

ISSN: 2630-6484
Volume 4, Number 1
August, 2020



JOURNAL OF SPECIALISED AND
PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

JOSPED

An Official Publication of the
College of Specialised and Professional Education

Tai Solarin University of Education
Ijagun, Ogun State, Nigeria.

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First Publication (Vol. 1 No 1) August, 2017
Second Publication (Vol. 2 No 1) March, 2018
Third Publication (Vol. 2 No 2) August, 2018
Fourth Publication (Vol. 3 No 1) March, 2019
Fifth Publication (Vol. 3 No 2) August, 2019
Sixth Publication (Vol. 4 No 1) August, 2020

Printed and published by:



TASUED Press and Bookshop
Tai Solarin University of Education,
Ijagun, P.M.B. 2118, Ijebu-Ode,
Ogun State, Nigeria.

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THE IMPERATIVES OF OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENTS FOR CHILDREN'S LEARNING

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Abstract

This is based upon the belief that the world of children is meaningful when they are allowed to engage with the environment particularly the outdoors. Over the years, there has been a noticeable decline in outdoor engagements by children and this is traceable to the ignorance of parents/guardians and childhood care providers. This paper appraised the concept, features and benefits of outdoor environments to children, and suggested ways of structuring outdoor environments for their learning.

Keywords: Children, Learning environments, Physical environments, Outdoors environments

Introduction

The total of all environments of children makes a lot of significant difference in their existence, growth and development. Children encounter a lot of things in their environment which oftentimes contribute to what becomes of them in their later years. The physical environment is an essential element with a significant effect on children rearing. Generally, humans are influenced by what the environment presents to them. It is important to note that a well-equipped, well-arranged environment can better support the all-around development of children – physical, social, emotional, intellectual as well as spiritual. For this reason, it is essential for all adults especially childhood educators to create enabling environments for children where they will feel welcomed, safe and ready to learn.

Whenever children engage in activities without being forced to do so, learning comes so easy to them (Bredekamp, 2004; Tovey, 2011; Jalongo & Isenberg, 2012). It is almost impossible to isolate the outdoor

environment from children's play which is a natural activity. Although, the engagement of children in outdoor activities in our contemporary society is on a declining slope. Reflecting on childhood play of the ancient society – before the last two to three decades, children enjoyed those moments of playing in gardens, climbing trees, finding tadpoles or fishing in nearby streams, throwing stones at birds on the farms, running around the open fields without restriction and shouting at the top of their voices. All these and many more are exciting memories that cannot be easily forgotten by people of older generations. These thrilling experiences cannot be said of many children of today based on factors such as the culture of fear, over-organised lives, growing intolerance of children's play, lack of space for outdoor engagement, improved virtual spaces - advancement and access to technological devices (Tovey, 2011). In addition, there has been a cultural shift in our society that has reduced access and use of the outdoors for many young children. Unfortunately, many children in our contemporary society have been deprived of the privilege of playing outdoors as well as the benefits that can be derived from it.

What is Outdoor Learning Environment?

Basically, the outdoor learning environment is the physical space outside the four walls of a building that provides the opportunity for engagement for children and adults as well. It is a place that promotes active play among children and connects them with nature both at home and in the school environment. Moreover, it is an extension of the classroom experience to the outside environment where children can play with natural elements such as sand, water, plants, among others. Outdoor environments which also serve as playgrounds give children the opportunity to learn concepts in their real form and offers opportunities for them to better explain the impact they have on their environment. Through natural learning, the outdoor learning environment enhances and reinforces the lessons children learn in every school subject.

Features of Outdoor Learning Environment

To bring back or create outdoor environments that support children's learning and development, factors such as open-ended and flexible space, open-ended loose parts, quiet areas, materials to interact with, shade, actual activities that will complement/promote classroom learning should be considered.

Open-ended and flexible space: The space in the outdoor learning environment usually is not limited and flexibility in space provide educators with the opportunity to be responsive to children's interest and development.

Unlimited loose parts: This allows children to participate in play activities with their own ideas. The role of the teacher here is to interact with the children based on the ideas children bring into play activities through scaffolding.

