

5-2021

A Classroom Without Four Walls? Paving the Way for More Outdoor Education

Sandra Anaya-Zamora

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/caps_thes_all



Part of the [Outdoor Education Commons](#)

This Capstone Project (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Capstone Projects and Master's Theses at Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Capstone Projects and Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csumb.edu.

A Classroom Without Four Walls? Paving the Way for More Outdoor Education

Sandra Anaya-Zamora

California State University Monterey Bay

LS 400: Senior Capstone

Dr. Patty Whang

May 26, 2021

Abstract

The focus of this Capstone Project is on the need to increase outdoor education opportunities for students. More specifically, how can teachers increase outdoor learning opportunities during instructional time? This is important because a lack of outdoor educational opportunities hinders students from learning benefits only found through their environment. It is argued that a decrease in environmental integration in schools will cause children to lose touch with nature, affecting their development and the future sustainability of our planet. The three primary stakeholder perspectives chosen were one teacher, one science teacher and one garden-nutrition educator, because considerations of the issue should include the perspectives of teachers as they are the ones who facilitate learning. Three action options emerged from an analysis of the data and are explored as ways to address the issue presented. Outdoor Education teacher training and seminars along with collaboration with supporting nonprofits or community organizations are argued to be the most effective way to achieve the goals of increasing outdoor education opportunities for students by infusing it into teacher pedagogical practices .

Keywords: Outdoor Education, environment, nature

A Classroom Without Four Walls? Paving the Way for More Outdoor Education

Most people can describe moments or learning opportunities that they had in school that created meaningful experiences. One of the most meaningful learning opportunities that I had in elementary school was outdoor education. I recall being in fourth grade and having outdoor learning activities. For example, we picked up different leaves to identify the tree they came from, what the leaf told us about a season, and the different parts of that leaf. In another example, my class learned how to grow different types of vegetables and plants in our school garden. The best part was being able to grow our own carrots and pea pods and then take them home to eat with our families. Further, much of the outdoor learning opportunities that I had included visiting state parks, beaches, and the outdoor science school where fifth-graders stayed for three nights and four days. Activities at the outdoor science school included; using motor skills to do a ropes course over logs, learning about different bodies of water and how they affect animals during certain times of the year. We even got to do a hands-on experiment with various objects to test what would happen if they blocked the water from running in creeks. All of these rich-sensory experiences were effective for me because I was a kinesthetic learner who could not sit still at a desk and learn by only listening or watching.

Fast forward , I was a college student, who was participating in a service learning third-grade classroom. When one becomes involved in school settings, they start to pay attention to the sort of opportunities that students have. My outdoor learning opportunities did not match the observations I was noticing at my service learning site. Six hours and ten minutes defined a typical school day for third-graders at my service learning site. A total of one hour and ten minutes was used for recess and lunch. The only time left for them to go outdoors was 20 minutes twice a week to have structured physical education. The remaining time not taken up by

recess, lunch, or physical education was dedicated to focusing on core subjects inside of the classroom. Absolutely no time, integration, or investment was dedicated to incorporate the outdoor environment into lessons. The presence of a garden was within reach of the third-grade classroom. Access to a small outdoor amphitheater surrounded by a natural environment was within a walking distance. This was the situation that made me question why no integration of outdoor education existed for these students.

Right around the same time, I was taking a Liberal Studies course named, *Social Foundations of Multicultural Education*. One of the topics that was presented were different forms of playgrounds that strayed away from a typical playground found at conventional schooling. One playground that stood out to me was nature playgrounds. These playgrounds place an emphasis on using the natural environment to facilitate play. In the course, we explored some of the benefits of having these sorts of playgrounds for children. It was then that I made a connection. Some of the sensory benefits that nature playgrounds offered were similar to some of those that outdoor education also facilitates. Yet both of these opportunities were not culturally relevant for students. I began to wonder why a lack of using the natural environment for students and children was limited. From my observations of doing service learning in a third-grade classroom, there was no evidence of any sort of outdoor education occurring. My experience in elementary school having outdoor learning opportunities was contrary to these observations.

While my experience with environmental opportunities as a student in elementary school was present, this is not necessarily the same opportunity that students are receiving today. Through my observations at my service learning site and inspiration of nature playgrounds, I concluded that something needed to be done about increasing the frequency of outdoor education. My inspiration comes from a place where it feels important to integrate more outdoor

opportunities for students, as a way of accessing rich sensory experiences, that I once felt as a young student. As a result of teachers being the facilitators of education, there is a responsibility placed on them to make outdoor learning opportunities more consistent. A significant component of this is helping redirect focus. Not from what is important but including opportunities that schools are using little of such as outdoor education. Unfortunately, the outdoor environment is not as appreciated as society hopes. However, through education, we have a platform where we can help develop this through learning opportunities presented in school systems. My goal is to investigate the different ways that teachers can increase the opportunities of using the outdoors and the environment into teacher pedagogical practices.

Literature Synthesis & Integration: A Classroom Without Four Walls? Paving the Way for More Outdoor Education

A popular learning pedagogy that has continued to receive attention is outdoor education and instruction. In order to best understand the context of this paper, it is important to define what outdoor education means. Gilbertson et al. (2006) define, “outdoor education is a method of teaching and learning that emphasizes direct, multisensory experiences; takes place in the outdoor environment and uses an integrated approach to learning by involving the natural environment” (p. 5). While research indicates that the implementation of outdoor education is associated with numerous benefits, this is a practice that does not get implemented enough at the elementary level. Outdoor education is, unfortunately, becoming a method that is disappearing more from elementary schools. A lack of outdoor educational opportunities hinders students from learning benefits only found through their environment.

