

Turning Our World of Learning Inside Out!

How did two early childhood programs transform their outdoor learning experiences for young children? Read this article to find out how programs can improve the outdoor learning experiences for children.

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Early childhood professionals constantly reflect upon how to improve the quality of educational experiences for young children. We are often encouraged to create centers which support the development of language, literacy and mathematical concepts inside the classroom, but we often forget that there is an untapped world of learning just outside our classroom door. This article describes the story of two South Florida early childhood programs that took the challenge and made students' outdoor time more than just recess or free play. These programs encouraged the faculty to be purposeful with their approach to learning by addressing the outdoor environment. They turned their early childhood world 'inside out' by creating outdoor learning environments that tapped into the natural curiosity of all young learners.

Mary Help of Christians Preschool (MHOC) in Parkland, Florida and **Miami Country Day School (MCDS)** in Miami Shores, Florida, both started their outdoor classrooms with the creation of a dedicated children's garden. The gardens offered a place to grow vegetables and flowers and were surrounded with a butterfly garden to attract local species of butterflies for observation. Classrooms visited the garden at least once per week to tend vegetables, dig in the dirt and delight in discoveries of butterflies and caterpillars. Recognizing that the garden provided a unique time and place for the children to experience outdoors - the question arose: *How can we give the children more opportunities to experience nature?* Each school took its journey in a unique direction as outdoor classrooms were created. The story of each unique program is shared, along with a short list of lessons learned for other programs to consider as they seek to create better outdoor spaces for learning.

Miami Country Day School (MCDS) in Miami Shores, Florida

Miami Country Day School (MCDS) was established in 1938 and became a co-educational school in the 1970's. It has grown from a K-8 program to a PreK-12th grade college preparatory school. The school focuses on the whole child. The Early Childhood Program is a play-based program that educates young children through indoor and outdoor play, giving children many opportunities to explore and have valuable learning experiences.

There are many outdoor arenas to explore, create and play with purpose (Davis & Elliott, 2004). MCDS has pathways that lead to treasures throughout the campus. It has an outdoor "mud area" that is being restored, a garden with fairy homes, fluid play area, a "jungle"/tricycle area, and big soft foam building blocks.

***The work of
children is play.***

Outdoor areas naturally lend themselves to literacy development in young children. Oral language and imagination are the only true pieces of equipment a teacher and student need to have outside to enhance literacy. The work of children is play and waiting outside our classroom doors are numerous opportunities for young children to learn and grow.

In the planning stage for the new playground, the kindergarten students were invited to illustrate what their dream playground would look like. Their imaginations

were much better than real life. A much-needed playground for three- and four-year olds became a reality this year. It is a musical playground and provides wonderful opportunities for gross motor skills to be developed such as climbing, balancing, rolling, crawling and running.

The Abess Center for Environmental Studies (the ACES lab) provides countless opportunities for both structured and unstructured natural play, and is a centerpiece for learning at MCDS. The lab incorporates the study of animals and gardening on a weekly basis for the early childhood children. Three, four and five year olds' eyes light up as they experience first-hand bearded dragons, baby rats called pinkies, and baby chicks! Students interact with animals up close in this open, safe and supervised environment. ACES also allows students the opportunity to plant and care for a garden on a weekly basis. ACES effortlessly stimulates the five senses to learn. Growing and then tasting French Sorrel is a favorite treat! Seeing and catching caterpillars, or having a butterfly land on an outstretched finger, is a wonderful and natural opportunity to learn about life cycles. Students feel, smell and harvest veggies and fruits.

As students meander, there are fairy gardens amongst the butterfly plants to stop and visit. Their joy and widened eyes are visible as their stories flow freely and creativity is enhanced in these outdoor spaces. Students share their fairy stories, and those who are quiet are dreamingly looking at the fairy houses as they listen and imagine. The garden is an essential play-based natural learning environment that encourages pre-literacy skills and a joy of learning.

Space is limited on this beautiful campus, but that does not hinder the

emergence of many outdoor areas for the students to enjoy and utilize. A barren area with no grass quickly became a mud pie area. Art class became a time of joy and exploration of mud pies, imagination and dramatic play. A small problem for the early childhood program is that these areas are sometimes developed into lovely grassy areas over the summer holiday, leading us to recalibrate our plans and seek other areas to play in! We scouted a great area to begin again and in this scouting stage the art teacher mindfully scaffolded with spoons, pots, pans, and a water basin with just enough water in it in order to create some fun. Some challenges

arose, such as prepping kids to get dirty, time for clean-up, scaffolding of materials, storage of materials and adult buy-in. Kids are invited to wear water shoes or rain boots, so clean up of the area and kids can be effortless. Having a plastic bin to house materials is currently being discussed. Instead of toting water out each time, a simple slope into a barrel collects rainwater.

