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Balancing Outdoor Learning and Play: Adult Perspectives of Teacher Roles and Practice in an Outdoor Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Recognizing the inherent value in outdoor play and learning for young children, we focused upon the practices and perspectives of adults at an early childhood center as the outdoor play areas were transformed into outdoor classrooms. A salient finding emerging from the data exhibited a gap between constructivist child-led theories of play and learning and the changing needs for greater adult-led learning in the altered outdoor environment. Disparate attitudes towards greater adult intervention in children's play existed between parents, teachers, and administrators, as children and staff transitioned and acclimated to the new outdoor classroom. Using ethnographically grounded data collection, researchers interpret these findings to suggest that while teachers maintain a strong preference for child-led learning, the changing outdoor space requires increased adult-led activities and intentional environmental education goals and training.

Keywords: adult perspectives, child-led play, emergent curriculum, environmental education, outdoor classroom, teacher roles, theory and practice

Outdoor play is an essential ingredient in many early childhood education settings and if we were to close our eyes, many of us could imagine an outdoor space complete with concrete, swings, slides, and chain-link fencing. We can imagine what the children's play might be like in these spaces, as well as imagine the actions of teachers who accompany students out of doors. But, what if the outdoor spaces are transformed, turned into an outdoor classroom with logs for stacking and balancing, stones, sensory tables, and garden plots? How would children acclimate to the new environment and, central to this work, how do adult perspectives and practice change relative to learning and playing in the outdoors? These are the primary questions that ground our study of an early childhood center in the Midwest of the United States. By designing a research project around both adult perspectives and children's experiences, we hoped to holistically understand the outdoor learning that was taking place at the center as it transitioned from a traditional playground to an outdoor classroom. In this paper, we focus upon the intersection of seemingly competing ideas of how play and subsequently, learning, should be oriented in outdoor environments. Specifically, this work is an inquiry into how adults perceive their role in outdoor learning with young children and how this relates to their teaching practice. Embedded within this discourse are various theoretical claims detailing how children should play and, additionally, how the changing landscape fosters changes in pedagogy and practice.

Through extensive fieldwork in which we collected data over the course of the entire outdoor classroom project, we perceived an interesting tension between theory and practice, a "pedagogical gap," as typified by Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards (2013). These researchers suggested that this gap arises when two different approaches to

environmental education in early childhood settings occurs. Describing these two approaches, Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards (2013) explain an interesting dynamic between the inherently experiential learning found within open-ended, free-play, and the knowledge and values orientation of more structured environmental education. Examining the emerging themes arising from the voices of adults at the center, we became interested in this intersection of structured play oriented towards environmental education, that being teacher-led, and the strongly felt theoretical commitment to constructivist learning in which children's experiences lead the way.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Perspectives of Outdoor Learning for Children

There is general recognition within educational discourse that outdoor experiences are valuable. As such, researchers are increasingly focusing upon the centrality of early childhood education to foster positive environmental values and attitudes (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Herrington & Studtmann, 1998; Malone & Tranter, 2003; Merewether, 2015; White, 2004). Additionally, school grounds have been identified as one of the very few places where children can play freely in natural environments with peers, and subsequently, their importance as sites for engaged learning has greater resonance today (Moore & Wong, 1997; Tranter & Malone, 2004).

Yet, among educators, there has been little time or conversation concerning the planning and preparation for outdoor learning (Davies, 1996; Davis & Waite, 2004; Louv, 2008; Renick, 2009). Research suggests that there is a prevailing belief that outdoor learning requires less time and attention in planning than indoor learning (Davies, 1996; Renick, 2009) and that when children are outside this becomes a time for teachers to take a break and solely ensure that children are safely supervised (Davies, 1997; Renick, 2009). Merewether (2015) argues against this trend in declaring that "outdoor spaces in such settings are not just places to let off steam or relax, they are places for learning, so the need for these environments to facilitate learning is vital" (p. 104). In this regard, children's experiences are dependent upon the outdoor environment, the types of space a school provides for them, and the adults who experience the outdoors with them (Kiewra & Veselack, 2016; Moore & Wong, 1997). Engaging and effective outdoor learning therefore requires certain types of outdoor space and, importantly, particular attitudes and practices of adults (Emilsen & Koch, 2010; Moser & Martinsen, 2010) and higher levels of direct engagement of teachers with children (Chakravarthi, 2009).

This strand of research belies the persistent consensus among educators that child-led, open-ended play, exploration and discovery are often seen as instrumental for children's cognitive development (White et al., 2007). Taken together, our findings resonate with the broader literature concerning children's classroom-based play and associated teacher roles and attitudes. Understandably, considerable attention has been payed to teacher attitudes and experiences in outdoor learning environments across the literature. Less often have parent perspectives been examined, and typically, when they have it has concerned perceptions of risk and safety (Little, 2013) or views of the importance of outdoor experiences for their children (Bohling, Saarela, & Miller, 2013). Importantly, research has also focused upon a lack of communication between parents and teachers concerning outdoor play (Jayasuriya et al., 2016), something that correlates in the present study. The divergent perceptions of adults examined here reflect philosophical and pedagogical divides, which position the essential importance of constructivist, child-led learning against the effectiveness of teacher involvement in facilitating and scaffolding learning (Fesseha & Pyle, 2016).

Pedagogical v. Open-ended Play

There is an inherent tension within early childhood education and outdoor experiences between contradictory adult goals for either open-ended (free) play or pedagogical play for children. This discourse is well represented in the literature and including interesting critiques of open-ended play along cognitive as well as cultural lines of argument (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013). Much of this tension arises out of conflicting goals of what outdoor experiences are for; getting energy out and gross motor development or more cognitive and emotional development, including the inculcation of environmental values. Davis, Rea, and Waite (2006) sums this up in their estimation that "for some early years practitioners, provision of outdoor learning may simply be seen as a removal

of barriers to children moving freely between inside and outside the classroom but not as a qualitatively different form of learning" (p. 4). The alternative to this is a movement towards more intentional pedagogical engagement for teachers and a balancing of child-led play on the one hand and what Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards (2013) call "pedagogical play" on the other hand. Importantly, this blending of constructivist theories of open-ended play with more intentional teacher-led learning resonates with our research concerning teacher perspectives of outdoor learning.