The issue that will be researched in this capstone project is what do stakeholders at local schools have to say about the implementation of outdoor education and how to increase the opportunities to use the environment as a learning platform.

What is the issue?

When the COVID-19 pandemic hit, outdoor education was placed at a disadvantage due to remote instruction away from school sites. Remote instruction narrowed in to focus on core subjects. Content that branched outside core subjects was especially affected. Marshall et al. (2020) write, “In some cases, they were asked not to assign any homework, so as “to let students focus on their ‘core’ classes” (english, math, science, and social studies)” (para.15). One may believe that a focus on core subjects has become an issue just recently, however, this is the primary reason why a lack of utilizing outdoor learning exists. Over the last 15 years curriculum in the United States has centered around core subjects like Math and English, as a way of ensuring students obtain high test scores (Valentino, 2016). A high demand is placed on performance while a curriculum foundation fails to provide an integrated learning pathway for students to use the environment as a learning tool. In a sense, outdoor education is viewed as an extra or an addition to an already existing curriculum. Valentino (2016) argues, “The elementary school educational focus has shifted from emphasizing the importance of life-long learning, which ensures that students can apply their skills to real life, to simply teaching children on how to take tests” (p. 2). With limited time in a classroom, teachers should be providing students with opportunities that they can take beyond school grounds. Ultimately educators should strive to create global citizens. Sole focus on core subjects will not completely achieve this and it is why the implementation of outdoor learning is required.

Outdoor education is in further decline as a direct result of a lack of teacher training. More specifically is the lack of teacher preparation to feel competent in engaging inadequate outdoor education. Teachers indicate obstruction by having little certainty in regards to outdoor teaching as a result of inadequate involvement and understanding of this method (Van et al., 2020). School districts manage funds to provide their teachers with various trainings, however, including proper training for non-traditional classroom pedagogies is unrecognized and affects the integration of outdoor learning. Teachers do not teach lessons outside as a result of feeling that they have not received proper training on what and how to teach outdoors (Project Learning Tree, 2016). If teachers are given proper training then they are more likely to become involved and increase learning opportunities presented by the environment. Until proper training is supplemented then a positive correlation with a lack of implementation will exist.

Why is it an issue?

Failure to integrate outdoor education hinders learning opportunities for students to experience both sustainability and real-life applications. Through education, we strive to teach students sustainability and stewardship, yet we deprive them of these opportunities when we confine them to the indoors. Allen (2016) argues, “without environmental integration in schools, children will lose touch with nature which will affect their development and the future well being of our planet” (p.31). As a result, a positive correlation exists. A lack of exposure to natural environments is positively correlated with an underappreciated sense towards nature. Engaging in outdoor learning opportunities can help develop a stronger understanding and empathy in regards to issues found in the environment, which then impacts willingness to preserve such surroundings. (Kenny et al., 2003). When educators do not provide students with opportunities to build a relationship with the environment, then long-term sustainability becomes unlikely.

Further, little outdoor education also hinders opportunities in applying real-world applications through activities. Both children and adults have a natural curiosity to make sense of our world and apply connections. Warner and Dillenschneider (2019) argue “multiday nature of the experience may provide participants with ample opportunities to process their experiences...and consider how new skills transfer to their lives” (p.328). If we remove the ability to be curious outdoors we are more unlikely to be mindful of our experiences and less likely to connect how skills impact one's personal life.

A lack of outdoor education further becomes an issue when it hinders learning opportunities for different types of learners. Gilakajani (2021) writes, “a person educated in an area having no relationship to his/ her learning style may lack confidence and s/he may be less successful” (p.12). Every single student does not meet a one size fits all model, so the question then becomes why are we not using the integration of the environment to supplement learning styles. The experiential theory states that students learn most effectively by participating rather than only hearing and reading. Hands-on experiences and applying content matter both serve as a powerful learning tool (Kolb, 2014). Involving students is arguably one of the most effective methods for conceptualizing and connecting information across disciplines. However, by failing to provide outdoor education opportunities we deprive them. Every student should have the opportunity to learn in a different environment that might just perhaps stimulate the type of learning that they need in order to thrive in. Students who engage in outdoor education tend to outperform students inside of conventional classrooms (Louv, 2008). As a result of outdoor experiences supplementing different types of learners, academic performance increases more holistically.

What should be done?

In order for local elementary schools to increase the use of the environment and nature for learning, the issue needs to be evaluated from the bottom up. One way of increasing the opportunities for outdoor education is by directing attention on teachers since they facilitate learning. Van et al. (2020) suggest, “Actively participating in outdoor learning activities, such as short activities related to mathematics or language skills, supported teachers with familiarizing themselves with the concept of outdoor learning and lowered the threshold to actually start experimenting with outdoor learning” (para.29). It is critical that a foundation of what outdoor education feels like be laid out for teachers. This step requires that teachers remove themselves from indoors and step outdoors. Of course, proper training is another option to better inform teachers on how to implement more outdoor education. There are seminars that teachers can attend as a way of becoming trained on how to engage with hands-on lessons using the outdoors (Project Learning Tree, 2016). In order for opportunities of outdoor learning to increase, we need to take action and involve teachers with the same hands-on experience to develop familiarity.