Areas constantly being tweaked and improved are fluid play, the jungle and foam blocks. Fluid play includes sand and water tables, shaving cream, paint, and anything that can be a bit messy! Children can investigate or will have specific tasks



Photo courtesy of the authors/Miami Country Day School

Children at MCDS have the opportunity to garden each week in the ACES lab garden, providing countless opportunities for learning.

in the fluid play space. This area was once a staple inside the classroom, but as an early childhood team we decided to restructure our approach to allow for explorative messiness with easier clean-up.

The jungle has large beautiful trees creating a natural canopy and also has a traditional jungle gym, slides, basketball hoops, rock climbing wall, and tricycles. Storage of the tricycles is a constant concern. Foam life-size building blocks are a joy to use, but present student clean-up challenges. Having students sort, match and fit pieces together helps in clean-up efforts, along with facilitating clean-up in a timely manner.

Last, shifting the mindset of adults that outdoor time is not break time is important (Wilson, 2008). Adults often forget how much fun it is to play in mud and get messy! Not only are these experiences fun, but also outdoors provide opportunities to explore first-hand life cycles of plants, animals, the seasons and weather in informal ways (Dowdell, Gray and Malone, 2011). This area will lend itself to literacy, science, math and dramatic play experiences for many years to come.

Mary Help of Christians Preschool (MHOC) in Parkland, Florida

Living in South Florida presents wonderful weather opportunities to spend time outdoors, but because it is so densely populated there is little open space for children to explore. Here is the story of one preschool's journey to create a nature-infused playground for children to play, discover and learn.

The preschool began with a vegetable garden as a way for the chil-

dren to be able to dig in the dirt, plant seeds, watch the plants grow, and eat the vegetables they grew. Language, science and math come alive through gardening. It provides the children a real world situation in which to learn. They work and play side-by-side, while learning to care for the plants by weeding and watering. They keep journals to log the garden's progress. Plants are measured with unifix cubes and rulers. Children create seed markers to identify plants. They ask questions, search for answers and discover some of what nature has to offer.

This small garden has grown to a large garden area with the help of a

grant from the National Garden Association and Home Depot, parent donations, and community volunteers. Those entering the garden area through a vine covered arbor encounter a large space where vegetables grow and butterflies flutter to plants designed to attract them. There is a potting table supplied with empty pots, soil, seeds and shovels for children to plant, and a dirt area left "raw" just for digging and discovery. Children run and play among the trees, stooping to discover a caterpillar under a leaf, while others may sit on child-sized benches and listen to wind chimes and observe the wonders of nature.



Photo courtesy of the authors/Mary Help of Christians Preschool

Stump jumping can be a fun activity when teachers closely supervise the experience.



Photo courtesy of the authors/Miami Country Day School

The Fairy Garden stimulates children's imaginations and encourages pre-literacy skills.

The children loved being outdoors in the garden so much that the preschool director, Ellen Munnelly, wanted to provide the children with more nature experiences. She only had to look to the playground and knew she had found the place. Thinking about Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods* (2008), and remembering her own childhood adventures outdoors, she created a team of teachers and parents to plan the new playground.

The first step was to remove the large jungle gym from the center of the playground, replacing it with a man-made hill with a built-in double slide (there are no hills in South Florida). Now children can climb the hill, roll down the hill, and lie on top of the hill. The hill also serves as a natural ramp for racing balls, cars and even pumpkins. The rubber mulch was removed in favor of natural wood mulch. Native shrubbery was planted along the fence adding more greenery and providing a home for lizards and bugs- favorites among the preschoolers. These changes im-

mediately made the playground feel less traditional and more inviting.

Next, an area under two trees was designated to be the building area. The area was set with pavers to provide a flat building surface. A shelving unit for tree blocks, stumps, sticks and tree cookies, which are 1-2" thick cross-section slices of a tree trunk, was placed in the building area. Other materials: cardboard boxes, wooden crates, ramps, and cardboard tubes, are rotated to stimulate new thinking and cooperative building. Additional props, such as pinecones, palm fronds, river rocks, pumpkins, and pine branches are added from time to time.

