overall range of interaction may be even broader than my data reflects.

Certain design elements of the park appeared to directly encourage social engagement. The face-to-face swings and the wide smooth slide frequently prompted spontaneous collaborative play between children, including those who did not appear to know each other beforehand. In contrast, features such as the single-user swing or the textured slide tended to support more individual, parallel, or solitary play. Another important factor contributing to child-to-child interaction was the park's open layout. The design allowed children to see one another from a distance and move freely between play elements, increasing opportunities for shared or adjacent play. This kind of spatial openness likely contributed to the number and quality of social exchanges observed during the sessions.

It is important to emphasize that not every structure needs to promote cooperative play. In an inclusive environment, the goal is not to ensure that every feature supports every kind of interaction, but rather that children can seek different types of play at different times. Children and adults should be able to find features and activities that meet their needs and offer a range of play experiences. Inclusive design, when viewed through this lens, is less about uniformity (everything for everyone) and more about variety, offering multiple ways for children to engage with both the environment and each other across the whole park. When considering the Play as a Spectrum framework (Zosh et, al.) it is essential to remember that this is not a hierarchical model of play but a way to recognize and honor the full range of meaningful play experiences that children engage in and the multiple components that are a part of this spectrum.

According to Kinsner (2019), outdoor play provides important opportunities for children to practice social and emotional skills such as turn-taking, problem-solving, and navigating risk in social contexts. These types of interactions were observed throughout Pathways Park,

particularly in features that allowed for shared physical space, open visibility, and structures that invited participation.

Theme 2: The Role of Adults in the Play Space

The role of adults in the play space was something I had not fully considered as a critical element of playground design prior to conducting this research. However, after analyzing the data, I became increasingly interested in how outdoor play environments are designed not only for a diverse range of child experiences but also for meaningful adult participation. Several design elements at Pathways Park made space for this type of engagement in ways that I have not seen in my experience at traditional playgrounds. For example, the width of the large slide allowed adults and children to slide together, creating shared movement. Similarly, the center swing was wide and low enough to allow both adult and child to sit or even lie down together. This differs significantly from the more typical swing interaction, where a child sits while the adult pushes from behind. These features enabled a different type of relationship, one where the adult can be physically present in the play experience, not just adjacent to it.

Adults are a critical part of play relationships, yet many playgrounds are not designed with adult engagement in mind. At Pathways Park, elements like the Hillside Cove are large enough for an adult to comfortably enter which allowed for more immersive adult roles, including that of a play partner. Although this was not something that I observed as how the space was used, it is something I suspect would have occurred if I observed longer or more time. When physical space accommodates adults, it creates room for adults to do more than just be a manager. It allows them to co-create, co-explore, and co-imagine with children. While not every feature in an inclusive playground needs to invite full adult participation, having multiple structures where adults can engage directly benefits the entire park.

This raises important design questions about how we invite adults into play, not just as managers or monitors, but as collaborators and play partners. The sand pit offers an example of this. It had the highest number of coded instances of adults acting as moderators or managers and the fewest as play partners. Adults were often observed intervening to stop children from throwing sand, managing turn-taking, or guiding children into or out of the space. There was very little evidence of collaborative play between adults and children in this feature. This led me to wonder: what would it look like to design the sand pit in a way that more actively encourages adult presence and playful engagement? How might we create space for adults to participate in sensory or creative play, rather than simply enforce their own rules?

This tension between support and control echoes questions raised by Pesch et al. (2022) in their discussion of how guided play is a critical element of Playful Learning Landscapes. Their work explores how intentionally designed environments that promote guided play can promote joy-centered exchanges and high-quality interactions between children and caregivers. When environments are built to support guided play, children benefit not only socially but cognitively (Cite Pesch et all 2022). While my study did not specifically examine playful learning landscapes or use guided play metrics, the findings suggest that these principles could offer a valuable framework for future analysis. What would it mean to bring the lens of guided play to park design? How might we design inclusive play spaces that encourage not just physical access, but relational, sensory, and developmental access and opportunities for both children and adults?