Another way that educators can increase the opportunities of outdoor education is to integrate it into what they teach. Palavan et al. (2016) write, “If outdoor education activities could be directly incorporated into the curriculum, then teachers’ concerns about not meeting curricular deadlines when implementing outdoor education activities could be rendered useless” (p.8). Although curriculum like the Common Core has a strong focus, an interdisciplinary approach makes room for outdoor education and curriculum to co-exist, rather than viewing outdoor education as an add-on. In a sense, teachers would be combining standards and hands-on learning outdoors to satisfy learning objectives. Studies inclusive of teachers indicate that a focus on curriculum-correlated benefits is more likely to encourage the usage of outdoor learning

(Marchant et al., 2019). A clear indication of outdoor education aligned with curriculum needs to exist, an interdisciplinary approach would satisfy this. This is done through a perspective of drawing on multiple disciplines to teach a lesson(s) and targeting numerous learning objectives.

A third way that teachers can increase outdoor education is by collaborating with community partners that are willing to offer an outdoor education program to a school's population. Farrell and Liu (2020) write "Many schools, especially in urban areas, cannot offer outdoor programming without the assistance of community partners" (p.4). When schools collaborate with community partners, then opportunities for outdoor education increase because a tailored program is brought into that school's population. Programs can look like school garden projects, outdoor kitchens, and outdoor classrooms. Some schools that have integrated outdoor education have done it through opportunities like school garden projects, dependent on that community partners' collaborative efforts. Pajaro Valley Unified School District for example has partnered with *LifeLab* (n.d) whose goal is "to cultivate children's love of learning, healthy food, and nature through garden-based education" (para.1). Having a bridge that connects education and community resources allows for forms of outdoor learning to exist. Teachers also benefit from the resources that programming brings in. Partnerships include more opportunities for professional development, access to different networks, greater operational efficiency, increased access to resources, greater innovation, and enhanced credibility. Collaborating with community partners can be overlooked because it may stray away from perceptions of outdoor education needing to be field trips, outdoor science camps, or other projects that require a lot of funding dependent on a school district's budget. However, that is not true when a school gets the opportunity to collaborate with a community partner or nonprofit to offer an outdoor education program.

Conclusion

There is a significant amount of evidence that points to the benefits of outdoor education. However, utilizing the environment as a learning tool, as of 2021, is a pedagogy that is not used consistently throughout elementary schools. Failure to provide outdoor learning opportunities affects students because they do not benefit from what the environment and nature have to teach them. Barriers will continue to exist, however, attention needs to be redirected to present more learning opportunities that are geared towards the outdoors. It is crucial that educators evaluate how they can increase the opportunities to use the outdoors, nature, and the environment as part of how they teach.

Method

For this capstone project, I investigated how local elementary teachers view outdoor education and what they thought could be done to improve it. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature, I used what I had learned to formulate an action that responds to the focus issue in a way that inspires, informs, or involves a particular audience.

Context

This research took place at two different school sites that will be referred to as Creekside Elementary School¹ and Pinto Valley Elementary School. Creekside Elementary School is located in the countryside of Sea Mist, California. This school is nestled in a town full of redwood forests, oak trees, and beaches. Creekside Elementary sits between two creeks that cross the school site. The names of these creeks are Redwood Creek and Stump Creek. The school is also bordered by woods on three sides. Students and educators at this school have access to nearby forests, beaches, and state parks within close proximity. Predominate demographics of

¹ Pseudonyms have been used for the names of people, places, and organizations.

students at this school site are 61.3% White followed by 31.2% Hispanic. The 2019-2020 SARC report indicated that Creekside Elementary, home, and school club raised more than 50,000 dollars inclusive for classroom supplies, technology, field trips, and outdoor education scholarships. Further, according to the 2019-2020 SARC report, science specialist, garden lead teacher, green team leader, and primary grades science lead teacher all attended professional development sessions that were provided by the school district, as well as outside organizations like the local aquarium. In 2012, Creekside Elementary School earned recognition as a county-certified green business. This school site has a green team program inclusive of the outdoors and sustainability. Students who engage in everyday green teams can be seen composting, recycling, working in their school garden, or taking walking field trips on trails in surrounding woods built by the local scout troops.

Pinto Valley Elementary School

Further research for this project took place at Pinto Valley Elementary school located in a smaller suburban town which can be found in Marismas, California. This town is surrounded by an abundance of wetlands and sloughs. Dunes, lakes, rivers, and large agriculture can also be found in Marismas, California. Pinto Valley Elementary School is about an eight-minute driving distance to access local wetlands and sloughs. Predominant demographics of students at Pinto Valley include 95.9 % Hispanic/ Latino followed by 3.7% White. Pinto Valley Elementary has a garden-nutrition program that has been established with the help of Green Gates, an external program that was funded by the school district to support nature and garden-based education. As of 2021, Pinto Valley Elementary School has a part-time outdoor garden-nutrition educator who supports the school with garden-based activities. A school garden, outdoor kitchen, and garden beds can be located along the north wing of the school entrance. According to the 2019-2020

SARC report, the home and school club raised funds to support the school and students with field trips, classroom needs, the fifth-grade outdoor science school, and computers. No federal or state grants provide extra funding for instructional programs other than their after-school program.