A big challenge was to incorporate a water element near the sandbox area. Water and sand naturally go together. At the time, a water fountain was located at the entrance to the playground and a sandbox was at the far end of the playground. The children repeatedly would take buckets from the sandbox and run to the water fountain, fill it with water and

run back to the sandbox. This was unsatisfactory for everyone. The children never had water fast enough, and the plumbing bill for removing sand from clogged pipes was growing high. The solution was a rain barrel with an extended hose placed next to the sandbox. Of course, the rain barrel empties quicker than it can be filled with rain, so it is filled every morning, providing the children with a plentiful supply of water.

This water also supplies the nearby dirt/mud digging area: a/k/a "the mud kitchen". Initially, the dirt area was to be a small garden patch for herbs, but eager young gardeners picked plants too early and watered them too much. Eventually this small would-be garden became just the dirt garden. Although nothing green grows in the dirt garden, mud pies emerge, stick-leaf soup stews are prepared in pots, and birthday cakes of every flavor are baked with sand sprinkles and small sticks for candles. Stories are told, children play together and learning grows from a small patch of dirt.

Make a variety of props available.

One of the most important elements for the success of this new outdoor space was the hiring of a teacher to oversee this area as if it were her own classroom. She plans the lessons, sets up and maintains the space, and nurtures the children's love for what nature provides. She is there to marvel at the children's discoveries and support the indoor classroom teachers as they strive to increase their knowledge of nature.

The outdoor classroom continues to grow and change as new ideas are implemented and new materials are acquired. The ‘way’ children now play has changed as well. Rather than just run and chase, they explore, ponder and discuss their ideas with each other and their teachers. There is less conflict, more cooperation and as a result, more play and more learning.

Like to know more?

Miami Country Day School
<http://www.miamicountryday.org>

Mary Help of Christians Preschool
<http://www.mhocrc.org>

Abess Center for Environmental Studies
<http://abess.miami.edu>

Five Important Lessons

Planning outdoor spaces is a challenge for any early childhood program, and the faculty/staff from these two unique learning environments learned many lessons along the way. We tell the story of these two magical outdoor learning environments because it is important to share the lessons learned with others. The five most important lessons are shared for you to consider, as we hope to inspire you to expand your outdoor learning/exploratory spaces.

**Lesson One:
 The Importance of
 the Planning Phase**

When planning outdoor spaces, first sketch out a vision for how the area will look. This is important in considering flow, traffic and areas of interest for students. This is best done in collaboration with the team using the area. Another important element that is often overlooked is

who will maintain the area and how will it be maintained. In the planning phase, storage should be considered and included in the sketch if that is feasible for the physical location. Teachers need training and development. It is often assumed that early childhood is just playing; however, successful early childhood teachers are thoughtful and strategic in their approaches to indoor and outdoor lessons. According to Wilson (2008), adults sharing an interest is an important factor in encouraging and supporting children to enhance connections with nature and natural play. It is important to be open and ready for bumps in the road, as generally, nothing goes as planned and there will always be room for growth and improvement.

**Lesson Two: The Need for
 Dedicated Spaces-Outdoor
 Learning Centers**

The need for outdoor spaces is undeniable. The first factor in encouraging children in natural play is recurrent constructive experiences

outdoors (Wilson, 2008). When planning outside spaces, setup is the key. Look at the space and think about establishing learning centers the same way that centers in a classroom would be set up. The large open area of a traditional playground needs to be subdivided into smaller areas that are conducive to small social play groups (Blanchet-Cohen & Elliot, 2011). Consider where to put the quiet centers and where to put the more active or messy centers.

For example, sand and water inately work together and should be placed near each other. They can be in sensory tables or, on a larger scale, in a sandbox area with a water source such as a rain barrel, water pump, or hose. A mud area definitely needs its own separate place as it can get very dirty - mud pies are messy business.

The art area in an outdoor space can be extra messy- no worries about getting paint on the floor. Nature also provides art materials and tools. Children can paint with berries, or use leaves, sticks and rocks as painting



Photo courtesy of the authors/Mary Help of Christians Preschool

An outdoor puppet theater (complete with stump seats) provides an opportunity for collaborative play and creative expression.



Photo courtesy of the authors/Mary Help of Christians Preschool

ments are available for purchase. The important thing is to provide the instruments so the children can experiment with them and play them LOUD!

On the quieter side, reading outdoors is also valuable. Having books and blankets set in a shady spot invites children to read and relax. They can also use this area for a respite to lay back and just watch the clouds. Clipboards with paper and crayons should also be provided in this area to draw or write.

