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Outdoor Learning in Urban and School Settings

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As a primary teacher for almost 20 years, Marie-Line Laflèche has a strong interest in social pedagogy, enjoys thinking outside the box, and spends time in nature with her students. She has embraced creative delinquency and purposefully uses this as a catalyst for meaningful pedagogical experiences. In addition to being a panelist at the ACFAS 2022 congress, Marie-Line is teaching the first nature class at her school.

As a school teacher for 27 years, Isabelle Goyer currently teaches French immersion in an elementary school in British Columbia. She has been the French Immersion Coordinator and a consultant/ leader in the Early Reading Intervention program for her school district. She has a real passion for the Reggio approach and outdoor learning. She is presently participating in two different programs in partnership with The Ministry of Education (CP4YC) and The Early Childhood Pedagogy Network.

Outdoor education has a wide spectrum of purposes, practices, and settings. Depending on the focus and intent to change, purposes can be to change feelings through recreational programs, to change thoughts through educational programs, to change behaviours through developmental programs, and to change resistance to assistance through therapy programs (Priest & Asfeldt, 2022). This chapter is mainly oriented toward education and more precisely for the context of school-based outdoor learning. The chapter emphasis is on the urban and school ground settings that can be used as part of daily teaching practices in any K-12 school discipline, but distinct from the more exceptional context

of field trips or expeditions. While discussion will focus on the intentions for using urban and school grounds, it will also identify potential surrounding settings, and provide examples from the practice of two teachers, one in British Columbia and the other in Québec .

School-based outdoor learning in Canada

Similar to the international outdoor education community, there is no formal definition of outdoor education in the K-12 context in Canada (Asfeldt et al., 2022). Nevertheless, the underlying concept of outdoor learning in this chapter is very similar to that of the *udeskole* developed in

Denmark, a curriculum-based approach integrating outdoor learning activities on regular basis (Barfod et al., 2016; Bentsen et al., 2009). More precisely, school outdoor learning in urban and school grounds settings involves these places that:

- are outside of the school building(s), which excludes classrooms,...
- allow the contextualization of learning in context,
- are easily accessible during a regular ... lesson,
- can support activities that are complementary to other learning activities that take place inside the school, and
- can directly target the goals of the ... curriculum (Ayotte-Beaudet et al., 2019, p. 16).

An idiosyncrasy of Canada, in addition to its vast territory, is that curricula are not national, but specific to each province and territory. Consequently, describing outdoor education practices and settings in Canada in general terms becomes especially challenging. Furthermore, outdoor learning 'is widely missing as a formal approach to teaching and learning in Canada's public K-12 education system' (Oberle et al., 2021, p. 251). Challenges are already well known for outdoor learning in schools and have recently been grouped into four themes of barriers to implementation: teacher characteristics, systemic factors in the education system, culture, and environment (Oberle et al., 2021). Nevertheless, many local initiatives have the potential to become grassroots movements, such as forest schools in Ontario and British Columbia (Boileau & Dabaja, 2020) or the clear endorsement to regular outdoor education given by one province's Ministry of Education (Québec Government, n.d.).

Since the realities of Canadian outdoor education differ according to region, curriculum, and culture, one cannot present national practices in a homogeneous light. Despite this, one study provided some insight into outdoor education programs in Canadian public schools, with representation from almost all provinces and ter-

ritories in Canada across summer camps, K-12 schools, and post-secondary institutions (Asfeldt et al., 2022). Their survey found the two most influential underlying philosophies to be: hands on *experiential learning* that engages students "in active, interesting, and relevant tasks with others" and *holistic and integrated learning* "for achieving more holistic life-long learning goals" (p. 302).

Identify intentions

There are several key intentions for engaging in school-based outdoor learning in Canada and identifying these is a prior step in this chapter. In a recent study about teaching practices in the province of Quebec (Ayotte-Beaudet et al., 2023), the most frequent intentions were *connecting children to nature* and *using real-life contexts for learning*, although there was *benefiting from a larger space, enabling students to mobilize their energy, letting students initiate free play, and engaging in sports activities*. Here is a look at how these non-exhaustive intentions can be used in outdoor spaces.

Connecting Children to Nature. One of the primary intentions of school-based outdoor learning is to connect children to nature. This involves providing opportunities for students to explore and engage with natural and urban environments, whether that is through spending time in forests, local parks or other kinds of green space. By developing sensitivity to nature and living organisms in their natural surroundings, children may discover and appreciate local species, develop a sense of belonging, and be more responsive to local environmental issues.

