A Classroom for All Seasons

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A Classroom for All Seasons

Senior Honors Project

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ABSTRACT:
The Four Seasons of An Outdoor Classroom

A preschool teacher creates and maintains an outdoor classroom environment through an entire year.

Children can gain learning experiences about their world from time spent interacting with nature in all seasons of the year. Children can also glean learning experiences from activities and materials that an outdoor setting more appropriately accommodates. An unused outdoor space was modified to provide the traditional preschool classroom centers: science, manipulatives, reading, block area, art, and imaginary play centers. The children’s interactions with the centers and materials were documented through photographs and anecdotes. During the year, continuous review of these records led to adaptations that were made to the outdoor classroom to support and encourage educationally rich play among the children. The outdoor classroom provides an appropriate setting for learning that could not be conducted within the traditional indoor classroom. The outdoor setting is especially conducive to detailed and involved imaginary play and engaging and question provoking explorations into the realm of science. An outdoor classroom is a worthwhile addition to a preschool classroom in any location.
Introduction

In the summer of 2003, I completed my student teaching at The University of Tennessee Child Development Labs. A part of the requirements for this course includes the completion of an investigation project in cooperation with the other student teachers. The two other students and I chose to create and maintain an appropriate outdoor classroom environment for our class of three to five year olds. Through the summer, we documented the changes we made to the outdoor space, and the children’s reactions and play through photographs.

To fulfill my requirements for the Honors Program at The University of Tennessee, I was required to complete a senior honors project. Because of my great interest in the outdoor classroom, I was motivated to choose the continuance of that student teaching project for my senior project. Access to the classroom was provided when I obtained a paid position in the classroom as an undergraduate classroom assistant. My duties as a classroom assistant, however, did not include the work I did to create and maintain the outdoor classroom. The outdoor classroom, unlike the indoor classroom, was a place that I had the sole final responsibility for maintaining.
Although the initial stages of creating the outdoor classroom had passed, I chose to take responsibility for creating appropriate outdoor environments throughout the fall, winter and spring seasons.

The questions I developed included these:

Could an outdoor classroom be maintained throughout all the seasons of the year?

What different materials and environment changes would be necessary to accommodate appropriate play in the fall, winter and spring seasons?

What types of play would the children choose to engage in during the different weather types of the seasons?
Theoretical Background

“Nature for the child is sheer sensory experience.”

The creation of outdoor classrooms is supported by a large body of research that has been conducted recently. Outdoor classrooms provide many things to young children that traditional playgrounds are unable to offer. While traditional playgrounds are often visited for about an hour in the morning and an hour in the afternoon, the outdoor classroom is a place where children could conceivably spend the majority of the day. The centers of the traditional indoor classroom can all be represented in the outdoor classroom, making it a place full of educational content. While traditional playgrounds contain much to learn in the areas of socialization and large motor development, the outdoor classroom provides specific learning experiences in every developmental domain. The outdoor classroom is also a place where lesson plans can be conducted.
The Importance of Nature

Providing more time in the outdoors is important for several reasons. White and Stoecklin (2003) discuss the benefits of spending time outdoors: “Well over 100 studies of outdoor experiences in the wilderness and natural areas show that natural outdoor environments produce positive physiological and psychological responses in humans, including reduced stress and a general feeling of well being.” White and Stoecklin also discussed how very young children prefer the natural environment to constructed ones because they have not adapted to the built world (Biophilia: The Love of Outdoors).
Less Access to Nature

As compared to many adults, children today do not have the amount of access to nature that the previous generations have had. Increases in maternal employment have placed many children in childcare centers at very early ages. Most childcare centers have outdoor spaces that are composed of plastic play structures, wood chips and a few trees. True exploration of nature in all it’s glory is inherently limited when a child spends the majority of the daylight hours inside a childcare center. Even when children are at home, they often spend their free time watching television or using the computer, instead of spending time outdoors. This is often due to the not unfounded parental fears of child abduction. Children in university childcare centers are often the children of university students who may live in cramped married student housing buildings with little more than a small playground for their children. The question is, when do these children get to experience digging for worms, chasing butterflies, reading in the sunshine, playing with mud and drawing squirrels? If not at home, child care centers should strive to provide these experiences.
Biophobia vs. Biophilia