Theme 3: Material Engagement and Spatial Design

When reflecting on the materials and spatial design of Pathways Park, it became clear that the physical environment supported a wide range of play types and user experiences. Although my study focused on only four features, what I observed reflected a park that met a

variety of needs and adapted to support different kinds of play. The features I examined demonstrated varied levels of material flexibility. For example, the sand pit was more rigid in how it was used as there were no coded instances of flexible material use, and children tended to engage with the sand and toys in consistent, expected ways. In contrast, the slides and swings offered highly flexible opportunities for movement, social interaction, and creative reimagining of the space. Children used the wide slide in nontraditional ways, climbing up the sides, sliding in different positions and the swings became places for role-play and inviting others to play together.

This variation speaks to the importance of designing play environments that span the full spectrum of play. At Pathways Park, there was evidence of features that invited gross motor and risky play alongside those that supported quiet, repetitive engagement. Inclusive design is not about ensuring every structure does everything, but rather about ensuring that all types of play are represented in some form across the space. One of the most compelling aspects of inclusive design is the potential for a single feature to support multiple, and sometimes opposing, play values. For example, a structure might offer risky, dynamic play for one child while simultaneously serving as a site for calming, repetitive play for another. This kind of design flexibility can help meet the diverse needs of children with different sensory preferences, developmental profiles, or energy levels. This was seen in the swing set. There was one instance of a teenager who sat on the middle swing and rocked herself back and forth while appearing to talk to herself, this interaction serving quiet and repetitive play. While another instance had an adult and 3 children all stacked on top of each other laughing, supportive of more risky social play.

At the same time, I found myself questioning whether the flexible uses I observed were a direct result of the inclusive design or simply an emergent property of children's creativity. Did certain structures limit opportunities for flexibility? If so, was that by design or by unintended constraint? It is also worth asking what types of materials and features best support imaginative or creative play, and which tend to promote more repetitive or structured behavior. Is it possible to design features, like the sand pit that intentionally invites both or could support both? Could a sand feature be reimagined to better support creative exploration alongside the predictable, sensory experience it already provides?

I also think it is important to note that my understanding of material engagement was shaped by the decision to focus on four features. If I had included eight or more, the results of my study might have looked very different, and the play value data might have reflected even more variety and nuance. Pathways Park was explicitly designed with inclusion, intentionality, and accessibility at its core, and this intentionality was evident in the range of materials and spatial forms provided.

Why Research Community Spaces?

One of the key questions that began to emerge during my research was: Why study community spaces? Although my research focused on children's interactions with an inclusively designed playground, it quickly became clear that Pathways Park is far more than a traditional play space/playground; it is a community gathering place. During my observations, I witnessed the space being used in many ways: birthday parties, class walking field trips, neighborhood meetups, caregivers reconnecting, children getting off the bus & playing before walking home, and individuals simply passing through along the Burke-Gilman Trail. The park was always in motion, with groups and individuals coming and going, shaping the social dynamics of the space

in real time. These patterns led me to wonder about the role of public spaces like Pathways Park in fostering community and belonging, and why studying these dynamics matters.

One area that emerged from this wondering was the significance of group dynamics. A limitation of this study is that I only observed public behavior and did not collect any direct demographic or relational information. This meant I often had to make informed guesses about relationships. I had to infer whether children were siblings, classmates, or strangers. This was also true for parent child relationships, as I wondered about nanny, babysitter, parent, friends' parent roles etc. It was not always clear who belonged together. This ambiguity became both a constraint and a prompt for future research. For example, how do the relationships between who children come with influence the type of play that they engage in? I observed multiple instances where children recognized peers from school or other community settings, and where adults connected with other adults. Even during birthday parties, families and individuals connected and it was not always clear if they were at the party or just in the space. It was not always a closed-off group; there was a permeability to the space that invited connection. Some of this might also be due to the open and flexible nature of the space.

These observations have led me to consider broader questions about community-centered design. If Pathways Park supports connection and belonging not only through its features but through how it invites people to gather, what might it mean to apply this thinking to other types of public space? What would it look like to use play-based, inclusive design principles in places like city hall courtyards, public libraries, or bus/train stops? A conversation I overheard between two caregivers about how much they liked coming to this park and how it "felt different" than others, further prompted me to wonder about what specific design or social elements contribute

to that sense of belonging. Understanding these factors could have implications far beyond the boundaries of a single park.