Participants and Participant Selection

I invited two participants from Pinto Valley Elementary School to participate in this study. One additional participant from Creekside Elementary school was invited to participate. A total of three participants were a part of this study. This group of prospective participants was invited to participate because of their relevant experience and expertise in utilizing the outdoors as a learning platform for students at local elementary schools.

Jessica Reynolds. A fourth-grade school teacher. Jessica has had a career in teaching for a total of 24 years. Prior to her career in teaching, Jessica worked at a county camp program, followed by working at a nature day camp focused on outdoor learning, and then later became a naturalist. Jessica is currently a member of the green team program located at the school site where she teaches.

Christy Miller. A third, fourth, and fifth-grade science teacher. Christy has been teaching at the elementary level for a total of 11 years. Christy has also taught life science at a local junior high for two years where her focus was an ecosystem program. Part of her science instruction includes working with the garden-nutrition educator to deliver outdoor science-based lessons for her students.

Bill Morley. A garden-nutrition educator assigned to Pinto Valley Elementary School. He holds various positions throughout the school district. For example, he is also the fresh fruit and program coordinator, he also works with a local nonprofit program whose focus is on outdoor

education. This nonprofit supports a few of the local school gardens inside of the district that he works in. Since 2009, Bill has started various school gardens and orchard projects within Central Coast Unified School District. Bill collaborates with the Green Gates program whose focus is garden-nutrition education. They work together to teach at about seven different elementary sites during the school day.

Researcher

This concern is personally meaningful to me because I see students who are just like I was, itching to get out of their seats and wanting to learn differently than watching or listening. Sitting in a chair during school was one of the biggest challenges I had as a grade school student. When I returned back into the elementary school setting as an undergraduate student, outdoor learning opportunities appeared extinct. My observations of no outdoor learning became further reinforced through my job position as a senior recreation leader. I continue to watch TK-5th grade students do distance learning. No outdoor learning integration exists for them. I realized that students and educators are missing out on a valuable learning opportunity. Society is in a time of shift where a greater appreciation of being outdoors will increase as a result of being indoors for a long period of time, due to the pandemic. I believe a greater momentum for increasing outdoor learning is required. I stand by these learning opportunities because they supplemented the learner I was in grade school and the learners like myself in schools today.

Semi-Structured Interview and Survey Questions (Webb, 2004)

1. What do you see as the challenges with; or What are you most concerned about when it comes to outdoor education and instruction that is utilized?
2. What do you know about outdoor education or instruction?

3. What is currently being done to incorporate the use of outdoor instruction and education - by whom - and what are the strengths and weaknesses of these efforts?
4. Prior to distance learning what sort of outdoor instruction was being utilized? What do you think outdoor education will look like once students return to school?
5. How much of an effect does outdoor instruction have on a student's academic success?
6. What are you most excited about when it comes to utilizing the outdoors as a learning space?
7. What do you think are the challenges or obstacles of doing something that aims at making outdoor instruction more accessible?
8. What do you foresee as barriers that others may bring up with the action of utilizing more outdoor space for instructional purposes?
9. What do you think should be done about the implementation of outdoors as a learning space?
10. How can we make more teachers aware of what outdoor education is? How can we prepare teachers to take students outside to learn, as a way of increasing its implementation?
11. What actions can local teachers offer to make outdoor education more accessible and equitable for students at the elementary level?
12. Is there anything else that you would like to say about outdoor education, and/or the improvement of making an outdoor learning space more equitable?

Procedure

Participants were interviewed. All interviews were done individually. All participants being interviewed chose whether or not they wanted to be a part of this research study. Upon participant consent, a scheduled interview occurred at the convenience of the interviewee. Due to

the COVID-19 pandemic, face-to-face interviews took place through phone interviews and virtual zoom meetings. With participant consent, interviews were audio-recorded for the purposes of transcription at a later time. A semi-structured interview format was used for face-to-face interviews, to allow for follow-up questions to unclear, interesting, or unexpected responses. All interviews took approximately 30 minutes to complete.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

Results

For this Capstone Project, one fourth grade teacher, one garden-nutrition educator, and a fourth-fifth grade science teacher were interviewed to see what they think could be done to improve outdoor education opportunities during instruction. Teachers are facilitators of learning, therefore failure to provide outdoor experiences that are enriched by the environment, hinders learning opportunities for different types of learners. Based on an analysis of the data and the relevant research literature three themes emerged (see Table 1). Evidence-based decision-making required evaluating each potential Action Option by the following criteria: time required, reach, and effectiveness. Time required is important to consider because teachers have many time constraints that they are working with. Therefore the amount of time that an action requires can influence an outcome. Reach is important to consider in evaluating how possible and reasonable an action is for teachers to implement. Last, effectiveness is important to consider because it measures how successful an action can be through consistency of implementing outdoor education long term. Based on the evaluation of each Action Option an action will be recommended and justified.