Allowing children to have these experiences is more important than one might think. White and Stoecklin (2003) discuss two new disciplines, ecopsychology and evolutionary psychology which suggest that people may have a genetic affinity for the natural outdoors. They theorize that because for the majority of human history people have lived in close involvement with nature, in hunter-gatherer bands, etc., people have an inborn need to be in contact with nature. They call this phenomenon biophilia (Biophilia: The Love of Outdoors). The counterpart to biophilia is biophobia. This term refers to a condition White and Stoecklin described which can occur if the “human natural attraction to nature is not given opportunities to be exercised and flourish in the early years of life” (Biophobia: The Aversion to Nature). The effects of this condition can range from discomfort in natural places to active scorn for whatever is not “man-made, managed, or air-conditioned.” One of the most obvious conclusions one can draw from the discussion of biophobia and biophilia is that without a love for nature, children cannot proceed to contemplate the necessity of protecting the earth and conserving its resources. White and Stoecklin make a chilling statement: “Biophobia is also manifest in the tendency to regard nature as nothing more than a disposable resource” (Biophobia: The Aversion to Nature).
Benefits of Outdoor Classrooms

Creating an outdoor classroom which the children can become familiar with is an important step in creating a love for nature. White and Stoecklin discuss this: “There is considerable evidence that concern for the environment is based on an affection for nature that only develops with autonomous, unmediated contact with it. In their early years, children’s developmental tendency towards empathy with the natural world needs to be supported with free access to an area of limited size over an extended period of time. White and Stoecklin emphasize: It is only by intimately knowing the wonder of nature’s complexity in a particular place that leads to a full appreciation of the immense beauty of the planet as a whole” (Environmental Education).
Space and Stress

Another important reason for creating outdoor classrooms and devoting a major portion of time to their use during the day is the issue of space. The outdoor classroom at our center averages at around 2000 square feet, while our indoor classroom has around 1200 square feet of space. In the outdoor classroom, however, all materials can be used in any and all of the space. Compare the indoor classroom, where the blocks have to stay in the 40 square foot block area and the imaginary play scenarios have to stay in the 35 square foot imaginary play area. Children in the outdoor classroom are thus much more unlimited in their possibilities for play in the outdoor classroom. The larger space allows for larger drawings, larger and more detailed imaginary play scenarios, louder explorations of music and sound, and messier and more realistic explorations of science.
References

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References Continued


References Continued


The outdoor classroom came into existence in the summer of 2003. It’s initial development was conducted by myself and two other teachers as part of our Semester Investigation for student teaching. What follows is a brief overview of what happened during the summer, as the outdoor classroom began its evolution.
The outdoor classroom began in an area of grounds around the school that was largely unused. My teaching partners and I decided to maximize the potential of this space and make it a place for learning. Our classroom has a door that opens into this grassy space. The children regularly used this door and walked through the outdoor classroom on their way to the big playground. The space itself was seldom used however.
In the initial phases of the outdoor classroom we allowed the children to choose materials from the indoor classroom to bring outside with them. This allowed the children to begin to associate this outside space with the focused, engaged play. We also were able to monitor the types of items they chose to bring outside so that we could permanently provide similar items in the outdoor classroom.
Using a basket for books that we transported in and outside each day, we were able to provide a relaxing reading corner in the outdoor classroom. Using a vinyl mat, the children were able to sit or lay comfortably and read in the pleasure of the outdoors. Providing opportunities for reading in several settings increased the children’s exposure to books and literacy behaviors.
This canopy, created from a hula hoop and some fabric became known as the “friendship hut”. It became a place for imaginary play, alone time, conversations, and dance. Two friendship huts were placed in different areas of the outdoor classroom.
The children used the small hill in the outdoor classroom as a part of their imaginary play. In the picture to the right, they are playing a rescue game where the person at the top saves the children on the hill from falling.
Full length mirrors were hung horizontally on both of the fences of the hill. The mirrors faced each other and two children standing at opposite mirrors had the ability to see each other. The mirrors became a prominent part of the children’s imaginary play, as well as providing children an opportunity to experiment with light and reflections in an outdoor setting.
A working fountain was donated to the outdoor classroom. The children were fascinated with the moving water. One of their favorite activities was to clean the fountain with paintbrushes and water.
Art became an essential part of being outdoors. An “art cart” was put together so that teachers could bring art materials in and outside each day. A table and several chairs were placed in a shaded part of the outdoor classroom. The table we used was an ordinary indoor table, however covering it with a tarp, and securing the tarp with a bungee cord prevented the table from being damaged by rain.
Sidewalk chalk is another important art medium in the outdoors. Children used the sidewalk chalk to draw pictures and letters that were bigger than anything they could have created in the indoor classroom.
Summer