In describing this need of intentionality within environmental education, Cutter-Mackenzie (2007) urges a "delicate pedagogical balance of knowledge, values, and action," (p. 196) as educators provide children with outdoor experiences and specific knowledge of the environment, blending child-led and teacher-led experiences. To this end, pedagogical play fosters multiple varieties of educational activities intentionally developed to provide children with significant opportunities to develop awareness and understanding of their world (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Woods, 2010). Tranter and Malone (2004) suggest that effective pedagogy maintains a balance of structured and unstructured play and activities that best suit environmental education. Teacher-led and unguided activities are both seen as developmentally appropriate ways for educators to foster pedagogical, cognitive, emotional, and physical benefits for children in outdoor environments (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Tranter & Malone, 2004; Woods, 2010). Understanding this dynamic requires both an exploration of adult intentions and practice concerning learning outcomes and the actual experiences of children in outdoor spaces.

Experiential education is one predominant theme within environmental education pedagogy, although there is recognition that experience untethered from knowledge acquisition can limit the development of positive environmental attitudes and behaviors (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013). While experience is an essential component of positive environmental attitudes later in life, it alone does not necessarily foster desired environmental attitudes (Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002). This is the essential groundwork that we work within as we attempt to understand the crucial interface of experience and knowledge that lie at the heart of outdoor learning (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013) and fostering positive environmental values and awareness.

We have been led by a curiosity in how changing outdoor environments impact both adult perspectives of pedagogy and children's experiences of play. To this end, we have been motivated by an attentiveness to examine the intersection of unstructured open-ended play of children, and adult structured and intentional facilitation of learning essential to environmental education. To understand this dynamic, we have examined the discourse of teachers, their practice and interactions with children, and children's own experiences in the outdoor classroom.

METHODOLOGY

We began this research project at the initial stages of the early childhood center's transition from a traditional playground to an outdoor classroom. Thus, we became privy to the various discussions and ideas relative to this large-scale structural and programmatic change from diverse adult perspectives. As such, we learned a great deal about the goals, expectations, and concerns among adults involved in the center as the traditional playground was replaced with a Nature Explore Certified Outdoor Classroom. This change brought to bear intriguing discussions concerning questions of what the outdoor space should look like, how it should be used, and how curriculum might change. The Nature Explore website describes certified classrooms as "dynamic, nature-based play and learning spaces" which are "nature-rich" and are both "well-designed" and committed to "staff development and family involvement" (Nature Explore Website, 2019). Kiewra and Veselack (2016) explain that natural outdoor classrooms should "stimulate children's creativity and enhance learning opportunities" through open-ended, natural materials and the freedom to choose their play (p. 71).

Witnessing this transition to an outdoor classroom provided a unique opportunity to examine how this particular early childhood center balances the tension between teacher-led and structured (pedagogical) and child-led and unstructured (free or open) play in a dedicated and intentional outdoor learning environment. Collecting data before, during, and after the change of the outdoor environment has yielded an account of how constructivist, child-led learning theories intersect with an evolving and more intentional, pedagogical practice among teachers. The

dynamics of change have accrued as adults and children have acclimated to the outdoor classroom and represent an intriguing tension between competing goals for children's play and outdoor learning.

Throughout the research project we have used a flexible qualitative design that allowed us to alter data collection methods throughout the duration of the project and to be attentive to the social context in which we were working. Within this flexible design we have followed the guidance of anthropologist Harry Wolcott (1999) in organizing an ethnographic case study, employing ethnographic data collection methods and techniques to explore deeply one particular educational setting. Our study centered on the perceptions of adults and experiences of children, as their outdoor play environment transitioned from a traditional playground with the requisite swings and plastic features to an outdoor classroom, full of small spaces and natural materials.

Setting

The early childhood center sits on the campus of a major state university, serves as a site for pre-service teacher practicums and internships, and has five classrooms with approximately 150 children and 10 full-time, certified teachers and two administrators. The center fosters a culture of emergent learning and child-led free play and this is consistent in both indoor and outdoor learning. Thus, there is a tremendous amount of freedom for children in the center to follow their own interests and construct their own knowledge and experiences.

The goals of the administrators and teachers at the early childhood center are grounded in a constructivist theoretical framework, which guides the emergent curriculum they utilize. Taken from the center's Parent Guide (2019), *emergent curriculum* is "based on the philosophy that each child learns best when early childhood educators' focus is on being responsive to children's individual interests to create learning experiences that are meaningful" (p. 4). The Parent's Guide further explains that "learning experiences should be child-initiated, rather than something initiated only by the teacher" and that "to create an emergent curriculum learning experience, teachers closely observe children at play to discover what they are interested in at this time" (p. 4). With children leading the way and teachers observing children to find their interest the general consensus is that greater learning opportunities are fostered ((Bohling, Saarela, & Miller, 2010). Finally, this concept of emergent curriculum is directly linked to a play-based philosophy, in which, as the Parent's Guide states, "the teachers understand the value and the benefits to the children of play" (p. 4). These particular perspectives correlate with the general strategies typified by emergent curriculum goals; such as teachers being facilitators of learning while being responsive to children's interests, developing relationships and meaningful learning experiences through child-led play-based learning (Cassidy et al., 2003).

These conceptualizations of emergent curriculum and play remained consistent for indoor and outdoor learning as we examined the changing outdoor space and subsequent engagement of children and adults. This commitment to child-led and constructivist learning found strong resonance in the discourse around emergent curriculum and unstructured child-led outdoor experiences, and proved to be a vital element of our research findings.

Data Collection

We conducted our research in two phases with the transition of space being a natural line of demarcation. Thus, phase one took place prior to the installation of the outdoor classroom and data collection included a parent questionnaire, teacher and administrator interviews, and observations of children and teachers in the outdoor playground. Phase two ensued subsequent to the many alterations in the physical environment of the outdoor space and again included a parent questionnaire, teacher and administrator interviews, and observations of children and teachers. To these forms of data collection, we added focus group interviews with small numbers of children, child-led tours, and gave the children the opportunity to create drawings of the space. We were intent to understand how adult perceptions and practice and children's experiences evolved as the space was altered. Yet, we were keen to do this in a holistic way, bringing together different ideas, perceptions, and experiences to understand the space in totality. Thus, our design has allowed us to triangulate interviews with observations and artifacts akin to Wolcott's (1999) trilogy of data collection; experiencing, enquiring, and examining.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with open coding of questionnaires, interviews, and observations. From these open codes we constructed a master code list and using this list returned to the data to reread for accuracy and further code reduction. Within this master code list, we examined for correlations and created categories of affiliated codes. We subsequently examined the categories for overlapping relationships to generate overarching themes that emerged from the data and to develop our findings.

While our data collection methods garnered a tremendous diversity and depth of data, herein we kept our focus on persistent and evolving adult perspectives of the outdoor space and children's experiences. Subsequently, we drew primarily from the parent surveys and the teacher and administrator interviews, as these sources of data best articulate adult views and the larger discourse concerning play and learning. The second phase of data collection was conducted one year into the outdoor classroom being installed, and allowed teachers to acclimate to the new outdoor space and thereby more fully articulate their perspectives on the changes taken place.

FINDINGS

The two principle findings we examine in this work reflect persistent adult perspectives and the evolving outdoor practice of teachers in the intervening year since the installation of the outdoor classroom. The first finding concerns a consistent tension between parent and teacher perspectives and goals for outdoor learning and play. We highlighted this dynamic previously in this journal (Hunter, Graves, & Bodensteiner, 2017) when exploring adult perspectives prior to the installation of the outdoor classroom. Subsequent to transitioning to the outdoor classroom we have found a continuance of this tension. Thus, while parents stressed their support of intentionally oriented, teacher-led outdoor curriculum, teachers persisted in their perspective that time spent outside should be child-led and free of imposed structure. Interestingly, what is often conveyed through adult discourse looks considerably different in practice. To this end, the second finding focuses on adult perspectives concerning the practice of teachers in the outdoor classroom and in this, we found a significant difference in how engagement, interactions, and structure are perceived. Hence, while adult perspectives have remained consistent when concerning free and structured play throughout the installation of the outdoor classroom, there is a recognized and observable shift in the engagement of teachers and, importantly, how teachers structure and plan for outdoor play and learning. Even upon reflection, teachers are quick to point out that their practice has changed, although there is significant variability among teachers in how they view intentional environmental education goals.

As we exhibit below, the discourse of the teachers remains resolutely oriented towards unstructured, child-led learning, and yet, their perspectives concerning the experiences and interactions of children and teachers have changed significantly with the changing outdoor environment, evolving towards more intentional planning. This has resulted in an imposition of ad hoc structuring of activities embedded within an emergent curriculum. The findings below are oriented around two salient themes, one being that teachers perceive themselves to being guides to learning and the second having to do with balancing outdoor play and emergent curriculum.

Guides to Learning: Conceptualizing Teacher Roles in Outdoor Learning

This first finding provides data that details the ways that adults speak of outdoor play and the role teacher-led learning is perceived at the early childhood center. As stated above, the teachers at the center maintained a consistent perspective concerning their role in the outdoor learning of children regardless of the type of outdoor setting. These perspectives have remained constant throughout the research study and the transition to an outdoor classroom. The most salient aspect of these shared perspectives is that teachers should act as a guide and facilitator in the outdoor environment. As a facilitator, Jessica described her role as teacher to "be a quiet observer, and just kind of watch their little brains tick". This idea is supported by a second teacher, Rebecca, who stated,

> I just facilitate if they're getting, you know, if they're using the equipment the wrong way, or if somebody's acting inappropriate with a piece of wood, if they're throwing it or that stuff where it

> could cause injury. But mostly we just stand back and let it happen, let the play, I should say, happen and the interaction with each other.

Rebecca continued by saying “we're just more of a guide to help them.” In these statements we see the common idea that teachers see their role primarily as one of monitoring and guiding the behavior of children. This is strongly echoed throughout the teacher interviews, and supplemented by an insistence among the teachers that children should lead the way in constructing their own learning and meaning and teachers should provide a supplemental role.

> A prime example of this awareness comes from Sarah, who, in describing current practice said, I’m one of those people who just lets them have their time. I’m not gonna direct you how to play. Usually I’m trying to be the facilitator, but stepping back just to make sure that I want them to first have the experience.

Sarah continued this line of reasoning by describing the concept of exploring in this way:

> Exploring in my mind is when they [children] go out on their own and they look for something themselves. Then it turns into the hands-on and creative learning, and it’s more of them being more independent. Them making their own choices and beginning to go into an area that they haven’t even tried before. Something new, that’s a new learning experience.

Exploration in this sense originates as a form of independent learning and stresses child-led, constructivist frameworks. What remains unspoken here is the extent, to which teachers engage or direct the learning and what form of pedagogy is best suited to foster this notion of exploration. Jessica bridges the two notions of behavior monitoring and deeper interaction in describing the role of teachers by stating that

> mediation is another big one, if there is a conflict, conflict mediation. As far as engaging them with their play, just a lot of questions” such as “What are you doing? How are you using that? Oh, what else could you do with that? Or, that's such a creative idea. What else could you? Just lots of prompting questions, thinking questions, getting them thinking about what they're doing, and really thinking about the materials they're using.

This level of engagement is echoed by one administrator, who, in describing unstructured play explained,

> you still need the teacher there using that language to say, "Tell me what you're building? How did you choose to use that," or, "You're having a struggle with this. How can we problem solve this and make it work? Here's what you're telling me you want," versus just completely unstructured play, where you open the gate and you say, "Go have a great time," and you as the teacher sit back and make sure everyone is safe. (Kate)

In Kate’s statement above, we have both the recognition that independent free play is vital to learning, but is also dependent upon teacher interactions. Here too, we can see some tension in how the administrator envisions interactions in the outdoor classroom and the ways teachers describe their role as primarily facilitators of safety as expressed above.

Other tensions persist throughout the transition to the outdoor classroom: primarily between the teacher perspectives exhibited above and parent expectations and perspectives emerging from the surveys concerning teachers’ roles. A predominant theme within the parent surveys was a desire for more structured learning to take advantage of the outdoor classroom. Below are four representative samples of different parent responses to the question of what their goals were for the new outdoor classroom and teachers’ roles in the new space.

> Fully incorporating the playground in the curriculum. i.e., making it a place where teaching/learning actually happens.

> Getting structured about the learning when the tendency has been to use the playground as free time for kids and adults alike.
>
> Making learning moments outside.
>
> I would like for the teachers to invest in outdoor curriculum.

We can see in these responses that there is significant concern for using the outdoor classroom in intentional and structured ways. This would entail a shift from the practices of teachers who embed a purely emergent curriculum into the outdoor activities. While free play was still considered an important factor in their child's day among parents, those surveyed relayed a strong orientation towards teachers embedding outdoor education curriculum within the activities in the outdoor classroom. This is significant when compared to the above perspectives of teachers and highlights the seemingly disparate attitudes concerning adult roles in the outdoor classroom. As will be shown in the second finding, the data highlights interesting overlap in how these expressed goals align with parent perceptions of practice in the outdoor classroom since the transition.

Administrators seem to toggle between these differing views concerning teachers' roles. Danielle and Kate, both administrators interviewed, stressed that structured and unstructured play were similarly vital to effective child-led and emergent curriculum. This may be indicative of the culture of the center being one orbiting around emergent curriculum and this would position the teacher in a more auxiliary or facilitating role. To this end, Danielle emphasized that she likes

> to give children the opportunity to have child-led, child-directed play, so more unstructured. But I do like to have a plan in place so that particularly for children who don't engage. So, I think there's a time and place for that. I tend to lean toward unstructured with supervision and guidance.

However, she underscored that even though child-led play is key,

> it's important to be mindful of what really you're there to do, and it's to be with children not only to supervise but to engage with them, particularly at those key moments where they find something that's really striking or interesting to them, and to figure out how you can help them learn more about whatever they're doing.

Kate echoed this view in stipulating that, "for me, good structured play and good unstructured play are both child-led," continuing that child-directed play should be "unstructured from the aspect of not having a specific goal in mind. The only structure is that, 'This is the material I'm putting here. What are you gonna build?'" Kids can choose" (Kate). These concepts of structured and unstructured are an essential awareness for studying staff perspectives and roles at the center and underlying theoretically constructivist ideals. However, this discourse begets the question as to the implications for not having specific goals in mind concerning the outdoor classroom. Would a stronger sense of curricular cohesion and long-term environmental education goals suit this new environment?

Thus, we have a de-centering of teachers in these explanations concerning the outdoor classroom and children's play. This perception of child-led play and learning is consistent throughout the research project as staff at the center consistently stressed a peripheral role for teachers, both before and after the transition, while the consensus among parents is for the space to be intentionally used as an outdoor classroom. This highlights a recurrent tension among adult goals and perspectives of how the outdoor classroom should be used.

Having explored these perceptions among educators regarding teacher roles in the outdoor classroom, we turn now to the second finding concerning how structured curriculum is regarded in the new space and how adults view the intersection of emergent, child-led curriculum with more intentionally directed play and learning.

Finding Balance: Structuring Outdoor Play within Emergent Curriculum

While teachers consistently spoke to the need for less structured and less teacher-led learning, in practice they engage more with children in the new space, effectively creating ad hoc structured activities. The general sense among teachers is that curriculum oriented towards the outdoor classroom requires more and varied forms of intentional planning, but that both the space and the experience of children directs these lessons. Within this finding, we will explore three interrelated concepts expressed by teachers: *planning for play, spontaneous teaching, and training*. Synthesizing these perceptions seems consistent with the embedding of emergent curriculum as articulated by Kate below.

> We use an emergent curriculum, so we're following the interests of the children…our philosophy of the emergent curriculum completely meshes with the outdoor classroom…I think our new outdoor space really allows for that. That's kinda the goal of where we're at, of there are some structured things out there, and there are some unstructured things.

Teachers similarly described a changing dynamic in the outdoor classroom, one that requires more preparation and a sense of how to balance free and pedagogical play, although it is generally viewed as a work in progress. Both administrators spoke to the continuing transition to the new space, as explained by Kate in suggesting "I think that the engagement of the teachers, the use of that outdoor space as a true learning space, we're still learning about, and we're still grasping what all of our options truly are."

Yet, this transition to the outdoor classroom has taken time for adjustment and recognition of different needs for children and adults. Considering this transition to the outdoor classroom, Danielle indicated that

> we're learning the balance because before, really, truly, it was just unstructured play. And I think we're in what I would call a transition time. So each classroom is supposed to plan for a week of a structured activity to place out there that's available for children to do. So, kind of as a team, I think we're trying to learn how to balance that.

In similar fashion, Kate described a community dynamic at work among teachers,

> building off of each other, talking to each other, using that opportunity when they're out there, talking about what was happening in the classroom, and someone saying, "Well, we can do this, or this." Because that space lends itself to community, I'm seeing that community within the teachers.

In describing community, Kate is exploring a concept of adaptation to the new space and how best practice might look in this space. In her statement is a sense of the staff working together to find the best path forward, yet, Danielle, in contrasting before and after engagement of teachers, illuminated,

> in the big picture, I would say I don't see a big change. I would hope for a bigger change. I know we're almost at two years; I would say we're still learning. So, I would say that teachers most often stand and supervise and watch and listen rather than engage. I don't think that's necessarily wrong. I think there's a time and a place for engaging and a time and a place to just observe and let kids be kids. I think there needs to be some balance with that.

From the administrative viewpoint then, there is a concern for finding the right balance in outdoor learning, something that sits at the intersection of free, unstructured play, and intentional, pedagogical play.

Parents, likewise, related a desire for balancing different forms of play. However, while parents describe goals that link to more intentional, pedagogical play, their perspectives of the learning in the outdoor classroom suggest that they see more free play than not. In describing the desire for the outdoor classroom to be incorporated more fully into the curriculum, one parent stressed that

> I am not sure this is happening now and can see how teachers would need to invest time both during the day and for prep to create opportunities for learning. But doing so and not taking just pure recess time away.

This is a shared perspective and concern among parents as supported by the two separate statements below:

> I don't get the sense that there are lessons being taught out there. What I see is that they are free playing on the playground, which is good, but I don't get the sense that there are set lessons being taught.

> I thought that there would be a lot of directed learning about the materials and natural surroundings. My sense, though, is that its still pretty much all free play. That's fine, of course, but it does make me wonder to what extent the teachers are taking advantage of the teachable moments that occur out there.

Significantly, these statements suggest that parents desire using the space more intentionally and that this requires a higher degree of curricular planning and a movement away from purely free play, or at the least a recognition that there should be a difference between recess/free play and developing lessons and "opportunities for learning." This further suggests the need for increased teacher intervention in the learning process to lead children towards particular learning goals and to bridge a potential pedagogical gap.

This is not meant to critique the teachers for their practice being embedded within an emergent curriculum orientation, rather, this finding suggests that adults have significantly different perspectives and attitudes of what constitutes learning and play and that changes that are occurring are a natural outcome of a change in environment. Contextually, these parental views of intentional curriculum planning are important, yet how does this work within practice? Below, we explore teacher perspectives concerning how curriculum planning ensues in the outdoor classroom, related specifically to planning, spontaneity of teaching, and training.

Planning for play. Teacher responses exhibit recognition that environmental education may require a stronger sense of intentional planning and pedagogical investment in the play of children. Teachers frequently spoke of planning in the new space, a very different discourse than before the transition, when the playground was simply a space for recess and teacher down time. Within the teacher reflections presented below there are several explanations of the ways that intentional planning for the outdoor classroom has changed. Although, there are apparent inconsistencies in how much planning teachers are actively doing, a variability that training may offset. In the following statements, there is the appreciation that the space itself demands increased attention to planning and intentional pedagogical engagement among teachers. Contrasting her experiences before and after the transition, Jessica identified that "now, there's more in-depth planning" and further, that

> when we do have something really going on in the outdoor classroom that is fun and exciting, there is definitely a lot more planning that goes along, and with the gardens and everything, growing the plants, and once the plants start to grow, constantly watching those and checking. That goes into our outdoor lesson plans as well.

Activities such as gardening, using hammer and nails, and water play require a higher amount of intentionality to be successful and teachers consistently spoke of these projects being more heavily planned.

Ella provided a complimentary perspective comparing before and after when she related that, "I am actually planning things for outside. You know, because in the past it was, ok, well, I am going to take out this toy and that was all that was required of us." This statement is augmented with Michelle's statement below.

> oh, my goodness. It is definitely a lot more planning on our part. I don't think I am using it how I want to yet. I would like to be able to use it more, but I just think we need more materials out

> there, to be able to use it effectively. I think I am more mindful. I know that I need to prepare more, I guess and more conscious of how I use it than what I was before.

Both administrators similarly spoke of the increased need for planning. Danielle in describing her own experience, articulated that "I've had to learn to think more about planning for the playground," while Kate stressed that she observes "there's a lot more purposeful planning of what's going on." In these statements is embedded the perceived need for more intentional curriculum and preparation, something akin to what parents have described. However, while teachers consistently spoke of the need for increased planning, there was also an undercurrent suggestive of the fact that the outdoor environment fosters more spontaneous forms of pedagogy.

Spontaneous teaching. There is a significant discourse among teachers suggesting that the space itself creates conditions for spontaneous curricular planning and that teachers are often responding to the outdoor environment in their practice. Some of these perspectives run counter to those above relative to more intensive planning. Regarding this, Jessica explained,

> I like to let the outdoor classroom kind of lead it into something. There's less planning, sometimes, but then as I see something emerging, there's more planning involved, and like, 'Okay, now where can we take this that's happening?' Once something emerges, there's more planning that goes along with it, but until something is spurred, it really goes along with more our emergent curriculum.

Jessica's experience with this emergent form of curricular planning reinforces the variability of outdoor lessons being dependent upon ambient conditions and what children are noticing. Thus, according to this teacher's experience, regardless of the play being child or teacher-led, the outdoor environment dictates to a large degree what happens on a daily basis. Ella articulated this dynamic by stressing the informal ways she engages with the outdoor classroom.

> I know that we're supposed to be planning for that time just as much we do in the classroom. But I feel like sometimes it's hard enough just to plan for the classroom, or finding the time to plan for the classroom, that that sort of follows. Not that we don't do stuff out there, but it's not formally planned. Not formally planned out, necessarily, but not that we don't do anything. We use the space but we just don't always have it already thought out. I didn't even think that I was gonna open the water table until I walked outside today.

In her statement are several very important considerations that impede outdoor education planning, such as limitations of time and lack of formal ways of approaching outdoor education. Lack of formal instruction was also seen arising out of perceptions concerning the outdoors in general. Even while stating that she engaged in more planning for outdoor lessons, Michelle clarified that outdoor lessons are

> more informal than in the classroom. Because in the classroom I´ll do circle time and then I´ll explain you know if I have an activity, what it is. But I feel like the stuff outside and just how it is, you´re not going to get anywhere by making it formal usually. Like it needs to be more informal, just because of how it is outside. Especially when there are other classrooms out there. You can´t, I mean, to try to manage all that, it is just easier to plan for it to be informal.

Within this estimation, the outdoor classroom creates the limiting factor for more intentional curriculum and lesson planning and the best way forward is to limit structured planning.

Echoing this view, Jessica explained that, "I may not always have a lesson plan. It may just be like, 'Oh yeah, today I'm gonna get out some music and movement,' and we'll dance around the playground, and have a good time, and that'll be that." Spontaneity in teaching came up under various guises in our discussions with teachers across the data and the quote below offers an insightful way of considering this process. When describing child engagement in the outdoors, Rebecca, illustrated that

> if they see something outside, we might have a magnifying glass, and if they see a bug, oh, let's see if we can find some more. It's more spontaneous teaching, like, oh, let's do this, let's see if we can see where it's coming from. It's just more exploration outside.

Taken together we can see how the concepts of *informal*, *exploration*, and *spontaneous* become synonymous and are clearly seen as an appropriate way to engage in outdoor environments. Lack of formal planning amplifies the notion that outdoor education requires less attentive engagement among teachers on a day-to-day basis and the default becomes less pedagogical play and more spontaneity. As we explain below this relates to the persistent need for environmental education training.

Training for outdoor education. All of this begs the question of whether the outdoor classroom is indeed being used to its fullest capacity, and what it might take to get to this level of engagement. While there is general agreement that teachers are more engaged, and observational data supports this, there is less agreement in the specifics of instruction and pedagogy appropriate for the outdoor space. There is further consensus that outdoor learning requires different methods than indoor lessons and that teachers are still transitioning to the new space. This transition is evidenced in the acknowledgement that there is considerable variability in how teachers approach the outdoor classroom and intentional use of the space for environmental education.

Danielle conceded that she finds outdoor learning "more difficult, not necessarily in the planning but in the implementing," and that teachers were eager to "know more about how to incorporate the nature study side of the outdoor classroom. We are good at taking what we have inside outdoors, but what are some of those specific things that you can have outdoors?" While teachers are keen to learn, Danielle's statement reflects her concerns that the outdoor classroom is not being used to full advantage, that there exists a gap in pedagogical expertise. This is evident in how Sarah describes her preparations for outdoor learning.

> Well, they [Nature Explore] do have a whole booklet of different ideas of things you could do outside and things that enhance nature things. Like how they grow, and ask questions that you can provide and build upon. But I tend to like to go off what they [children] notice.

Sarah's statement orients towards constructivist frames of reference, but the default to engage only what children notice may be a limiting factor pedagogically, steering away from intentional forms of learning and fostering environmental values. Relying solely upon child-led experiences can further negate the holistic and intentional design elements in the outdoor classroom, an issue revolving around how teachers themselves value the outdoor environment.

In highlighting this tension, there is recognition that without specific goals for outdoor learning, there may be limited value placed upon the outdoor classroom, and this is inherently an issue of fostering this awareness in teachers. Outdoor lessons, Kate suggested,

> help them [teachers] see the value of the outdoor classroom because if you just go out and you use the sand toys, and the trikes and the balls that are out there every day, even for teachers, you can lose that purpose of what it's about. If there's something specific out there, there's a reason it was put out, and that helps them to see the value.

Purpose here suggests more intentional planning and use, something training can encourage. Jessica provided a description of the dynamics in the outdoor classroom suggestive that understanding purpose is essential to taking full advantage of it.

> We had a whole lesson that just was surrounded by picking the plants, just that one aspect of the gardening. My kids were always really mad when the other kids picked the plants, but it's not as high on some of the other teachers' priority list to do some of those outdoor things. They prefer to do more of the letter recognition and those kinds of things, which are also super-important. When we're outdoors in that outdoor space, we need to utilize that time as not just a mental break,

> but as continued learning, and experiencing all the science, and biology, and stuff that comes along with it.

This is perhaps the clearest statement concerning a need for a different orientation towards curriculum planning relative to indoor and outdoor spaces and implicitly a call for training for staff at the center.

Considerable attention is given to teachers who bring inside curricular ideas into the outdoor classroom. Yet, little attention has been given to the need of additional training for outdoor environments, or towards that end, an awareness that there is inherently anything different about teaching in these different spaces, let alone, how to intentionally instruct environmental education-oriented lessons. Thus, while children and adults are benefitting from the outdoor classroom and new experiences, there is a persistent tension evident in how to engender greater engagement.

DISCUSSION

We believe that this dynamic between adult perspectives is evidence of a tension between the disparate goals of intentional versus emergent curriculum, of child-led versus teacher-led learning. Both forms of curriculum beget structured play, although the former begins with the goals of adults and the later originates with the experiences of children. As both children and adults are acclimating to the new outdoor space, we are actually observing a blurring of intentional and emergent curriculum, a blending of child-led and teacher-led engagement. This often took the form of what was termed *spontaneous teaching*, the genesis of which can be found at the intersection of children's experiences and the outdoor environment. The following discussion, while being grounded in the particular context of this project has broader applications to outdoor learning environments and the roles and practices of adults in these settings.

There are indeed benefits of spontaneous teaching as described by the teachers and this resonates with the emergent curriculum orientation at the center. This also fits within the theoretical lens of constructivist learning at the heart of the program. Taking advantage of the interests of children and the ambient outdoor conditions on any given day provides flexibility and less dependence on prescribed lessons oriented towards adult goals. Allowing children to lead, while observing their play and exploration can be an effective pedagogical strategy that fosters greater learning (Bohling, Saarela, & Miller, 2010). However, the downside of this is that there is not a cohesive, environmental education orientation across the classes as attested to by some teachers. This inconsistency in how the space is used is a direct reflection of how various teachers think about planning for the outdoor environment. Limitations such as time, formal outdoor awareness and training, and the outdoors itself all factor into this lack of cohesion, as do teachers' own personal memories of unstructured childhood play and the benefits perceived of this kind of experience (Author citation). A greater degree of communication among all involved concerning goals, values, and pedagogical strategies is necessary for the success and long-term sustainability of a project such as this.

The interesting paradox is that while the space itself fosters spontaneous self-exploration there is an amplified perspective that more intentional curriculum and pedagogical play is needed to fully use the space to its potential. This is reflective of the diverse adult perspectives exhibited above; parent, administrator, teacher. The enduring tension sits at the intersection of balancing child-led, emergent curriculum and the increased need for structured lessons and planning particularly oriented towards environmental education. And it is here, that we find the "pedagogical gap" explored by Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards (2013). Interestingly, this gap is recognized among teachers, who are cognizant that while they obviate towards constructivist, child-led play, the space itself is driving changes in practice towards more intentional pedagogical learning.

Essential to the outdoor learning for the children at the center is a deeply experiential ideal held among adults. There is consensus among the adults there that learning should be hands on and oriented towards what children are directly experiencing. This resonates with the larger literature within environmental education pedagogy, though experience alone may not lead to positive environmental awareness or attitudes (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Kollmuss & Agyeman, 2002).

To be sure, children's experiences in the outdoors are tethered to the types of environments they have access to and the experiences, awareness, and actions of adults with whom they share the outdoors (Kiewra & Veselack, 2016; Moore & Wong, 1997). While our study highlights that children acclimated to the new outdoor classroom quickly and this led to a host of changes in engagement for children and adults, lingering questions exist as to how to take greater advantage of the outdoor resources. Without intentional pedagogic and curricular shifts, including higher levels of direct engagement with teachers, children may miss out on transformative outdoor learning (Chakravarthi, 2009; Emilsen & Koch, 2010; Moser & Martinsen, 2010). In this case, children's experiences are not solely dependent upon the space itself, but, importantly, from the ways in which adults help shape and nurture particular experiences in the outdoor classroom.

Parents desire more intentional planning while the discourse of teachers is strongly situated within the perspective of teachers being observers. Yet, the space dictates changes in experience and practice. Outdoor learning is happening to be sure, but this more often takes shape as an extension of natural curiosity among the children as they interact with the ambient environment in the form of pinecones, seashells, logs, tree cookies, dirt, plants, and water.

Intentional environmental education, with its incumbent sense of values and knowledge (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013) has not played a central role in the interactions that we were privy to, even though, in the focus group, several teachers expressed the desire to be more intentional and structured in their practice and have been working on curriculum for the outdoors; a structuring that aligns with parent expectations and goals. As can be seen in the various perspectives highlighted in this work, the changing outdoor space has led to interesting changes in practice and intentions among teachers without a coordinated effort at professional or curricular development.

As to the question of the outdoor classroom being realized in pedagogy, practice, and experience, the general sense is that it has not. This is evident in the responses of parents and the recognition of staff concerning children's experiences in the outdoor classroom and is due to several factors; chief among these being lack of cohesive training in environmental education. Teachers are finding that the outdoor classroom fosters child-led free exploration, something akin to the constructivist orientation of the center, and simultaneously, requires more pedagogical intent to direct learning. In effect, a balance of theoretical frameworks and effective practice.

Because the outdoor classroom is vastly different from the habits of a traditional playground, teachers haven't had time or training to create dedicated curriculum oriented towards environmental education. Rather, they are adapting to the space and how children are reacting to the outdoors in ad hoc fashion and thus the curriculum emerges out of the direct experiences outside without long-range curricular goals. In this still new, still evolving outdoor classroom there is a blurring of pedagogical and free play as the engagement between children and teachers increases in response to the outdoor environment.

The inherent tension is made more complex in that there are significant inconsistencies in how teachers think about planning for the outdoor environment and what role they play in structuring activities for children. The discourse of teachers has not shifted from before the transition to the outdoor classroom; they hold to the notion that children should lead and teachers should facilitate. However, their practice has shifted dramatically, evolving from more passive observing and behavior management to an actively engaged interaction and recognition that more in-depth and intentional planning is necessary, moving beyond simply taking inside work outdoors. In this is acknowledgment that the outdoor environment has its own demands and requires a different form of awareness and planning. What we find particularly interesting is how the outdoor space has transformed behavior and interactions, without an intentional, cohesive, and comprehensive attempt from adults.

Implications and Recommendations

While this study focuses upon one early childhood center, the findings offer broad applications for the practice of outdoor learning and the development of outdoor classrooms. Essential to successful project development and outdoor learning is clear communication across all participants, professional development and training for staff, and intentionality in the design of outdoor spaces, their use, and the balancing of child-led and teacher-led learning.

An underlying implication of our study is whether the space is effectively being used as an outdoor classroom and what is necessary to balance the outdoor learning of children. This is an important consideration for all groups hoping to create outdoor learning environments. To be successful in this requires a higher level of intentionality and training for teachers to use the space to make "learning moments happen," as one parent suggests. Teachers speak of experiencing both increased engagement and increased planning resulting from the altered outdoor environment. The implication of this is that the outdoor space creates the necessary conditions for increased engagement, yet there remains a need for educators to intentionally develop learning opportunities for children to take advantage of what outdoor classrooms have to offer. With increased intentionality and environmental education training the outdoor space may be utilized to greater advantage for children and adults. To engage in this might lead the center towards greater balance between child-led and teacher-led learning and pivot away from ad hoc reacting to the outdoors towards a more cohesive, outdoor education curriculum best suited for the outdoor classroom.

Children need time for free exploration, while teachers need to feel supported in their attempts to meet children's needs. Greater attention to long term goals of environmental education could go a long way in finding the balance between child-led and teacher-led engagement. Cutter-Mackenzie and Edwards (2013) write of the need for a "pedagogical balance" between experiences, knowledge, and values that allows various forms of outdoor learning. Both child-led and teacher-led activities are necessary for creating the conditions by which educators can encourage holistic learning in the outdoors (Cutter-Mackenzie & Edwards, 2013; Tranter & Malone, 2004; Woods, 2010). Our findings are evidence of this dynamic and speak to the need for intentionality among adults to balance child-led and teacher-led learning. In this regard, we view intentionality as a way of guiding interactions and effective use of space rather than simply forcing all lessons to be teacher-led and structured. Thus, there is a heightened need for intentionality among adults to better balance these different forms of learning. This requires, though, more discussion and interaction among administrators, teachers, and parents at the center to communicate goals and best practice for learning in the outdoors. The 2013 case study by Bohling, Saarela & Miller concerning parental involvement in an outdoor classroom offers important lessons that resonate here. Of particular import is their finding that "meaningful parent involvement is built on providing layers of information" and that staff development and training and parent education "regarding the benefits of outdoor play for children's learning and development" (2013, 38) are all necessary for program success and sustainability.

Recommendations for Practice

Cognizant of the contextualized findings explored here, and working towards achieving balance between different forms of engagement and learning, and in fully realizing the potential for outdoor classrooms, we recommend the following:

- Professional development for teachers and staff in outdoor learning environments and environmental education. The development of awareness of best practices in outdoor learning and competencies in leading children in environmentally oriented lessons would provide resources and awareness in how to effectively engage children in the outdoor classroom.
- Development of long-term goals for environmental and outdoor education. Intentionality is essential in providing clear guidance for optimizing the space and ensuring balance of experiences, knowledge, and values orientations.
- Consistent discussions among the school community so that all (children and adults) have the ability to share ideas and suggestions for outdoor learning and how to best use the outdoor classroom. This could take the form of an advisory committee of staff and parents who shepherd the outdoor classroom, consider practical elements of maintenance and growth, and the subsequent learning of children and adults.
- Providing more time outdoors. This would allow for achieving balance in learning with time devoted to more structured environmental lessons at the direction of teachers and time devoted to child-led and free play.

Opportunities for Future Study

- How do teachers perceive professional development development/training relative to outdoor classrooms and environmental education and subsequent practice?
  One of our suggestions is for more intentional professional development for teachers as a way to foster greater environmental literacy and engagement. A study along these lines would allow examination of impacts and outcomes of professional development opportunities relative to outdoor learning and whether this type of training is effective.
- What are children's experiences with and perspectives of child-led and teacher-led activities in outdoor classrooms?
  The present study explores adult perspectives, but children's voices are missing here. Of great interest would be to account for the ways children are aware of and respond to various types of activities in outdoor learning environments to better prepare practitioners.
- How does amount of time outdoors impact children and adult interactions and learning?
  Allowing more time outdoors may be one way of balancing child-led and teacher-led activities and foster deeper connections across all activities. This would be beneficial in designing outdoor learning environments and determining timeframes and schedules for outdoor experiences.

CONCLUSION

In exploring the outdoor classroom at this early childhood center, we have been privy to a dynamic intersection of theory and practice and a host of changes in the ways children and adults are engaging with the outdoors. The salient findings presented here provide access into the variety of adult viewpoints of outdoor learning and teacher roles and interesting tensions between diverse perspectives and goals. It is remarkable to reflect upon the transformative effect the changes from a traditional playground to an outdoor classroom have fostered in the experiences and interactions for both children and adults. Outdoor learning is happening to be sure. Children and adults are engaged in ways they were not in the traditional playground, and they interact in responsive ways to the environment around them. This in itself is illustrative of the power of our environment and outdoor spaces to engender positive change.

Likewise, our investigation speaks to an essential discourse within early childhood outdoor and environmental learning; how to encourage both child-led learning, and more teacher-led and structured environmental lessons. Teachers at the center are universally committed to an emergent and child-led curriculum. This orientation is rooted in a constructivist theoretical model of learning, but finds itself intertwined with the practical realities of engaging children with the outdoors. While hewing to this theoretical frame, teachers are finding the outdoor classroom requires more structured lessons to be truly effective. In this we find a pedagogical gap between the constructivist theory embedded in emergent curriculum and teachers' changing practice, as children and adults adapt to the new outdoor environment.

Teachers are acclimating to the space and are developing lessons suited to outdoor learning, though this has been a more spontaneous, ad hoc expression and response. How much more powerful could this learning be with increased intentionality and professional development? Recognizing that teaching and learning in the outdoors offers unique challenges and opportunities different from indoor learning may go a long way in developing highly impactful practices that balance the various needs and goals of all involved. With greater intentionality, the child-led, emergent curriculum that is highly experiential can be balanced with the essential knowledge, awareness, and values orientation encouraged by more structured environmental education.

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