Lesson Three: An Outdoor Classroom Teacher

The success of the outdoor classroom is enhanced by having a teacher dedicated to it, just as any other early childhood classroom requires a dedicated teacher. Like the indoor classroom teacher, she/he is responsible for creating and maintaining the learning centers with an adequate supply of materials such as paint, books, blocks, and water. The teacher is there to facilitate the outdoor classroom, to scaffold children's learning and provide support to indoor classroom teachers.

In addition to the qualifications of an early childhood classroom teacher, the outdoor classroom teacher must possess curiosity, enthusiasm and an interest in nature. It is just as important to have an adult to guide and nurture the children's discoveries as it is to provide the outdoor space itself. From her book *The Sense of Wonder*, Rachel Carson (1965, p.55) said it best, "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in." Teachers become partners in the learning process with the

Young children can learn valuable skills using water, funnels and tubes.

tools. The same nature items can be used to make a collage. They can also become props for a dramatic play adventure as in the children's story *Roxaboxen*, by Alice McLerran. The lesson here is look for what nature provides in your own backyard and use it.

The block area takes on a different dimension outdoors. Building can be LARGE! First, the area for block building needs to have a flat, firm surface such as wood or pavers. Blocks used for building do not have to be manicured wood blocks; instead use tree branches, tree cookies, cardboard and wooden boxes and palm fronds.

In other words, educators need to think outside the classroom about what can be used in these outdoor areas. Another popular option is a dedicated woodworking space.

A music area is a must for an outdoor classroom. The outdoor classroom allows children to go to the limits and play as loud as they want without disrupting other children's play- a problem when instruments are played indoors. Instruments can be as simple as pots and pans with wooden or metal spoons, garbage cans with lids, bamboo sticks, wind chimes or, if the budget allows, many large outdoor musical instru-

children. There are sustained, shared interactions that happen when the child brings natural discovery to the teacher. They talk, discuss, share, discover, learn and form deeper bonds (Waters & Maynard, 2010).

Lesson Four: A Supply of Loose Parts

Kids love tinkering with loose parts, and it is important to have these things on hand in order to allow for exploration. An outside area for building needs tree stumps, branches and empty boxes. These items must be maintained and kept safe for children to use. Parents are great resources for collecting these items. In dramatic play areas, children need a variety of props. Old pots, pans, bowls, spoons, fabric, and even old clothes are great stepping off points for creative play in or outdoors. Students do not need pre-made costumes or brand new items with batteries, which stifle imagination and allow limited student expression. Natural settings offer loose parts for play which, because of their

open-ended characteristics, prompt children's creativity and imagination (Davis, 2010).

**Take advantage
of teachable
moments.**

Lesson Five: Taking Advantage of Teachable Moments

Educators must take advantage of teachable moments whenever they are presented. Dowdell, Gray and Malone (2011) found the teachers that interacted with students in indirect ways while outdoors, allowed opportunities for students to examine and make connections to indoor classroom lessons. Nature is in constant flux, and there is always something new for children to uncover (Davis, 2010). Whether there are seasonal changes to note, animals and insects to study or gardens to be tended to--nature is the best teacher!

Conclusion

Our world is a classroom! Children gain so much from the outdoors (Cordell, Green, & Larson, 2011). Providing opportunities to discover is quality, especially when done in a purposeful way (Davis & Elliott, 2004). Young children need to be able to explore their surroundings in safe environments. Experience with natural surroundings gives young children the ability to expand sensory development and supports the development of the whole child. The enthusiasm of the children as they run outside to see what new things are there to discover is wonderful. We hope these stories inspire your staff to consider turning your world of learning inside out, because as one child said, "This is the best place ever!"

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Photo courtesy of the authors/Mary Help of Christians Preschool

Exploring nature can focus on many areas of the curriculum. The teacher can use this exploration as a teachable moment.

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María has been in the early childhood field for 23 years and has taught in both the private and public sectors. She currently oversees the educational component of six early childhood programs at the Florida City RCMA (Redlands Christian Migrant Association) and provides professional development opportunities for its teachers.

For a copy of the session agendas and registration information, go to http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/seca_conference.php



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At the July 2013 Summer Board Meeting of the SECA Board of Directors, a new initiative was born, the *Janie L. Humphries Student Leadership Development Fund*. This fund was created to support the development and leadership capacity of early childhood students as emerging leaders in our states and is in honor of Dr. Janie Humphries of Louisiana, SECA President 2010-2011, who has worked tirelessly to support student groups in her state and in the SECA region.

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