Paintbrushes and rollers were introduced to the outdoor classroom. These materials allowed the children to “paint” with water. This popular activity became both a part of the children’s imaginary play scenarios and their artistic creations.
A plexi-glass easel, weaving strips of cloth in the fence and regular access to play dough completed the types of art mediums the children were able to use in the outdoor classroom.
Several types of blocks were provided permanently in the outdoor classroom including: logs, “No-Ends” and PVC pipe.
Digging and bug hunting were two activities that the children initiated. As we monitored their play we added shovels and watering cans as well as bug nets and small plastic aquariums for briefly capturing insects.
Plastic binoculars were added to the outdoor classroom to provide the children a way to look closer at the birds and squirrels they encountered. These binoculars often became cameras in imaginary play scenarios.
Cooking in the outdoors classroom involved the use of mud, leaves and berries to create all kinds of realistic concoctions.
A used water table was placed as a permanent part of the outdoor classroom. The PVC pipes became a medium for exploring the water.
Autumn is a beautiful time in Tennessee and it often has much of the same weather as summer. The children in the Mixed Age classroom continued to use the outdoor classroom in much the same way as they previously had during the summer. However, as I observed their play, I noticed that one thing in particular was missing. The outdoor classroom was lacking a reliable storage system and the outdoor classroom materials were all too often being destroyed because of the lack of care given to them.
Purchasing a Rubbermaid drawer system and labeling it with both pictures and words gave the children a place to store their things. Previously, many items had to be carried in and out by the teachers. The storage system also helped the children to take responsibility for clean-up in the outdoor classroom.

Labeling with both words and pictures allows non-readers to have access to information, while being exposed to the written words.
To increase aesthetic appreciation and add the magic of sound, I added several new wind chimes to the Outdoor classroom during the fall.

Adding elements of sound creates a new layer of interest for any area. Adding beautiful and functional wind chimes allows children to experiment with sound and achieve a delightful result.
We began to notice more and more squirrels. One parent suggested that we feed them and donated a feeder and some squirrel food.
To increase the capability of the outdoor classroom to teach physical knowledge, I added several pulley systems.

Physical knowledge is the understanding and familiarity with physical objects. Other examples of physical knowledge would be the fact that a ball rolls down an incline, or that certain objects float on water.
To prepare for the upcoming changes in the temperature, I attached this large thermometer to the fence.

Providing access to tools such as a thermometer could possibly intrigue the children’s curiosity and lead to later explorations.
During the fall, one of the student teachers conducted a leaf book project. In this project she had the children collect leaves and glue them into a numbers book they wrote themselves. The outdoor classroom was a prominent part of this project, as it was where all of these leaves were collected. Unlike the large playground of our center, the outdoor classroom has several trees in close proximity to each other. It was therefore ideal for this project.
While Tennessee winters are fairly mild, the change in the weather brought a definite change in the way the children played in the outdoor classroom. Many changes were made to the environment during this season to accommodate the differing needs of the children.
One of the biggest changes was the removal of the art area to make room for a child-sized maze tent. As the weather cooled, the children spent less and less time at the art area. Their play became noticeably more active and more imaginary. I felt that this tent would be an excellent place for imaginary play.

By noting the changes in the children’s play, I was able to adapt the environment appropriately and regain their engagement in the outdoor classroom.
To introduce the tent, I held a special group time to allow the children to think of some rules to help take care of their tent. They were:

1. Sleep in it
2. Put things in it
3. Don’t break it
4. Don’t take it apart
5. Party in the ten
6. Put toys in it
7. Nap in it
8. Get in it
9. Be careful
10. Use soft touches
11. Go camping in it
12. Wipe our feet.