Quiet areas: It is logical that after a lot of running around in the open space, children get tired and exhausted. As a result, a good outdoor learning environment is expected to make provision for a quiet area where children can retreat or relax when exhausted during play activities.

Sufficient and appropriate materials: The natural outdoor environment is known to be the most equipped with lots of materials from which children can make choices. A blend of natural features such as plants (trees, shrubs, grass, flowers) and other environmental elements like rocks, stones, sand, running water, mud, among others, provide opportunities for children to understand and appreciate nature.

Shade: The presence of trees with several branches and fruits attracts different animals – insects, birds and reptiles which enhance children's knowledge of the world around them. In the natural environment, trees of different species grow in their number. In situations where trees are fallen either by wind or human activity, it is important that they are replaced to ensure the steady provision of shade and protection for children from the scorching sun.

Freedom: The outdoor environment is associated with freedom for children. Their movement is not restricted, they move at their own pace, run, shout at the top of their voice, throw stones, have endless opportunities to explore and many more. To children, the classroom is controlled or owned by the teacher but the outdoors is owned by no one

neither is it controlled by anyone, therefore there is no accountability. They do not need to explain themselves or prove anything to anyone, they can just be themselves as they interact with the outdoor environment and have fun at its peak.

Risk and challenge: In today's world, children are viewed as semi-adults who are expected to behave as such. On the other hand, they are viewed as babies in need of constant protection. This has deprived them of the privilege to either enjoy childhood and are also unable to become independent. Gill (2007) argues that childhood is becoming undermined by risk aversion and echoes a sentiment that adults are interfering too much with childhood (Cunningham, 2006). The outdoors, more often than indoors, provides the opportunities to take risks and be successful. Children do not need to be faced with hazards and danger, but they need to experience risks and challenges. Challenges help children to become self-regulatory in their safety. If they cannot regulate themselves, it will be difficult for them to find out what is safe and what is not. Challenges are essential for healthy growth and development in children (Greenfield, 2003). Risk and challenges enable children to know about their capabilities and to develop the mechanism for judging it in controlled settings' (Cook & Heseltine 1999).

Why should outdoor environments be restored?

- i. The outdoor environment is uniquely and qualitatively different from the indoor learning environment majorly because of the space it offers. Unlike indoor learning environments where adults are oftentimes in control with lots of rules and restrictions, children enjoy a greater degree of freedom to play, try things out, explore, discover and experiment (Stephenson, 2002). In addition, learning materials provided within the classroom are found on a much larger scale, offering a substantially different experience in the outdoor learning environment.
- ii. Outdoors are a dynamic environment with an ever-changing atmospheric condition where temperature, light, air, weather conditions are not static. The outdoor is full of unpredictable changes and the sheer variability of the outside environment also constitutes its uniqueness. Furthermore, an outdoor learning environment offers a rich landscape of sensory experiences that

stimulates the whole body (Tovey, 2011). For example, children experience the natural smell of a flower, the texture of a variety of leaves, soil, feeling of the natural soothing breeze, rainfall on the tender skin and viscous feel of wet mud in their palms as they mould different objects.

- iii. The importance of an outdoor learning environment is inexhaustible, particularly to children. Cooper (2015) argued that an outdoor learning environment is helpful to children in the areas of their physical fitness and gross motor development, self-regulation, brain development, academic achievement, the severity of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and the promotion of the culture of appreciating nature. Advance physical and gross motor development is a prominent area that children achieve through their interaction with the outdoor learning environment. Fjortoft(2001) affirmed that when children engage in outdoor activities, they significantly show improved motor fitness with better coordination, balance and energy.
- iv. An outdoor learning environment improves self-regulation. Taylor (2001); Kuo and Sullivan (2001) expressed that the more children spend time in the natural outdoor environment, the more they experience less stress and mental fatigue. Hence, less aggression and violent acts are exhibited by such children. Burdette and Whitaker (2005) added that viewing nature reduces the way humans respond to fear and psychological stress, however, it enhances their level of interest and attention in any given task.
- v. In addition, Rivkin (2000); Wells (2000) asserted that the outdoor environment stimulates the brain development of young children. According to Kellert (2004), several research outcomes have shown that direct and consistent experience outdoor learning environment in relatively familiar settings is crucial for children all-around development.
- vi. Improved academic achievement is another benefit that children can derive from an outdoor learning environment. American Institute of Research (2005) revealed in their study that schools whose classrooms are outdoor and other forms of nature-based experiential education record greater achievement in social studies, science, language arts and mathematics.
- vii. Spending time outdoors usually reduces the severity of the

