

Outdoor Play and Early Learning

CJEE is pleased to present this special issue of the journal on early years outdoor play, in collaboration with the Lawson Foundation. The issue is produced in conjunction with, and as a follow-up to, presentations given at the Lawson Foundation's Symposium on Early Years Outdoor Play (EYOP), which took place October 24–26, 2018. The symposium had an interdisciplinary focus on outdoor play for young children and brought together a global network of scholars, policy makers, and practitioners. One of the key outcomes of the symposium was a discussion paper titled “Advancing Outdoor Play and Early Childhood Education.” This paper was developed by the Lawson Foundation (2019) and was collaboratively reviewed and revised by symposium participants both during and after the event. The paper outlines six major themes related to advancing EYOP:

1. The importance of adopting a multi-sector ecosystem lens to address outdoor play
2. Approaches to integrating Indigenous curriculum and ways of knowing about outdoor play into Western early childhood education
3. Building support for, and enabling, risk in outdoor play
4. The need to make outdoor play pedagogy explicit in post-secondary early childhood education training and to support ongoing professional learning needs
5. The multiple gaps and barriers to outdoor play in policies and standards, and the inconsistent implementation of such policies by stakeholders
6. The need to develop a robust Canadian research and knowledge mobilization strategy to support evidence-informed policy and practice (Lawson Foundation, 2019, p. iii)

The papers presented in this special issue take up, extend, and respond to many of the themes identified in the symposium discussion paper. We are pleased to have curated this issue as an artifact of the symposium that not only complements the discussion paper but also draws further attention to the ongoing need for parallel work in policy and pedagogy—areas that “fuel new and ongoing efforts to advance outdoor play and ECE across Canada” (Lawson Foundation, 2019, p. 18). The Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (COEO) also produced a practitioner versus research focused follow up to the symposium in their journal - *Pathways* (COEO, 2019).

Environmental education (EE) is inherently interdisciplinary, and CJEE has long embraced interdisciplinary inquiry into EE. Leveraging the EYOP symposium as a springboard for conceptual and empirical research papers, this special

issue represents a unique constellation of papers with connections to adventure-based education, child study, early childhood education, experiential education, and health and physical education. We are pleased to share the following six papers with CJEE readers and stakeholders across the EYOP multi-sector ecosystem.

The special issue begins with a paper titled “Are Parental Perceptions of Risk and Attitudes Towards Risk-Taking During Play Associated with Preschoolers’ Physical Activity and Physical Literacy?” In this paper, **Michelle Rolande Stone, Natasha Webber, Jane Cawley, Natalie E. Howser, and Jane F. L. Kirk** report on their quantitative inquiry into the associations between parents’ self-reported ideas about risk-taking in their children’s play and the children’s physical activity (PA) levels and physical literacy (PL). In this paper, PA and PL are measured by accelerometer tracking and a validated test of gross motor ability and physical skills, respectively. The results demonstrate statistically significant relationships between parental perception of risky play and both PA and PL (there is a greater acceptance of risk associated with increased PA/PL). While the authors acknowledge that the research design presents some limitations on generalization, their findings contribute to a growing knowledge base that points to the importance of adventurous outdoor play on children’s overall well-being, of which PA and PL are important elements. In the context of environmental education, this paper may be read as a further call for capacity-building in the fundamental movement skills (e.g., running, jumping, climbing, manipulating objects) that allow children, with their families, to be present in and engage with natural spaces, where environmental learning can unfold.