By introducing the tent to the children and asking them for their ideas on how to take care of it, the children were given the responsibility to think of rules for the tent and to keep their own rules. When a child breaks a rule, a teacher has only to say “You forgot the rules you and your friends made.”
Declan takes a break from his imaginary play as a tool man.
Initially, the tent was used mostly as a place to crawl through.
The tent became a good place to draw...
Winter

And read!

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We made trails with the logs through the tent...
Winter

And sometimes we just talked.
The tent became a popular hiding spot during ‘hide and seek’
The tent added a lot of color to our winter outdoor classroom.
Painting with water is one activity that occurred all winter...except when it was freezing!

In activities such as these children are able to represent their ideas through water on any surface. This activity combines art, imaginary play and physical knowledge. In the picture to the left, the three children are “washing the fire truck”. They are also learning one of the properties of water, that it alters the appearance of many objects.
When the temperature was cold enough, the water in the fountain would freeze. This promoted many explorations of the ice during outdoor classroom time.

The children pictured here were wondering “where did the water go?” They had seen water in the fountain the day before and now a new substance was in its place. Through touching it, hammering at it, and questioning each other and teachers about it, they began to construct their knowledge of what ice is through their own curiosity.
One child used the handle of a paintbrush to “try to get the water out”.
Winter

Digging remained very popular.

Digging provides children with an opportunity to gain physical knowledge about dirt, grass and how shovels work. We allowed the children to dig anywhere except in the flower beds. They often used digging in conjunction with an imaginary play scenario. Using real materials in imaginary play creates a more realistic and engaging experience for children.
Winter

Aiden uses toy pliers to pull leaves off this bush. In this instance his imaginary play scenario became more real as he was able to interact with a real plant.
While art played a lesser role in the wintertime, chalk art still continued.

Providing art outdoors is beneficial because outdoors art is limitless. Children can draw big, and in our outdoor classroom we allowed them to use chalk to draw anywhere. Art can also be messier in the outdoors. Here, two girls use chalk to trace outlines of their bodies. This is one way a young child can find out, “How big am I?”
Chalk art also continued on the fences, benches and sidewalks!
Birdfeeders have been a part of the outdoor classroom since the beginning. However, in the winter time, feeding the birds became a big focus for the Mixed Age Children. By lowering all of the feeders to the children’s level, they were able to monitor the amount of seed and more closely watch the birds when they came.

Allowing children access to their own materials and tools increases their independence and their feeling of ownership over a space.
Winter

And birds came!
Children spent much of their outdoor time watching the birds. This tunnel became a bird watching post. Children were provided a large waterproof container full of birdseed which they could use to fill the feeders from.
Winter

Birdseed also became a part of the children’s imaginary play and physical knowledge discoveries. Here Will uses a toy hammer to crush the birdseed. Many of the children planted the birdseed in the garden.
Winter

Water proof containers were used to store hats, gloves and props for imaginary play.
Winter

A permanent storage container (yellow circle) was also added for these ‘no-ends’ blocks. Here, Reuben and Annika are driving their car.
The No-Ends went with us all over! They became a part of our imaginary play as “Green light, Red lights”. They also became firefighters hoses and magic wands.

Here, Ethan, Reagan and Steven carry their no-ends to the top of the hill.....
Winter

Get them set...

Main Menu
Winter

And watch them speed and bounce down the hill!

The children’s physical knowledge of inclines and objects that roll was being increased here.
We continued to find worms through the winter. Children’s experiences with nature increases their respect and love for plants and animals.
Magnifying glasses were added to the outdoor classroom materials to allow children to take a closer look at the worms. Magnifying glasses are often a part of the indoor preschool classroom. Providing them outside, and teaching children how to use them helps children to look closely at the nature around them, and to know what tools will help them achieve this goal.
Winter

Ali has learned to hold her magnifying glass next to the slug she is holding.
Winter
Cooking with natural materials is an activity that continues all year round. Here Hugh shows me his “cherry cookies” which contain the small red berries from a bush in the outdoor classroom.
Winter

Studying squirrels was extended into the indoor classroom for group time and class discussions.
Annika drew some of the squirrels she had seen: "This is three squirrels because we saw three squirrels in one center. I saw one at school, Duncan saw one at kindergarten, and I saw one at home."
“This picture has the squirrel that’s on the roof. There’s squirrels everywhere. The squirrel climbed up on the top of a tree. And then he hopped onto the roof and then he walked on the upstairs classroom.”
With spring came the ease of outdoor play with pleasant and comfortable weather. Things began to change once again in the outdoor classroom.
In early spring, a “thunderdrum” was introduced to the outdoor classroom. This addition complemented the wind chimes in adding music to the area. This creation is made from a large plastic barrel (obtainable at any carwash) and several rubber mallets.