symptoms of children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Taylor (2001); Cooper (2015) expressed that walking around freely in the open space lessen the manifestation of ADHD and increases their concentration.

- viii. The culture of appreciating nature is cultivated by children who spend more time outdoors (Wells & Lekies, 2006). This obviously helps in the preservation of physical environments as well as keeping them safe and healthy for future generations to behold and cherish.

Structuring Outdoor Environments for Learning

Developing an outdoor environment is a sensitive task that must be done carefully and thoughtfully. This is due to the fact that the environment must incorporate each aspect of the child's holistic development. Suggestions are offered below by the Saskatchewan Ministry of Education (2010) for landscape and design elements to incorporate into an outdoor learning environment. Elements within the outdoor learning environment overlap and combine to support children's holistic development.

Suggestions for Planning an Outdoor Learning Environment

Aspect of Holistic Development	Areas to Design	Landscape and Design Elements
Social-Emotional	* Areas for dramatic play * Areas that invite communication and collaboration * Spaces for quiet and calm	Stages - platforms Benches Sand areas Tree stumps, boulders, rocks, stones Canopies Outdoor instruments Wind chimes/bells
Physical Development	* Areas for digging * Areas for crawling, balancing, running, jumping, and dancing (large muscle growth) * Areas for climbing * Areas for sledging * Areas for constructing, grasping, pouring (fine motor)	Sand, pea gravel, mud Ramps and tunnels Pathways for wheeled vehicles Open grassy spaces Hills Boulders Stumps Beams, logs Stones Sand

Aspect of Holistic Development	Areas to Design	Landscape and Design Elements
Intellectual Development	* Areas to encourage symbolic representation * Areas for investigation, discovery, exploration, and observation * Areas to experience concepts such as seasonal change and position/direction	Outdoor easels Chalkboards Pathways for discovery and exploration (stumps, gravel, stone, wood) Boardwalk Bridges Hills Groves of plants and shrubs to experience year-round (e.g. shrubs with leaves of various colours in autumn, evergreens) Open-ended materials – logs, hoses, stones Water features*
Spiritual Development	* Areas to appreciate the beauty * Areas that appeal to the senses * Areas to nurture and care for living things	Soil Plants, flowers, garden Seeds Bird feeders, birdhouses Stones, wood Trees, shrubs, grass

Source Link: <http://publications.gov.sk.ca/documents>

Note: For safety reasons, standing water such as ponds, dams are discouraged within the facilities of outdoor learning environment for children.

Suggestion/Recommendations

1. Basic to citing any educational institution directed exclusively at children's learning considerable attention should be given to the existence of the outdoor environment.
2. School mappers, school planters, school developers, school architects and other professionals associated with the establishment and building of educational institutions meant for children's learning should produce a blueprint as a prototype.
3. Children's educational institutions, both public and private in both urban and rural settings should reflect a dispensation whereby the

- outdoor environment are given a pre-eminent place.
4. Professionals on children's learning, especially early child care educators should be accorded priorities for employment into such educational institutions devoted to children's learning.
 5. Quality assurance experts should emphasize the need for the necessary outdoor environment and its accessories in their services.

Conclusion

Childhood is a stage of human development that cannot be re-lived once the stage is passed. It is worthy of note that childhood is a small window of time to learn and develop. Hence, providing enabling environments that will make this phase a memorable one is a major responsibility of parents and childhood educators. To make children learn maximally and have a fun-filled experience, the outdoor environment is very essential.

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