Table 1

Evaluation of Action Options

	Time required	Reach	Effectiveness
Outdoor education teacher training and seminars.	Medium	Medium	Medium
Collaborating with supporting nonprofits or community organizations.	High	Low	High
Collaborating with other site teachers who practice outdoor education.	Medium	Low	Medium

Outdoor Education Teacher Training and Seminars

Throughout the interviews, time was a recurring issue that was expressed by teachers. Outdoor education is not a traditional learning method that is being implemented into daily instruction. Computer programs (coding) for example takes up a lot of time, while it has its merits, it decreases a teacher's time to learn other forms of instruction, it then becomes difficult to have teachers who have not experienced what learning outdoors feels like, know how to properly integrate it in a way that is relevant to their instruction for that day (J.R, personal communication, March 17, 2021). Taking the time to learn how to plan lessons that include using the environment, was noted as requiring time to do so comfortably and confidently. The literature indicates that if outdoor education opportunities are explicitly integrated into a teacher's curriculum, then worries about not covering the material in time decrease (Palavan et al., 2016). Teachers are constantly having to work against time to cover learning requirements.

As a result, after examining both the literature and interview data, the action option of outdoor education teacher training and seminars presented itself. Many teacher trainings and some seminars with a focus on outdoor education are provided by community resources, nonprofits, or professional development sessions held by the school. Trainings may allow teachers to share how they practice outdoor education, how they manage their class outdoors, and how they integrate it best as a way of giving pointers to other teachers. The seminars would provide supplemental information on how to further incorporate outdoor education into lessons so that it is applicable to a teacher's instruction. For time, this option requires a medium amount of time because the trainings would extend beyond instruction time. Additionally, the seminars would require that teachers participate in them outside teacher workdays. This option is medium in reach. It is not uncommon for teachers to have trainings during an academic year. By participating in these trainings and seminars, their knowledge on diverse practices that extend beyond a traditional classroom setting would expand. For effectiveness, outdoor education teacher training and seminars would be somewhat effective if teachers choose to attend the seminars in addition to the trainings. By participating in both seminars and trainings then effectiveness could increase because teachers would become better equipped to deliver and incorporate outdoor learning activities into their instruction more confidently.

Collaborating with Supporting Nonprofits or Community Organizations

An already existing model of outdoor education at some schools is sustainable external programs that help establish and create outdoor learning opportunities for teachers and students. Programming reflects developments like school garden projects, outdoor classrooms, and outdoor kitchen projects. Inclusive to these programs are funding opportunities to hire outdoor educators to teach outdoor programming during the school day. A second theme that emerged

was partnering with community organizations that support an outdoor education program. A garden-nutrition educator explained, there are mini-grants to support materials, but that does not sustain a school garden, it is the people that do, working with other nonprofits or community organizations to meet those needs and fund those positions is a more sustainable model (B.M, personal communication, March 24, 2021). Having the opportunity to partner with an organization that offers an outdoor learning program can allow for an increase in outdoor education efforts. The literature highlights this theme by indicating, lots of schools within urban areas are unable to provide outdoor education efforts without the aid of community organizations (Farrell & Liu, 2020). Although this theme emerged repeatedly across the interviews, a complication was duly noted. A garden-nutrition educator who collaborates with community organizations explained, there are not enough community resources at this time, to be able to establish a school garden project at every school (B.M, personal communication, March 24, 2021). Having insufficient resources can impact outdoor education efforts.

The action option of collaborating with supporting nonprofits or community organizations presented itself. If schools collaborate with community organizations, then opportunities for outdoor learning increase because of a tailored program offered for that school's population. Collaborating with a supporting nonprofit or community organization would require an immense amount of time. It requires a lot of time for a partnership to build, mature, and develop momentum. In terms of reach, it would be low, as a result of limited schools having access to partnership opportunities. What criteria are used to pick which schools are a good fit could create implications. For effectiveness, this option would be high, as a result of the supporting organizations helping develop consistency. Consistency is correlated to an increase in outdoor education-based learning being utilized. The partnership would allow for an outdoor

educator to be hired, therefore an increase in outdoor learning is to be expected because of the frequency of outdoor lessons being implemented regularly. Teachers would also benefit from community partner resources like trainings that would help teach them how to integrate the environment into their lessons, increasing the overall effectiveness of the action option.

Collaborating with Other Site teachers who Practice Outdoor Education

The third theme that emerged was teacher support among one another. Almost all participants touched on the importance of being able to connect and observe other teachers who regularly practice outdoor education, as a way of familiarizing themselves with this method. If they have other teachers who are really effectively practicing outdoor education, coach them and give them pointers, that would be great (C.M, personal communication, March 24, 2021).

Collaborating with another site teacher who utilizes outdoor education during their instruction would provide an overall feel of what outdoor education is, how lessons are delivered, and the unexpected learning moments that the environment presents. One teacher shares her experience when she states, “I have offered to go with other classes with the other teacher and just sort of show them what we do and how I set up, you know communication and safety and all of that. So I think doing that could be helpful for the first time to break through some of that anxiety” (J.R, personal communication, March 17, 2021). Observing site teachers who engage in outdoor education provides a visual representation. It is important to note that no literature was found discussing site teachers collaborating with one another towards outdoor education efforts in traditional schooling. I would hypothesize that this exists because a traditional classroom is a custom to 17-34 students with one teacher. Not 60 students with two teachers. Having joint classes is not common to conduct outdoor education, in fact, having joint classes is not commonly used.