Using Real-Life Contexts for Learning. The outdoors and schools' immediate surroundings also provide settings to use real-life contexts for learning. These spaces can be used in a wide variety of manners, whether at the beginning of a learning experience to initiate exploration activities, during the experience to elicit students' initial conceptions and to apply knowledge, or toward the end of the experience to transfer their learning in various contexts. It generally allows

students to achieve learning that they can then apply beyond lessons in the school context.

Benefiting from a larger space. A larger outdoor space provides more opportunities for activities that are not well suited to the classroom. Students can talk and move more freely, as they are less likely to disturb other students or groups in the school. Loud or unusual noises that might be disturbing inside the building are not necessarily disturbing outside.

Enabling students to mobilize their energy. While students are generally not seated outdoors, they can mobilize their physical energy more easily and decrease their sedentary behaviours (Ayotte-Beaudet et al., 2023; Finn et al., 2018). At a time when young people generally do not meet the requirements for physical activity, this is a valuable intention for outdoor school-based learning. Moreover, physical activity, especially in natural environments, are known to have a supportive effect on engagement (Thompson Coon et al., 2011).

Letting children initiate free play. Outdoor environments are generally conducive to letting children initiate free play, which is an activity that children enjoy and engage in without adult intervention or planning (AQCP, 2020). Outdoor free play is important for children, especially as it allows for better engagement of executive cognition, even when children are back in the classroom (Koepf et al., 2022). When engaging children in free play, it is important to choose an outdoor setting that provides opportunities for safe exploration without adult interference (Ernst, 2014).

Engaging in sports activities. It is important for students to learn to be physically active outdoors, as children who do so are more active and less sedentary overall (Gray et al., 2015). For health and physical education teachers, outdoor environments provide an opportunity to engage students in sports activities that are different from those done indoors in a gym. A key strength of these places is that they can provide reproducible activities for students in their dai-

ly lives (Lamy et al., 2021), with their friends or with their families.

These different intentions reflect many reasons for teachers to engage in school-based outdoor teaching. The key is to make these explicit intentions in order to facilitate decisions about which places to choose. The next section provides a list of potential places to consider investigating in schools' immediate surroundings.

Discover surrounding settings

Many sites have the potential to support outdoor learning experiences at school. These environments can be divided into two broad categories which are natural, where "living and non-living co-exist" and human built, where "people live, learn, work, travel, and play" (Lee et al., 2022, p. 12). These categories can be considered as the ends of a broad spectrum and there can be many variations in between, such as green spaces in urban settings. In all cases, the settings that are most promising in a school context are simply those that are most easily accessible to teachers. Although other settings may be available for use, here are common ones (Ayotte-Beaudet et al., 2023; Lee et al., 2022).

Schoolyard. For teachers who never practiced outdoor education with their students, the schoolyard is a great starting point as it is easily accessible and familiar. One of its main advantages is that teachers are not expected to take extraordinary measures to ensure safety. It can be used for a variety of activities such as land art, gardening, or exploration and application of concepts in different subjects.

City parks. Urban parks offer a variety of natural elements such as trees, plants, and animals and an infrastructure for play and physical activity. In urban settings, these sites are typically easily accessible and do not require any financial investment by schools. They offer increased opportunities for physical activity, afford ecosystems to study, are familiar environments for students, and are designed to be safe.

Woodland or forest. When accessible, woodlands and forests offer the opportunity for nature-based learning. This approach is known to have many benefits on learning outcomes, such as academic achievement, personal development and stewardship (Kuo et al., 2019). Students can build dens, develop sensitivity to nature, and learn about ecosystems.

Water course. Water courses such as streams, ponds, and rivers offer a unique opportunity to learn about aquatic ecosystems and the creatures that inhabit them. Although these venues are generally less common in schools' immediate surroundings, they represent a rich and unique opportunity for learning. Students can conduct distinct scientific investigations, question their strategic importance in the historical development of a community, or use them as inspiration for writing.

Outdoor classroom. An outdoor classroom is a dedicated space that shares certain characteristics with an indoor classroom, like places for students to sit. One of the advantages of these places is that they allow teachers and students to preserve some classroom-like cues. Outdoor classrooms provide a place for teamwork, for presenting information to the whole group, or for shelter when there is a roof overhead.

Sport facilities. Many schools, especially middle and high schools, have sport facilities that can be used in ways that are adapted to other outdoor learning intentions. It is important to mention it, because this existing infrastructure can have an alternative vocation. They can replace an outdoor classroom or provide a safe space for students.