Children can create beats and rhythms in their own way with no restrictions on how loud they can be!
Children were able to make their own unique wind chime out of painted beads and shells. This added to the musical quality of the outdoor classroom.
Feeding the birds all winter led to some extremely ‘child-friendly’ birds. In the picture to the right, Ali leans close and closer holding a handful of birdseed. In one instance she got as close as a foot away before the bird fluttered off! These large pigeons are a topic of conversation and observation in the outdoor classroom.
A new colorful “friendship hut” was added to the outdoor classroom. Several ribbons were attached to add interest to this hub for imaginary play.
With the return of warmer weather, we were able to begin to have group time outside again.

In settings such as these, children are able to enjoy the sensory pleasures of being read to in the outdoors. Experiences such as this create positive memories and feelings about the outdoors, a key to invoking concern for the environment in young children.
The art area also returned. Art in the outdoor classroom provides a place for children to relax and enjoy the outdoor environment, as well as create pictures and letters about what they are seeing.
A collection of plastic dinosaurs was provided. Here, Declan discovers that he can use real leaves as the dinosaur’s food.
The art easel returns as a fixed part of the outdoor classroom in the Spring. Providing paint outdoors increases the amount of access the children have to art materials.
Creating pleasurable places to explore books is part of creating positive feelings about literacy in young children.
With the return of water to the water table, experimentations with the PVC pipes began once again.

Mary Catherine and Reagan blow bubbles in a bucket.

In experimentations with water and pipes, children learn the effects that their actions can have upon water. This is a part of physical knowledge.
A small turtle sandbox was donated by a parent to the outdoor classroom.

Sand is an important textural addition to the outdoor classroom. It contains learning in the areas of physical knowledge, imaginary play, socialization and construction.
Another parent donated her time and energy into planting onions and sunflowers in the outdoor classroom. She worked with the children to help them experience planting their own seeds and taking proper care of them.
Spring

Planting the onions....
Children learn by doing. Here Harrison and Will dig holes for their onions, deposit them and pat them over with dirt.
Spring

...and the Sunflowers
Spring

Using writing in many settings increases the functionality and usefulness of literacy for children.

Writing is a part of the outdoor classroom. Here, Reagan uses the chalk to number her hopscotch board.
Methods

Documentation: Digital photography was my method of choice during this project. With a digital camera, I was able to shoot numerous pictures and use only those pictures that I felt best displayed what was occurring. I also wrote brief anecdotes to help me remember what was happening in the photographs. At points where I made major changes to the environment, I documented my ideas and feelings in a journal.

Maintenance: I spent a couple of hours per week evaluating the materials that were currently in the outdoor classroom, rotating them if necessary. Many of the materials needed frequent cleaning due to their exposure to the weather. Items such as the tent had to be put away each day. All containers had to be properly closed to prevent rain damage. Many items in the outdoor classroom would become damaged due to exposure to the weather and would need mending or removal.
Conclusions

Throughout this project, I found myself continually remarking on the great increase in learning opportunities the children have had because of the use of the outdoor classroom. I am now a strong proponent of the creation of outdoor classrooms in any childcare center where there is any amount of land. While it does require effort to create, and especially to maintain this type of classroom, the children benefit greatly from the extra time in the outdoors.

As a result of creating the outdoor classroom, the children in my classroom spend more time engaged in hands-on science either in observations of living things or in closely examining them. The children also engage in larger, and more detailed imaginary play scenarios. The other content areas are also represented in new and interesting ways in the outdoor classroom.