After examining both the literature and interview data, the action option of collaborating with other site teachers who practice outdoor education presented itself. This option does require a medium measurement of time. Teachers would have to mutually agree on a time that works for both of them, in order for this to occur. One of two situations would occur, which requires time. The first being that two teachers take both of their classes out at the same time or the second being that one teacher would have to step away from their class to go and observe how another teacher facilitates outdoor learning. An alternative to this would be if teachers recorded their lesson and then shared it with other site teachers who wanted to learn more about this approach. For reach, this option measures a medium criteria, reflecting how reasonable the action is. Depending on factors like classroom management, class size, and availability the reasonableness of this action will vary. Considering that teachers also have a lot to cover, the action may not be reasonable for their agendas. For effectiveness, this action is a medium measurement. Having close proximity to someone who is engaged with outdoor education can increase the observing teacher's outdoor activity efforts as a result of what is being modeled.

Recommendation

Of all three action options given above, I recommend that having outdoor education teacher training and seminars along with collaborating with supporting nonprofits or community organizations would be most appropriate. Based on the literature and the data collected in the interview process, I am confident that these two options are the best way that teachers can increase outdoor education opportunities into their instruction. This section will discuss the concessions, limitations, and possible negative outcomes that this action option may entail.

Concessions. While I chose outdoor education teacher training and seminars along with collaborating with supporting nonprofits or community organizations as the best options, the

remaining third option has considerable strengths as well. For example, collaborating with teachers who practice outdoor education can provide familiarity because of commonly shared resources and guidance that the experienced teacher has in using the surrounding environment. Further, if collaborating teachers, both teach the same grade then this provides context for the observing teacher. Inclusive to this is how to implement lessons that engage the environment, how to cover standards, and how to meet curriculum for the same grade level. Finally, this option also creates an environment where teachers support one another, and facilitate learning that engages the outdoors for a shared community of their students. Undoubtedly, this action option has noteworthy strengths that offer outdoor education opportunities.

Limitations. While choosing outdoor education teacher training and seminars along with collaborating with supporting nonprofits or community organizations as my recommended options, there are still limitations to note about each of these options. For example, time is always a factor that will be working against teachers. Although teachers would be participating in outdoor education training during school time, the seminars would require that they invest personal time to participate in these supplemental workshops to strengthen their knowledge. When collaborating with supporting nonprofits or community organizations a limitation to consider is the need for constant communication between the school and community partner. Communication is needed to successfully meet the outdoor education goals that both partners aim to reach. This may require that time is set aside so that teachers, administration, and community organizations effectively communicate. Resulting in teachers and educators having to invest time outside of instructional time.

Potential negative outcomes. Aside from my recommendations being the best choices to implement, there are potential negative outcomes that are important to consider. One negative

outcome to consider would be a teacher's personal interest in subject matters or learning methods. If teachers are not passionate about outdoor education and the learning that it facilitates, they may be unwilling, disinterested, or find participating in trainings and seminars of little value. In addition to this, little interest can affect a teacher's efforts in conducting lessons that involve using the environment. As for the action option of collaborating with supporting nonprofits or community organizations, a potential negative outcome is funding opportunities that could decrease programming efforts that have been established. A big component of collaborating with partnerships is funding to sustain outdoor education efforts. If those funding opportunities lessen, this may threaten the existence of projects like school gardens or outdoor classrooms affecting learning opportunities and the resources that they provide for a school.

Conclusion

Despite all the noted limitations or potential negative outcomes, my recommendation of outdoor education teacher training and seminars along with collaborating with supporting nonprofits or community organizations still stand strong as ways to increase outdoor education opportunities that involve using the environment for instruction. A combination of both these action options would allow for more consistent outdoor education opportunities to occur. These action options would allow for teachers to familiarize themselves with a non-traditional tool that is a more sensory engaging experience for students. Respectfully teachers have to cover standards and curriculum using different teaching methods, which expose their students to different learning tools. It is for that reason that teachers have the ability to facilitate learning using nature and the environment as a learning tool. This will benefit the differing types of learners. I can attest to this statement. As a young student, I was a kinesthetic learner and benefited immensely from hands-on learning like handling compost, growing my own carrots,

using solar energy to heat something, etc. These were the learning opportunities I remember the most, those that involved the outdoors. This action option will force teachers to remember their purpose in being able to supplement and accommodate different types of learners. Along with being able to practice methods that engage students more moving forward.

Action Documentation and Critical Reflection

The focus issue that is being addressed in the following Capstone Project is, how can teachers increase outdoor education opportunities during instruction. It is vital that teachers create learning opportunities that engage nature and the environment as a learning tool. Failure to provide outdoor learning experiences restricts learning opportunities that supplement different types of learners. After researching the literature and conducting interviews with one garden-nutrition educator, one fourth-fifth grade science teacher, and one fourth grade teacher, three actions emerged. The first action is outdoor education teacher training and seminars. The second action is collaborating with supporting nonprofits or community organizations. The third and final option was collaborating with other site teachers who practice outdoor education. From the research and literature, outdoor education teacher training and seminars along with collaborating with a supporting nonprofit or community organization were the two recommended actions. These two actions would be the most effective at helping create sustainable forms of outdoor education to be utilized long term. Teachers would become well equipped to deliver lessons that engage the environment through training and seminars. Additionally, collaborating with supporting organizations would help create stability in using outdoor learning opportunities regularly during a school day.