Gardens. School gardens are areas within the school grounds where students can grow and cultivate various fruits, vegetables, herbs or flowers. They offer an opportunity for experiential learning as well as the promotion of environmental awareness or healthy lifestyles. With proper planning and integration into the school curriculum, they can be used to teach a wide range of subjects, from science (e.g. the needs

of plants) to history (e.g. their use through the centuries before and after Confederation).

Loose parts. The concept of loose parts refers to materials that can be moved, manipulated, and combined in various ways. One of the main advantages lies in their ability to inspire creativity, problem-solving skills, and even critical thinking in children. By providing loose parts such as logs, tyres, or stones, a teacher can encourage forms of play that are beneficial to children development.

Most schools have access to at least two of these types of spaces, and often more within a one-kilometer radius. And, the places described above are not the only ones with potential for student learning, whether in urban, suburban, rural or remote settings. To give practical meaning to these ideas, here are examples of two teachers' experiences.

Seeking to better understand Indigenous Peoples

Isabelle has been going outdoors for many years with her kindergarten students in British Columbia. Since the release of the British Columbia Early Learning Framework (Province of BC, 2019), she has been using outdoor education to contribute to authentic reconciliation with Indigenous peoples as well as to view learning from a holistic perspective. She seeks to deepen awareness experience, to better understand First People Principles of Learning, and to challenge systems that perpetuate a deficit view of the child.

Her school is at the edge of a natural park, with four beaches, a pond, a stream, and various woods and forests. She regularly invites an elder from her community to speak to them about teaching through nature. This encounter completely changed her approach to teaching outdoors. She decided to stop teacher-directed teaching and started to listen and observe the children during their outdoor experience. Since then, she has witnessed a whole new level of motivation that gives her more insight into her students' interests and learning as they explore and investigate.

Five times a year, Isabelle receives aboriginal culture kits from the Qualicum First Nation Culture Program. One of the kits was filled with activities and materials related to a pond. With the materials, she invited the children to stand beside the pond. They observed and touched the skin, claws and teeth of a beaver. They were fascinated by the animal and the construction of dams. When the observation was finished, half of the group wanted to reproduce a small dam near the pond, while respecting the ecosystem. Others played the beaver and created a world with a family of beavers.

Isabelle believes that outdoor education allows her to truly focus learning on her students. She uses outdoor experiences in the classroom to keep students interested, questioning and seeking information. She also feels that these places are not perceived as formal as the classroom, so students communicate their ideas and emotions more easily. The outdoors opens the door to a different way of developing interpersonal relationships with her and among the students. Above all, she hopes that her students will become sources of change to reduce human impact on Mother Earth.

Using everyday settings as contexts for interdisciplinary learning

Marie-Line is a teacher in Quebec who generally works with grade 1 and 2 students. When she first began introducing outdoor learning experiences to her students, she wished to give them more freedom to move and speak than in the classroom. Her focus was to provide urban children with a connection to urban nature. She also wanted the children to experience learning as a process of adaptation, as in everyday life.

Today, with years of experience in the outdoors, Marie-Line goes out with her students in all places and in all seasons, even in winter. Currently, she teaches in a school adjacent to a forest. She likes to go there to organize talking circles, read with her group or organize learning activities also in natural sciences or mathematics. While the forest requires staying on the trails from spring

to fall, with the snow it expands in the winter, because they're not as worried about trampling undergrowth.

One of her favorite activities is building sheds in the middle of winter. The students have to build a camp using the trees, tarp and rope. Once the constructions are completed, students are instructed to add an address to their shed, with even numbers on one side and odd numbers on the other. They also have to respect the principle of street addresses and respect regular intervals. In the end, in addition to mobilizing mathematical knowledge, students have to work together to come to a final solution.

Based on her many years of experience, Marie-Line considers that learning in the outdoors becomes an adventure where it is easier to be engaged in wonder. Inquiry-based learning can be deployed in ways that would not be possible indoors. One of the biggest lessons she learned is that students who are usually labeled as troublemakers in the classroom can move and speak very freely. They suddenly become leaders to their peers, which transforms the conventional perception of them in the classroom.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we examined the intentions that teachers can link to potential settings for use in school-based outdoor education, both in urban or rural contexts. With no single method to develop and deliver outdoor practices, teachers should think about what enables and motivates learning experiences in order to better plan outdoor activities. This requires taking the time to walk around the school, to awaken senses and to take time to prepare. It's now your turn to consider the places around you and how they can help you ground student learning in local culture, history, nature, and stories in all seasons.

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Resources

6 actions school systems can take to support children's outdoor learning <https://theconversation.com/6-actions-school-systems-can-take-to-support-childrens-outdoor-learning-167745>