Finally, the children have repeated exposure to a beautiful natural setting, and have daily positive experiences there. Through these experiences, children will develop a healthy love and appreciation for the natural world.
Recommendations

If you are thinking about creating your own outdoor classroom, you may have some questions:

• *How will I have time to do this?*

When this outdoor classroom was created, one area was implemented at a time. Don’t feel that you must have every area fully in place before allowing the children to experience something new outdoors. As time and resources permit, you may add more. The outdoor classroom is an evolving creation that will change from day to day even when you believe that you have everything you need.

• *My center has a relatively small outdoor space, or my center does not have a separate area that I can use for an outdoor classroom; what should I do?*

The Department of Health Services requires a space of fifty square feet per child of usable play space on playgrounds. No specifics are stated about the types of play that can occur. It may be possible to use a fence to section off a small part of your playground in which you can create an outdoor classroom. Of course you should leave plenty of room for large motor play. If no room is to be spared, it may be possible to implement ideas from the outdoor classroom into your large playground. Plant herbs, hang wind chimes! Make a space for a garden, and allow children to dig. Put a table in a shady place and set out art materials.
Recommendations

Here are a few ideas which I believe may be of assistance to anyone who decides to create an outdoor classroom at their own center:

• Teach the children from the beginning that the outdoor classroom deserves as much respect as the indoor classroom. Provide storage spaces and appropriate labeling so that they can clean up on their own. Often children may associate the outdoors solely with the types of play and activities which they perform on the large playground. Often these behaviors do not include recognizable clean up efforts unless your center has put a emphasis on clean up during these times.

• Make it a priority of the entire classroom staff to maintain the outdoor classroom. When you are storing many materials outside that need to be covered or placed in containers to prevent rain damage, you really need every staff member to know the closing procedures for the outdoor classroom. If one person on your staff forgets to cover something repeatedly, rain damage can occur, which wastes valuable resources.

• You will need many new materials for your outdoor classroom and you may be wondering how to pay for them. Instead of buying new, first conduct several parent communication activities in which you list the materials you need. Some parents will not become involved, while others will bring in item after item! You can also ask parents to share their skills such as gardening, or woodworking. Working with the parents will not only save your classroom money, but it will improve the community atmosphere at your school.
Recommendations

• Take a look at some of the references I have listed in this module. Many of the articles and books have even more ideas than I have presented here. Some ideas may be more suitable to your area or your children’s needs.

• Use your imagination. Many of my best ideas came from simply noticing a tent in a store, or remembering how frequently the children talked about the squirrels. You can use your outdoor classroom to teach physics, botany, biology, math, literacy, community living skills, environment preservation, the list goes on! With all the space and without the limitations on sound, your lessons and materials can be bigger, more open-ended and more exciting than ever.

• Follow the interests of the children. If they are extremely interested in worms, create a worm study center complete with magnifying glasses, dirt, books about worms, and plastic terrariums. As their interests change, and the weather changes you can provide the materials that will engage their attention at that particular time.

• Document what happens in your outdoor classroom with digital photos and anecdotes. Send out frequent parent communication documents which help to exemplify the types of learning that occur in the outdoor classroom. Help to teach the benefits of outdoor play through these communicative documents.
The issue of space is important for children’s health. Stoecklin and White (2003) discussed this issue in their article *The Great 35 Square Foot Myth*: “Alain Legendre, a researcher for the French National Center for Scientific Research, monitored the cortisol levels of 113 children between 18 months and 40 months of age in eight child care centers in both France and Hungary over an eight month period. An increased cortisol level is considered a good biological marker of stress, and in particular stress related to psychological stress….The research found that 54 square feet of accessible play space per child is required to minimize children’s stress levels.” The current standard required by child care licensing is 35 square feet per child.

Providing more time in larger outdoor spaces reduces children’s stress levels by both allowing them to be in more natural surroundings, and by allowing them to have more than enough space to be comfortable. When the outdoor and indoor classrooms are used simultaneously, the children have double the space in which to work and play. I have noticed repeatedly that children tend to become more engaged in their play when they have enough space to continue without interruption from other activities. Deeper and more engaged learning can occur when teachers hold small groups in both the indoor and outdoor classrooms simultaneously. Having the lower child to teacher ratios that occur when the children are allowed to choose either the outdoor or the indoor classrooms also encourages teachers and children to develop closer relationships.