

# The Outdoor Classroom and Learning Gardens Project

Cara Haley, Claire Robinson, & Nicole Sander

## Abstract

*During a 15-week Early Intervention course in the fall of 2020, the authors and their classmates had the opportunity to design an outdoor classroom and learning garden project for the K-Prep Learning Center. The purpose of this project is to foster inquiry-based learning which allows preschool students to develop their fine motor, gross motor, and socio-emotional skills. In this article, we will present an introduction and background to our project, discuss the process of designing an outdoor curriculum and learning garden, and the benefits it presents for early learners and preservice teachers.*

Outdoor classrooms and learning gardens are simply spaces that connect early learners to nature. Designing an outdoor classroom requires intentionality and knowledge of state learning standards. It is general knowledge within early childhood discourse that experiences gained by early learners in outdoor classrooms are valuable. Research posits that outdoor experiences foster positive attitudes towards the environment and greatly enhances socio-emotional skills in children (Merewether, 2015). Socio-emotional skills include the ability to collaborate with others, self-control, and empathy. Outdoor classrooms and learning gardens have therefore been identified as spaces where children can engage in free play in their natural environments with their peers (Hunter et al., 2020).

As partial fulfillment of our Early Intervention course, we were tasked to design

an outdoor classroom and learning garden curriculum as our final project. This project was sponsored by the Millersville University Positive Grant that intends to foster a generation of sustainability stewards. In a series of webinars during our SPED 341-Early Intervention to Kindergarten course, we learned about developing curriculum that connects communities and schools with a focus on sustainability, equity, and access with an emphasis on a school culture that promotes wellness. As future teachers, this experience allowed us to synthesize our research on outdoor classrooms, our knowledge gained from Early Childhood Intervention Course, and the PA learning standards to envision our own curriculum. We designed our outdoor classroom to include the following: sensory garden center, block and construction area, and art center.

### **Sensory Garden Center**

Students will grow and learn about crops while observing the bugs and animals that appear in their garden. They will frequently engage their senses: students will dig in the dirt with their hands and experience the smell of the dirt, the taste of their crops, and the sight of life in nature. At the same time, children will focus on demonstrating their knowledge of subjects like science, nutrition, and their fine motor skills, or small muscle movements. The purpose of this center is to help students identify the basic needs of plants and animals and to observe and document the growth of living things, as stated in the PA Early Learning Standard 3.1 PK.A.3. This also connects to the PA Early Learning Standard 10.1 PK.C: Identify foods that keep our body healthy. The teacher should model the use of gardening tools and encourage the students to document observations in their journals.

### **The Block and Construction Area**

In the Block and Construction Center, students will explore aspects of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) when designing and creating structures through collaboration with peers and the use of their imagination. We believe that blocks can enhance a child's ability to problem-solve or express their wants and needs through language. Blocks can be used within measurement and balance to demonstrate mathematics skills, as well. Children engage in large muscle movements such as lifting and walking to develop their gross motor skills. This center connects well with the two standards: 3.4.4.E7 Understand that structures rest on foundations and that some structures are temporary, while others are permanent, and 3.4.4.C1 Understand that there is no perfect design. The role of the teacher is to stimulate children's curiosity by asking "I wonder" questions.

### **The Art Center**

In the Art Center, students will be able to use natural objects to create their own images and develop pieces of art. In the process, they will develop fine motor skills and cognitive skills. The art tools they use should require the use of their fingers, hands, and wrists, as stated in PA Early Learning Standard 10.5 PK.C. With their peers, students should formulate and share an opinion about others' art products, as stated in Standard 9.3 PK.G. When talking with the child about their work, teachers should ask open-ended questions to encourage children to use their vocabulary and think critically.

### **Conclusion**

The process of creating an outdoor classroom is relevant to our future teaching careers in a number of ways. Developing activities that fit with standards and meet learning goals for students is required of all teachers. We thought critically and creatively about the way young children learn and how we could create an ideal learning environment. As future teachers, we are passionate about providing high-quality, creative education to young children to aid in their development. Through our own learning, we have seen the power of hands-on, collaborative work in fostering socially competent students who are able to demonstrate 21st-century skills. They have learned how to work together to design creative solutions to real-world problems.

In our future education careers, we plan on persuading our schools to build an outdoor classroom for our students. We believe that every child should have the opportunity to learn about the earth and their role in the environment. An intentional teaching space will allow children to connect to the wonder of nature on a deeper level than what is available inside of the classroom. We want children to have access to sustainability education and opportunities to learn about

wellness. What better way to achieve these goals than to build an outdoor classroom for students to learn and grow in.

### References

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