In their paper titled “Taking it Outside: Engaging in Active, Creative, Outdoor Play with Digital Technology,” **Monica McLynn-Stewart, Nicola Maguire, and Emma Mogyorodi** explore two questions about the integration of digital technology into children’s outdoor play in the context of kindergarten classrooms in Ontario. Working from two distinct bodies of research literature that suggest potential benefits for children in both outdoor play and digital technology use, the authors assess the value of integrating tablet-based, open-ended digital technology application into child-led outdoor play. Through a robust qualitative design (27 kindergarten educators participating over three years, plus analysis of pedagogical documentation of children’s outdoor play with digital technology), the study documents the participating educators’ shifting understanding of digital technology in relation to outdoor play. At the outset of the research, many educators viewed the technology as a likely distraction from outdoor play, but through the training and experience that was effectuated by the research project, the educators were more able to see digital tablets as tools that both mediate the learning experience of kindergarten children during outdoor play and offer opportunities for ongoing reflection on and meaning-making in outdoor play experiences. These findings are significant to an ecosystemic perspective on early years outdoor play as developed in the symposium discussion paper

(Lawson Foundation, 2019): Children’s contemporary lives are literally and metaphorically “networked,” that is, intersected between the material and digital, as well as the indoor and outdoor, worlds. McGlynn-Stewart, Maguire, and Mogyorodi’s findings highlight this indoor–outdoor–digital–material nexus. They call for further inquiry into the benefits and deficits of young children’s technology-infused outdoor play in order to further elucidate best practices.

Michal Perlman, Nina Howe, and Catherine Bergeron’s paper titled “How and Why did Outdoor Play Become a Central Focus of Scottish Early Learning and Care Policy?” illuminates Scotland’s Early Learning and Care (ELC) Policy as a leading example of a jurisdiction advancing outdoor play programs (OPP) through progressive public policy that is shaped by innovation at the community programming level. Through government document analysis, stakeholder interviews (including government officials, educators, and advocacy group representatives), and site visits at both urban and rural ELC OPPs, the authors identify seven themes encompassing program heterogeneity, policy, quality, risk, educators’ roles, barriers, and the question “why now?” These findings resonate strongly with theme five in the Lawson Foundation’s discussion paper, which relates to policy deficiencies that have the potential to limit the advancement of EYOP opportunities. Perlman, Howe, and Bergeron laud Scotland as a jurisdiction that has effectively navigated policy development in ways that foster rather than hinder early years outdoor play. Their discussion emphasizes the Care Inspectorate’s decisions, which prioritize program quality as a driving policy, honour the unique program designs that have emerged in response to community needs in each program milieu, and approach OPP risk assessment in ways that include program benefits rather than viewing risk in isolation. The authors conclude that Scotland’s example of OPPs in regulated ELC contexts is worthy of study by researchers and policy makers around the world—including Canada.

Whereas Perlman, Howe, and Bergeron’s work focuses on early learning and care policy in a national context, the next paper, by **Blair Niblett, Kim Hiscott, Marlene Power, and Hanah McFarlane,** concentrates on a single case. Titled “Partnering for Outdoor Play: A Case Study of Forest and Nature School Programming in the Context of Licensed Child Care in Ottawa, Ontario,” the paper investigates the policy implications of a partnership between two organizations—The Child and Nature Alliance of Canada (CNAC) and Andrew Fleck Children’s Services (AFCS)—to offer forest school programming in the context of government licensed child care in Ontario. Theoretically grounded in the notion of the Anthropocene, the authors engaged in a collaborative action research project to identify those key policy aspects of the CNAC–AFCS partnership that allowed for the development and piloting of a licensed childcare program that operates within a forest and nature school framework. Several key themes emerged from analysis of the case study data, including: understanding a continuum of Forest and Nature School (FNS) pedagogies; working to influence regulatory disconnections between built and natural play environments; and

advancing social and ecological justice values through forest and nature school programs. In alignment with theme five in the Lawson Foundation discussion paper, the authors address gaps and barriers that exist in Ontario policy and regulation and which hinder the scalability of FNS as an important potential driver of EYOP.