Action Research Project Documentation and Reflection

The action that was conducted for this Capstone Project included connecting with community organizations that offer teacher trainings with a focus on outdoor learning. Part of this process included doing research of different organizations to investigate what upcoming opportunities were to be expected. I discovered that a community organization known as *The Blooming Classroom Project* will be having a summer training at home in June that covers outdoor lessons. To become better informed about this opportunity and help provide this information to teachers, I wrote an email to the co-designers who conduct this training (For my action see Appendix A, *Image 1*). Days later, I received a response from this organization that included information on steps that I could take to make teachers aware of this opportunity (See Appendix A, *Image 2*). Having this new information, my next goal was to inform my community partners, their principals, and the superintendent of the school district of this free training opportunity. Therefore, the next step that I took was sending a letter to the superintendent, principal, and teachers (For my action see Appendix B, *Image 3*). The letter would explain the two action options that emerged based on the literature and conducted interviews, on ways that outdoor education opportunities have the potential to increase. The intent of this letter is to draw awareness of the upcoming teacher training opportunity and how to participate. Additionally, the letter would provide extra community resources that partner with schools to help establish outdoor learning programs and support these efforts. Inclusive to these resources are community organizations where schools can apply to be awarded grants to sustain and support outdoor education efforts that make this learning method accessible at school sites.

One of the most surprising factors I discovered was the number of community resources that exist to support outdoor learning efforts. What derives from this, is a matter of learning how to bridge schools with these organizations that create learning experiences outdoors. One of the

modifications that I had to make was who I wanted my letter to reach. Initially, I decided that I would send my letter to my community partners and their school sites. However, I came to a conclusion that in order to reach a larger audience, my letter should be sent to the superintendent, so that outdoor education is a learning pedagogy that receives recognition and awareness from the top down. So far I have received a response from the co-designers on manners to reach more teachers. However I have not heard back from the superintendent, nor the principals addressed. One thing I wish that I had known from the start, is how important external support is needed to help develop and sustain outdoor education efforts inside schools. That information would have provided me with different vantage points, especially for teachers who are conducting outdoor education in underrepresented schools, inclusive of one of the school sites where my research was conducted. Looking forward, the next important steps are the continuation of drawing awareness for teachers and schools, by connecting them with supporting organizations to help make more outdoor education feasible. From this experience, I have learned how vital teamwork is needed to create opportunities that engage the environment to be viable and existent. In order to work towards change, having more outdoor learning experiences extends beyond one teacher's efforts. Instead it requires collaboration for more equitable experiences to reach more students.

Synthesis and Integration

My experience as a student at California State University Monterey Bay has been one of the most challenging, rewarding, and meaningful opportunities that I have experienced thus far. Being an undergraduate student has allowed me to develop academically and grow professionally into the future teacher that I aim to be for my community and future students. The required Liberal Studies major learning outcomes (MLOs) and this action research project have impacted and prepared me in my professional development. For example, MLO 1: Developing

Educator, has prepared me to think, write and speak critically with the focus on my Capstone Project as a California public educator in different context settings. Developing this project presented me with the unique opportunity to communicate and build relationships with community partners, who are directly involved in education systems. Second, MLO 4: Social Justice Collaborator, has equipped me to become an ethically and socially responsible educator working toward a just and sustainable world. By collaborating with community partners, I was able to connect with organizations that strive for the sustainability of using the outdoors for learning and developmental purposes. This includes advocating for access and equity to these learning opportunities in public education. Last, MLO 5: Subject Matter Generalist, allowed me to recognize my capability of being able to complete a coherent depth of study which required a close examination of the data collected and literature analyzed. In order to become the professional that I envision to be, I believe that I need to continue to become aware of how the discussed learning pedagogy gets implemented in schools. It is necessary that I continue to build a relationship and become involved with supporting organizations. Given the opportunity to volunteer at a local outdoor education program, would help better equip me to implement this method as a future educator. My participation would create self-awareness for this specific teaching method that I want my future students to engage with because it will involve the community they will interact with and the world they will contribute to. As a future educator, it will be my responsibility to facilitate learning opportunities that supplement different types of learners, which may just be one step away from them reaching their full potential. This may well be the need to step outside of the traditional classroom with four walls.

References

- Allen, M. (2016). *Benefits of implementing outdoor education curriculum for elementary schools students with nature deficit disorder*. Capstone projects and master theses. California State University Monterey Bay.
- Farrell, P.O., & Liu, H.L. (2020). *Gateway to Outdoors: Partnership and Programming of Outdoor Education Centers in Urban Areas*. *Education Sciences*, 10(11), 340.
<https://doi.org/10.3390/educsci10110340>
- Gilakjani, A.P. (2011). Visual, auditory, kinaesthetic learning styles and their impacts on english language teaching. *Journal of Studies in Education*, 2(1), 104.
[DOI: 10.5296/jse.v2i1.1007](https://doi.org/10.5296/jse.v2i1.1007)
- Gilbertson, K., Bates, T., Ewert, A., & McLaughlin, T. (2006). *Outdoor education: Methods and strategies*. Human Kinetics.
- Kenney, J.L., Militana, H.P., & Donohue, M. H. (2003). Helping teachers to use their school's backyard as an outdoor classroom: A report on the watershed learning center program. *Journal of Environmental Education*, 35(1), 18-26.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/00958960309600591>
- Kolb, D.A. (2014). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Pearson Education, Inc.
- Life Lab. (2021, April 11). *Life Lab Science Program*. Retrieved April 11, 2021, from <https://lifelab.org/>
- Louv, Richard. (2008). *Last child in the woods: Saving our children from nature-deficit disorder*. Algonquin books of Chapel Hill.
- Marchant, E., Todd, C., Cooksey, R., Dredge, S., Jones, H., Reynolds, D., Stratton, R., Lyons, R., & Brophy, S. (2019). Curriculum-based outdoor learning for children aged 9-11: A qualitative analysis of pupils' and teachers' views. *PLOS ONE*, 14(5).