Limitations

Several limitations emerged in this study, primarily due to the nature of the data collection method being an unobtrusive observation of public behavior. While this approach allowed for naturalistic insight into how people used the space, it was not fully sensitive to the nuances and depth of adult-child or child-to-child interactions. Without the ability to identify individuals or ask follow-up questions, I had no direct access to information regarding ability, identity, race, gender, or relationships between participants. As a result, many of the conclusions drawn from my data involved informed assumptions based on visual cues, proximity, or interaction styles.

A future study would be needed to draw stronger correlations between inclusive elements of the park and whether they are fulfilling their intended purpose, particularly for children and caregivers with disabilities. This was not specifically explored in my study, but it remains a vital area for further research. Additionally, I did not compare Pathways Park with a non-inclusively designed park. This study was not designed to assess whether Pathways Park was "meeting its mission," but rather to explore how an intentionally inclusive designed space were being used in real-time. Still, comparative data from different types of parks could provide useful context in further studies.

Another important limitation is that I did not observe all of the park's features. I selected four play features to focus on, but elements such as the climbing structures, sensory garden, and the spinning merry-go-round were not included in my data collection. These areas likely offered

different types of play value and could have resulted in different observations. Similarly, I did not observe how children used the interweaving paths across the park, one of its most unique inclusive design features. These pathways, frequently used by children on scooters and bikes, might offer a compelling area for future research, particularly regarding how wheeled play (scooters and bikes) is supported in inclusive environments. This is also specific to Pathways Park and how it is located within a bike/walking path.

The socio-demographic context of the park also shaped the kinds of interactions I observed. While the park is located within an affordable housing development, it is situated in a predominantly white and affluent neighborhood. I did not attempt to code or identify race, but future studies might benefit from exploring play dynamics in more racially and culturally diverse communities to assess how inclusive design intersects with social inclusion and cultural safety.

Weather and seasonality also played a role in shaping the observations. Most of my data collection occurred during colder months (Feb-April), and on days when it was rainy or chilly, certain materials and features were underused. For instance, the sandpit and its connected water table were engaged with less than the swings/slides, which is likely due to the temperature. This could have limited my ability to observe the full range of play behaviors that might occur during warmer weather. A future study might take a seasonal approach, observing how interactions shift across different weather conditions.

Finally, the time of day and day of the week were additional constraints. Although I attempted to visit the park during both weekday afternoons and weekends, my observations did not account for all possible visitor patterns. Children in school or daycare, or families engaged in extracurricular activities, may have been underrepresented in my data. Longer or more frequent

observation sessions across different times could provide a more comprehensive view of how various groups use the space.

Conclusion

This research underscores the importance of community-centered, inclusive design in the creation of public play environments. Pathways Park demonstrates how intentional, collaborative design can result in a space that not only meets a wide range of physical and developmental needs, but also fosters connection, creativity, and joy among children and adults. Inclusive design is not just about adding accessible equipment or meeting minimum requirements; it is about designing with and for the full spectrum of play experiences, recognizing that all forms of play are valid, valuable, and important.

As this study shows, parks and playgrounds that are truly inclusive are those that offer a diversity of play values and make room for different ways of being. Designing for all does not mean that every feature must serve every need but rather that all children can find something for them. This view of inclusion is rooted in the idea that inclusive design and inclusive play spaces have something for everyone and that we do not need every space to support the needs of every child.

> *With regards to playspaces, disability is often mistakenly understood as a person's inability to experience the play environment because of limitations caused by their disability. Rather, disability is the limitation of opportunities to participate on an equal level with others due to physical and social barriers in the environment. Disability is not a condition a person has; disability is an experience one may have (PlayCore and Utah State University, 2016).*

This work also invites us to think more expansively about inclusive design beyond the boundaries of playgrounds. This work and ideals of play value and inclusive design can be applied to all public spaces such as libraries, train/bus stops, and museums. These spaces can and should incorporate the same principles of intentionality, flexibility, inclusion, and community voice. Just as inclusive playgrounds support a richer experience of play, inclusive public spaces support a fuller experience of community, joy, and belonging. When we design with inclusion at the center, we create environments where everyone is invited to belong, participate, and thrive.