Shifting to another aspect of an EYOP ecosystem, the next paper moves upstream from direct program delivery policies and explores the realm of pre-service teacher training in early childhood education as a lever for advancing early years outdoor play. In their paper, “College Faculty’s Outdoor Play Pedagogy: The Ripple Effect,” **Beverly Deitze and April Cutler** argue for increased attention to pre-service early childhood educator training as crucial to advancing the delivery of outdoor play in early years programming. Two key findings emerge from their environmental scan of Canadian ECE programs offered nationally by colleges and institutes. First, there is a shortage of ECE training programs that include course requirements explicitly naming outdoor play as a course topic or learning outcome; relatedly, only about one-third of programs are found to include outdoor play elements in ways that are embedded as components of other courses. Second, there is a need for comprehensive faculty development for those who participate in early childhood teacher training. Because ECE faculty come from a broad range of interdisciplinary backgrounds and experiences, there does not seem to be a widespread collective knowledge base related to outdoor play theory and practice from which faculty can develop pedagogies for mentoring new early childhood educators. This systemic problem renders EYOP as a peripheral rather than central element of many Canadian ECE training programs. Deitze and Cutler’s findings on ECE faculty’s capacity for delivering outdoor play pedagogies respond to theme four in the Lawson Foundation discussion paper. They also resonate with ideas related to front-line EYOP program delivery presented elsewhere in this special issue by Perlman, Howe, and Bergeron, as well as by Niblett et al. Taken together, this discourse on capacity for implementing quality EYOP experiences—for children, their teachers, and their teachers’ teachers—raises broader questions about Canadians’ cultural affinity to and comfort in outdoor environments. The question of adults’ (especially educators’ and education faculty members’) personal dispositions toward outdoor life is one that must be addressed in any exploration of capacity for advancing outdoor play.

In the final paper, titled “Shifting Culture Towards Endorsement and Advocacy of Outdoor Play and Learning: A Collaborative Case Study with KidActive,” **Zachary Stevens, Bryan R. Grimwood, Shawna Babcock, and Carly Meissner** also explore the capacity for EYOP delivery, but they shift the focus within the metaphorical ecosystem from people to places and spaces—including the built and natural environments in which EYOP programming is situated. Their study is nested in a participatory research design that engaged affiliates of KidActive in a program evaluation of a three-year Nature Play and Learning Spaces program.

The program involves engaging school communities—students, parents, educators, and community members—in collaborative initiatives to enhance outdoor play and outdoor learning experiences by revitalizing schoolyard space. In addition to physical revitalization using natural and artificial installations, the program also provides pedagogical support for school staff to use the transformed space to facilitate play and learning. The authors assemble the narrative data they collected to create a logic model that maps program inputs, activities, and outputs. As indicated in the title, the most notable finding of the evaluation is that the program catalyzes culture shifts within participating schools, which may elevate outdoor play as a shared community value. Stephens, Grimwood, Babcock, and Meissner’s paper exemplifies the ecosystemic approach called for in theme one of the Lawson Foundation discussion paper. It serves as an example of such an approach not only because of its focus on the interaction between people, their spaces, play, and learning, but also because the KidActive Nature Play and Learning Spaces program and its evaluation are examples of cross-sectoral collaborations that advance EYOP.

Viewed as a whole, the papers in this special issue may be seen as one possible “mapping” of the ecosystemic lens on EYOP, which the Lawson Foundation discussion paper calls for in theme one (See p. 1 of the Lawson Foundation’s discussion paper for a conceptual map diagram). Individually, each paper takes up one or more of the remaining themes. Notably, however, theme two—on the cruciality of recognizing and integrating Indigenous approaches to EYOP through inclusive engagement with Indigenous peoples—is conspicuously absent from this constellation of papers, except in peripheral ways. As editors, we acknowledge this absence and, drawing on theme one in the Lawson Foundation discussion paper—the importance of adopting a multi-sector ecosystem lens that supports EYOP—we call on stakeholders across the ecosystem to respectfully and intentionally reflect and act on the ways that Indigenous peoples and perspectives are considered and/or included in EYOP-related policy making or programming.

In closing, the editors would like to express our sincere thanks to the Lawson Foundation for their commitment to EYOP as a national and international priority. We are also grateful for their financial support, which backed both the production of this special issue and several of the research projects that are documented herein.

References

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