

OUTDOOR PLAY

Building Capacity to Support Outdoor Play in Early Childhood Education

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Introduction

Children's play experiences in outdoor environments are becoming increasingly recognized as essential for their healthy development.^{1,2,3,4} However, children today, compared to the 1970s, are spending 50% less time engaged in outdoor play.⁵ Reversing the indoor trend of childhood is important to children. 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 Curriculum frameworks offer pedagogical approaches⁷ 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 accessible training on outdoor play pedagogy.

With researchers such as Pacini-Ketchabaw & Nxumalo⁸ and Shanker⁹ identifying a correlation between children's outdoor play experiences during their early years with later academic performance and others identifying the connection between outdoor play and the development of environmental stewardship,^{1,10,11} there is an urgent need to emphasize outdoor play in policies and early learning teacher preparation.¹² Curriculum frameworks and in turn government policies, funding levels, regulatory structures, workforce competencies and expectations need to emphasize its importance.⁷

Subject relevance

Play that occurs in outdoor environments is increasingly recognized as a foundation for children's healthy development.¹ Ideally, early learning curriculum should embody outdoor play, as it is vital to children's social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development and their learning.⁵ Children are hard-wired to need nature and

to play in their natural environments.¹³

The outdoor play experiences extended to children are influenced by the pedagogical interactions exchanged between the early learning teachers and children.¹⁴ Early learning teachers require support to understand their role in outdoor play provision.

Problem

The knowledge, skills, and practices that early learning teachers bring to their workplace are important factors in determining the strengths and gaps in knowledge, that if addressed would enhance the outdoor play experiences of children in early learning programs.¹⁵ 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 professional development requirements of early learning teachers. For example, specific competencies delivered in college early childhood education programs may be at the discretion of professors, programs or institutions rather than defined by government policy.¹⁶ 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.¹⁷

Research Context

Play has long been identified as the way children learn best.^{6,7,18} Yet, with the varying educational levels and backgrounds of early learning teachers, compounded with diverse guidelines and standards for children's daily access to outdoor play, this knowledge may not be explicit in practice. Professional development is highly influenced by employers, provincial funding models, and individual early learning teacher motivation, which adds to the problem.¹⁹ There is limited peer-reviewed research that provides insight into the depth and breadth of early learning teachers' outdoor play pedagogy or competencies in planning or implementing intriguing outdoor play experiences with children, or their receptivity and attitudes toward outdoor play. This area is of importance as their pedagogical approach to outdoor play influences children's outdoor play time, experiences, opportunities and attitudes toward outdoor play.²⁰

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? What are the barriers to overcome to change the practice and therefore, to increase children's access to outdoor play? Exploring the voices of early learning teachers engaged in discussions in an on-line outdoor play and nature pedagogy course, the authors examined data related to early learning teachers' practices. In the narratives shared, the barriers reveal a need to emphasize pre and post service training to early learning teachers on outdoor play.²¹

Recent Research Results

The research results provide insight into how early learning teachers describe their educational preparation for outdoor play 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 play theory or how to implement outdoor play pedagogy in early learning programs. Eighty-nine percent of the individuals indicated that this course was their first exposure to studying outdoor play pedagogy, while 11% indicated that they acquired their knowledge through workshops.²¹

Another study explored whether the current nature-based learning and forest and nature school movements were influencing programs or practice. 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 Of the 212 early learning teachers who participated, 61% of the respondents identified that these movements were not influencing their practice. Many participants suggested that their childhood experiences were more influential than these movements. More than 20% of the participants indicated that the attitudes of their fellow teachers determined how outdoor play was positioned within their programs. The lack of outdoor play space and materials were noted as contributing to early learning teachers not wanting to be outdoors. More than half of the respondents identified the need to support families in understanding the benefits to children in having access to and opportunities for daily outdoor play. These findings support the debates about how early learning teachers' competencies are influenced by exposure to outdoor play pedagogy both in their formal schooling and as part of their professional development options.²²

Currently, a third study is being conducted examining 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. Three have explicit courses and 39 identified outdoor play in descriptions leaving more than half without reference to this important curriculum area for early learning teachers. The extreme diversity among college programs combined with differing provincial and territorial policies and regulations for outdoor play raises the question if these are obstacles in advancing children's access to quality outdoor play experiences.

Research Gaps

The research needed to support advancing 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, staff professional development, family orientation, and family education. Further research is required to determine the depth and breadth of outdoor play pedagogy being implemented in college programs. 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 gaps in theories and approaches.

Conclusion

This article identifies that across Canada there are various provincial and territorial jurisdictions responsible for the development and implementation of policies, procedures, and curriculum in publicly funded post-secondary early childhood education programs that influence children's outdoor play experiences. Without a cohesive approach to the development and implementation of policies, procedures, and post-secondary curriculum, as it relates to outdoor play and pedagogy, the opportunities for children to be in outdoor play environments that

honours their right to play is diminished. Co-constructing policies, procedures, curriculum and action plans has the potential to 'raise the bar' in promoting the value and influence of outdoor play and pedagogy in children's development and thus contributing to establishing healthy communities.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

With expansion of services and corresponding policies that support outdoor play, early learning programs, post-secondary institutions 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 can become informed consumers and advocates for their children. Change to the current state of outdoor play requires engagement among families, government, community, administrators and early learning teachers in early learning programs. Working collaboratively can inform key stakeholders to bring the knowledge and skills from research and theory to practice in support of children's outdoor play experiences.

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