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Appendix A

Data Table Empty

This appendix is the data collection sheet that was used for all 5 observations. The data sheet was uploaded to my Ipad and was used for data collection. A new data sheet was used for all 5 observations.

Observation

Basic Information

- **Date of Observation:** _____
- **Location:** Pathways Park, Seattle, WA
- **Time Arrived:** _____
- **Time Departed:** _____

General Observations

- **Weather Conditions:** (e.g., sunny, overcast, rainy): _____
- **Notes about conditions of park** (are there any new materials, obstructed items, issues or new things):

- **Crowd Size:** (e.g., sparse, moderate, busy): _____
- **Notes on Atmosphere:** (e.g., noise levels, accessibility cues): _____
- **Where do children appear to be? (Spread out? All in one place? General trends):**

General Notes:

Observation ___ Play Feature _____:

Start Time: _____ **End Time:** _____

Total Kids at Park (Start): _____ **Total Kids at Park (End):** _____

Total # of children who engaged with the feature (tallies): _____

If at any time a child in this age was observed (yes or no):

Infant	Toddler	Child	Youth/Young Adult

Play Value Assessment		
Accessible	Inaccessible	**Notes (running record):**
Ground Level	Elevated	
Risk/Challenge	Repetition/Solitary	
Solitary	Social	
Active	Passive	
Private	Public	
Simple	Complex	
Fast	Slow	
Up	Down	
Hard	Soft	
Texture	Smoothness	
Natural	People Built	
Loose Materials	Fixed Equipment	
Open	Closed	
Permanence	Change	
Space	Components	
Light	Shade	
Predictable	Unpredictable	

Play Observations:

<table>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Was solitary play observed?</td><td>Yes</td><td>No</td><td>Notes:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Was it Brief: YES or NO
Was it Extended: YES or NO</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Was cooperative play observed?</td><td>Yes</td><td>No</td><td>Notes:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Was it Brief: YES or NO
Was it Extended: YES or NO
Was an adult present: YES or NO
If yes, circle all that apply: on phone monitoring from outside actively playing
present in interaction offering ideas multiple adults
talking with children
repeating child idea/phrases</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Was child to child interactions occurring?</td><td>Yes</td><td>No</td><td>Notes:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Did any of these occur in the interactions? (circle all that apply):
laughing loud/raised voices
Big movement (tag, chasing, etc.) turn taking sharing toys
talking with adults throwing objects

Was it Brief: YES or NO
Was it Extended: YES or NO

Was an adult present in the space: YES or NO
If yes, circle all that apply: on phone monitoring from outside actively playing
present in interaction multiple adults talking with children
offering idea repeating child idea/phrases</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Were there interactions with child & materials occurring together?</td><td>Yes</td><td>No</td><td>Notes:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Was it Brief: YES or NO
Was it Extended: YES or NO
What Type of Interaction with Materials was Present:

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Observational Notes:

Observation ___ Play Feature _____:

Start Time: _____ **End Time:** _____

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<tr><td rowspan="2">Was child to child interactions occurring?</td><td>Yes</td><td>No</td><td>Notes:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Did any of these occur in the interactions? (circle all that apply):
laughing loud/raised voices
Big movement (tag, chasing, etc.) turn taking sharing toys
talking with adults throwing objects

Was it Brief: YES or NO
Was it Extended: YES or NO

Was an adult present in the space: YES or NO
If yes, circle all that apply: on phone monitoring from outside
actively playing
present in interaction multiple adults talking with children
offering idea repeating child idea/phrases</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Were there interactions with child & materials occurring together?</td><td>Yes</td><td>No</td><td>Notes:</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">Was it Brief: YES or NO
Was it Extended: YES or NO
What Type of Interaction with Materials was Present:

Did any of these occur in the interactions? (circle all that apply):
laughing throwing
loud/raised voices Big movement (tag, chasing, etc.) turn taking
sharing toys</td></tr>
</table>

	talking with adults **Was an adult present in the space:** YES or NO *If yes, circle all that apply*: *on phone* *monitoring from outside* *actively playing* *present in interaction* multiple adults talking with children offering idea repeating child idea/phrases

Observational Notes: