ENCYCLOPEDIA on Early Childhood Development

Building Capacity to Support Outdoor Play in Early Childhood Education

[1]Beverlie Dietze, PhD, [2]Diane Kashin, EdD

[1]Kelowna, BC, Canada, [2]Richmond Hill, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

September 2024, Éd. rév.

Introduction

Children's play experiences in outdoor environments are increasingly recognized as essential for their healthy development and well-being.[1,2,3,4] Universal system reviews indicate that outdoor play contributes to children's physical, and social-emotional development, mental health, emotional regulation. cognition and level of curiosity required for later academic learning.[4,5,6] However, children today are spending less time engaged in outdoor play compared to children in the 1970s.[7,8] Findings from a 2016 global survey suggest that more than 56% of children play less than an hour a day outdoors.[8] Increased use of technology, disruptions and changes to children's daily lives since COVID 19, and societal attitudes toward favouring indoor environments contribute to the reduction of children playing outdoors.[9] Reversing this indoor trend is important to children and for society.[6,9,10,11,12]

Governments responsible for early learning programs have a variety of policies, funding levels, regulatory structures, workforce competencies, and expectations including curriculum frameworks intended to support quality play-based programs for children and families.[6,9,13]

©2024-2026 ABILIO | OUTDOOR PLAY

Curriculum frameworks offer pedagogical approaches[1,2,6,10,14] that guide the design and execution of experiences to build upon children's curiosity, exploration, thinking, and learning in indoor and outdoor environments. However, this does not mean that outdoor play is explicit in policies and frameworks. Early learning teachers do not focus enough on outdoor play, due in part, to a lack of training in outdoor pedagogy during post-secondary education and professional development options.[9,10,15,16,17]

Researchers such as Pacini-Ketchabaw & Nxumalo[18] and Shanker[19] identify a correlation between children's outdoor play experiences during their early years with later academic performance. Others outline the relationship between outdoor play and speech, language and communication skills4 and the connection between outdoor play and the development of environmental stewardship.[1,12,13] These findings suggest an urgent need to emphasize outdoor play in policies and competencies in early learning teacher preparation and in post-secondary programs.[9,10,15,16,17] Curriculum frameworks and in turn government policies,[20] funding levels, regulatory structures, workforce competencies and expectations need to emphasize its importance.[6,8,14,15,16,17]

Subject relevance

Play in outdoor environments is increasingly recognized as a foundation for children's healthy development and wellness.[1,2,3,4,6,9] Early learning curricula should embody outdoor play, as it is vital to children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development and their learning.[21,22] Children are hard-wired to need nature and to play in natural environments.[1,22]

The outdoor play experiences extended to children are influenced by the pedagogical interactions exchanged with program administrators, the early learning teachers, children and families.[1,10,14,15] Early learning teachers require experiential outdoor learning during their post-secondary education and access to professional development that will enhance their understanding of their role in outdoor play provision.[9,15,16,17]

Problem

Gaps in knowledge, skills, and practices that early learning teachers bring to their workplace should be addressed to enhance the outdoor play experiences of children in early learning programs.[15,16,17,21,23] In Canada, this is challenging because of the varying provincial and territorial government policies and departments that guide early learning programs, post-secondary programs, and the differing provincial and territorial policies on outdoor play in early learning

programs, programming competencies of early learning teachers, and the professional development requirements of early learning teachers.[9,15] As well, post-secondary professors designing and teaching courses do not require specialized education or experience in outdoor pedagogy.[9,16,17] For example, specific competencies related to outdoor play in college early childhood education programs may be at the discretion of professors, programs or institutions rather than defined by government policy.[9,10,15,16,17] Some critics suggest the coursework may not necessarily be based on latest research nor is there guarantee that the practice-based learning is connected to the theory presented.[9,10,15,17]

Research Context

Play has long been identified as the way children learn best.1[,2,6,9,15,21,23,24] Yet, with the varying post-secondary early childhood education curricula, educational levels and backgrounds of early learning teachers, compounded with diverse guidelines and standards for children's daily access to outdoor play, this vital tenet of education may not be explicit in practice. Creating an outdoor-based practicum in Canadian post-secondary early childhood education programs is viewed as a new approach for advancing skills in outdoor pedagogy with early learning teachers.[9,10]

Professional development is highly influenced by employers, provincial funding models, collective agreements, and individual early learning teacher motivation, which adds to the problem.[9,15,17] There is limited peer-reviewed research that provides insight into the depth and breadth of early learning teachers' outdoor pedagogy or competencies in planning or implementing intriguing outdoor play experiences or their receptivity and attitudes toward outdoor play.[15,21,25] This area is important as their pedagogical approach to outdoor play influences children's outdoor play time, experiences, opportunities and attitudes toward outdoor play.[3,5,9,10,23] Post-secondary professors have limited access to professional development.[9,15,16,17] Furthermore, having experienced professors does not ensure quality teaching. In many cases, professors are assigned courses to design and teach without having expertise in the subject.[17]

Key Research Questions

What is the impact of the lack of formal education and professional development related to outdoor play on the practice of early learning teachers? How do post-secondary courses and teaching and learning strategies influence how early learning teachers transfer outdoor play into practice?[6,10,15,16,17] What barriers must be overcome to change the practice, thereby increasing

children's access to outdoor play?[24] What are the perspectives of professors in post-secondary institutions who are involved in implementing outdoor play and nature pedagogy courses for on-line and in outdoor learning spaces?

Recent Research Results

The research results provide insight into how early learning teachers describe their preparation for outdoor pedagogy and practice. Eight hundred and ninety-six early learning teachers who enrolled in a professional development course on outdoor play were asked at the onset of the course to identify how they would assess their knowledge and skills related to outdoor play. Seventy-two percent of the respondents indicated that they had limited knowledge about outdoor pedagogy theory or how to implement outdoor play in early learning programs. Eighty-nine percent of indicated that this course was their first exposure to studying outdoor play pedagogy, while 11% indicated that they acquired their knowledge through workshops.[15,17]

The authors completed another study that explored whether the current nature-based learning and forest and nature school movements were influencing programs or practice.[15] A movement is characterized by a group of people who collectively work together to advance their shared ideas intended to bring about change to a social issue, such as outdoor play. Across Canada, the growing interest in outdoor play has resulted in the growth of these movements designed to provide more outdoor play experiences for children.[1,2,3,5,9,10] Of the 212 early learning teachers who participated, 61% of the respondents identified that these movements did not influence their practice.[15] Respondents identified other factors that they deemed more influential, such as childhood experiences, and the attitudes of their fellow teachers, which determined how outdoor play was positioned within their programs, as well as families' understanding of the benefits of daily outdoor play. Further, the lack of outdoor play space and materials were noted as contributing to early learning teachers not wanting to be outdoors. In the data examined and narratives shared, the barriers reveal a need to emphasize pre and post service training to early learning teachers on outdoor play and for professors teaching outdoor pedagogy to have access to resources and supports.[9,15,16,17] A third study conducted in 2018 examined 98 Canadian publicly-funded college early childhood education programs for calendar descriptions of courses on outdoor play or for explicit content related to outdoor play within other courses. Only three had explicit courses and 39 identified outdoor play in descriptions leaving more than half without reference to this crucial curriculum area for early learning teachers.[17]

In 2023, a further examination of early childhood education course descriptions at 92 Canadian publicly-funded colleges and institutes was undertaken to determine if there had been any significant change to the status of outdoor play in the programs. Only seven percent of the course descriptions explicitly identified having a module or course related to outdoor approaches and/or indigenous worldviews within their programs.[9]

Could the extreme diversity among college programs and student learning experiences, combined with differing provincial and territorial policies and regulations for outdoor play act as obstacles in advancing children's access to quality outdoor play experiences?

Research Gaps

The research needed to support expansion of children's outdoor play is multifaceted due in part to the various government and territorial departments and jurisdictions that influence early learning programs. Research is needed that examines how leaders of early learning environments position outdoor play in their policies, practices,[25] staff professional development, family orientation, and family education. Further research is required to determine the depth and breadth of outdoor pedagogy being implemented in college programs and the types of professional development that professors require related to the theory and practice of outdoor pedagogy with students.[9,10,15,16,17] Ideally, a participatory research approach would be utilized to investigate the interactions among government policies and post-secondary curriculum. This approach would create synergies and expose gaps in theories and approaches.

Conclusion

Across Canada there are various provincial and territorial jurisdictions responsible for the development and implementation of policies, procedures, and curricula in publicly-funded post-secondary early childhood education programs that influence children's outdoor play experiences. Without a cohesive approach toward outdoor pedagogy, the opportunities for children to be in outdoor play environments that honour their right to play are diminished. Co-constructing policies, procedures, curricula and action plans has the potential to 'raise the bar' in promoting the value and influence of outdoor pedagogy in children's development; this contributes to establishing healthy communities.

Implications for Families, Services and Policy

With expansion of policies and corresponding services that support outdoor play, early learning programs, post-secondary institutions, professors, and governments can increase children's access to environments that contribute to the developmental benefits that outdoor play has to offer. As families become more aware of the importance of outdoor play to children's healthy development and later academic success, they will become informed consumers and advocates for their children. Change to the current state of outdoor play requires engagement among families, government, community, administrators, professors, and early learning teachers in their programs. Working collaboratively helps key stakeholders to bring the knowledge and skills from research and theory to practice in support of children's outdoor play experiences.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Although Diane Kashin passed away in 2024, her commitment to research and co-learning, will continue to influence the early childhood education sector for many years. Thus, this entry retains aspects of Diane's voice and knowledge presented in the previous edition of this Encyclopedia, while adding recent research relevant to expanding outdoor play in all facets of early childhood education.

References

1. Dietze B, Kashin D. *Outdoor and nature play in early childhood education.* Toronto: Pearson Canada; 2019.
2. Dietze B, Kashin D. *Playing and learning in early childhood education.* Toronto: Pearson Canada; 2023.
3. Beaulieu E, Beno S. Healthy childhood development through outdoor risky play: Navigating the balance with injury prevention. *Paediatrics & Child Health.* 2024;29(4):255-269.
4. Scott S, Gray T, Charlton J, Millard S. The impact of time spent in natural outdoor spaces on children's language, Communication and social skills: a systematic review protocol. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health.* 2024;19(19):12038.
5. Parker L. Outdoor learning, a pathway to transformational learning? Or another educational gimmick. *International Journal for Cross-Disciplinary Subjects in Education*. 2022;13(1):4600-4611.

6. Lawson Foundation. Increasing outdoor play in early learning and child care in the context of COVID-19. July 2020. http://www.lawson.ca/op-elcc-covid19.pdf. Published July 2020. Accessed April 2024.
7. Juster TF, Stafford F, Ono H. Major changes have taken place in how children and teens spend their time: Child development supplement. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research, University of Michigan. 2004.
8. Prisk C, Cusworth H. From muddy hands and dirty faces to higher grades and happy places. Outdoor Classroom Day. 2018.
9. Lawson Foundation. More Than a New Course: A Framework for Embedding Outdoor and Land-based Pedagogies in Post-Secondary ECE Programs. June 2024. https://lawson.ca/MoreThanANewCourse.pdf. Accessed June 2024.
10. Boileau E, O'Donoghue L. Learning to embrace outdoor pedagogy: early childhood education student experiences of a nature-focused practicum. *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education.* 2024. doi:10.1007/s42322-023-00153-1
11. Kiviranta L, Lindfors E, Rönkkö M, Luukka E. Outdoor learning in early childhood education: exploring benefits and challenges. *Educational Research.* 2023;66(1):102-119. doi:10.1080/00131881.2023.2285762.
12. Leggett N, Newman L. Play: Challenging educators' beliefs about play in the indoor and outdoor environment. *Australasian Journal of Early Childhood.* 2017;42(1):24-32.
13. Loebach J, Sanches M, Jaffe J. Elton-Marshall T. Paving the way for outdoor play: examining socio-environmental barriers to community-based outdoor play. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health.* 2021;18(7):3617.
14. Ayotte-Beaudet JP, Berrigan F, Deschamps A, L'Heureux K, Beaudry MC, Turcotte S. K-11 teachers' school-based outdoor education practices in the province of Québec, Canada: from local initiatives to a grassroots movement. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*. 2024;24(2):334-347.
15. Dietze B, Kashin D. Perceptions that early learning teachers have about outdoor play and nature. *LEARNing Landscapes.* 2019;12(1):91-105. doi:10.36510/learnland.v12i1.981
16. Dietze B, Craig D, Goerzen M, O'Donoghue L, Hachey-Bell T. An early childhood education faculty community of practice: A model for guiding change. *Journal for Research and Practice in College Teaching*. 2024;9(1):1-24.

17. Dietze B, Cutler A. College Faculty's Outdoor Play Pedagogy: The Ripple Effect. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education.* 2020;23(2):86-105.
18. Pacini-Ketchabaw V, Nxumalo F. Unruly raccoons and troubled educators: Nature/culture divides in a childcare centre. *Environmental Humanities.* 2016;7(1):151-168.
19. Shanker S. *Self-reg: How to help your child (and you) break the stress cycle and successfully engage with life.* Toronto, Ontario: Penguin; 2016.
20. Connors M, Morris, P. Comparing state policy approaches to early care and education quality: A multidimensional assessment of quality rating and improvement systems and child care licensing regulations. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*. 2015;30:266-279.
21. Alden C. Why the outdoors should be an integral part of every early learning and child-care program. The Conversation 2021, July 18.
22. Smirnova E, Riabkova I. Psychological features of the narrative-based play of preschoolers today. *Journal of Russian & East European Psychology.* 2018;53(2):40-55.
23. Royer N, Moreau C. A survey of Canadian early childhood educators' psychological wellbeing at work. *Early Childhood Education Journal*. 2016;44(2):135-146.
24. Cheng T, Brussoni M, Han C, Munday F, Zeni M. Perceived challenges of early childhood educators in promoting unstructured outdoor play: an ecological systems perspective. *Early Years*. 2022;43(4-5):904-920. doi:10.1080/09575146.2022.2034140
25. Phillips D, Austin L, Whitebook M. The early care and education workforce. *The Future of Children.* 2016;26(2):139-158.