- <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0212242>
- Marshall, D. T., Shannon, D. M., & Love, S.M. (2020, September 2). *How teachers experienced the COVID-19 transition to remote instruction*. Phi Delta Kappan.
- <https://kappanonline.org/how-teachers-experienced-covid-19-transition-remote-instruction-marshall-shannon-love/>
- Palavan, O., Cicek, V., & Atabay, M. (2016). Perspectives of elementary school teachers on outdoor education. *Universal Journal of Educational Research*, 4(8), 1885-1893.
- <https://doi.10.13189/ujer.2016.040819>
- Project Learning Tree. (2016, May 9). *Trainings: Professional development*
- <https://www.plt.org/trainings>
- Valentino, E. F. (2016). *The benefits of outdoor education and experiential learning in elementary schools*. Capstone project and master's theses. California State University Monterey Bay.
- Van, J. E., Van, A. E., Mass, J., & Hovinga, D. (2020). Green schoolyards as outdoor learning environments: Barriers and solutions as experienced by primary school teachers. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 10, 2919–2919. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02919>
- Warner, R.P., & Dillenschneider, C. (2019). Universal design of instruction and social justice education: Enhancing equity in outdoor adventure education. *Journal of Outdoor Recreation, Education, and Leadership*, 11(4), 320.
- <https://doi.org/10.18666/JOREL-2019-VII-I4-9582>
- Webb, T. (2004). *Action conversations: Asking strategic questions in conversational style as a "tool" for developing community and social action projects, and the evaluation of these Projects*. Perusall. Centre of Popular Education: University of Technology Sydney.

Appendix A

Image 1. Communication sent via email to the co-designers of the organization, The Blooming Classroom Project.

Sandra Anaya-Zamora <sanayazamora@csumb.edu>
to [redacted] ☆ ↶ ⋮

Good afternoon [redacted]

My name is Sandra Anaya. I am an undergraduate student at California State Monterey Bay University. I am currently doing a senior capstone project. The topic that I am writing about is outdoor education. The goal is to investigate how teachers locally (I live on the central coast in California) can increase outdoor learning opportunities into their instruction. As part of my project, I collected data from interviews that were conducted with teachers and educators at local elementary schools. The interviewees shared that having teacher trainings is one of the ways that would help facilitate more outdoor education opportunities. Analyzing the data that I collected, my goal is to connect teachers locally with teacher training opportunities that are offered through community resources.

I learned that the organization [redacted] which you are a part of will be having a *summer training at home* opportunity that is free to any teachers or educators with the focus being "to share technical teaching, cooking, and gardening skills, and also to build community and connections among educators". Having this information, I would like to ask, if there is an informational flyer or method of communication that provides more information about this training? So that as a messenger, I could make more local teachers aware of this opportunity?

Please let me know if you have any questions. Thank you for your time. I appreciate it.

Sincerely,
Sandra Anaya

Image 2: Communication response via email, received back from the co-designers who conduct the outdoor education training.


Hi Sandra,

Thank you for reaching out and for offering to help us reach more teachers! Here is a link to [our website](#) and a [blog post](#) with information about our *Summer Training at Home*. We will send out a newsletter on May 12th with more information and registration links for the program. You can [subscribe to our newsletter here](#) if you haven't already. We'll also have some posts on social media shortly that will encourage folks to visit our website and learn more about this free professional development opportunity. Feel free to share any of the above or repost anything on our social media. I hope that these are helpful to you in spreading the word. Thank you again for helping spread the word!

Please let me know if you have any questions or want any additional information!
Best,
[redacted]

[redacted]
Senior Program Manager, Co-designer of [redacted]

Office: [redacted] Bite



Consider making a [gift](#) in celebration of our 25th year!

Appendix B

Image 3: Letter to the superintendent, principal and teachers.

To the Superintendent, Principal and Teachers:

I would like to begin this letter by saying thank you to the teachers and educators that allowed me to conduct my research at your school site. Your knowledge and expertise in engaging with outdoor education has provided me with rich insights. The data collection focused on ways of increasing outdoor learning opportunities into a teachers instruction. Upon reviewing the data collected and literature analyzed, I would like to share some different themes that have emerged, which I believe would help increase outdoor learning opportunities. The intent of this letter is to share local outdoor programming resources with your teachers in hopes that it serves as a resource to increase learning opportunities that engage the environment for your school population.

While conducting my data collection, almost all teacher participants noted the importance of having adequate teacher training that integrates using the environment as a tool. The teachers stated that they would feel more confident and comfortable, using outdoor education if training occurred. The theme of outdoor education teacher training and seminars presented itself to support this topic. Another expressed option that teachers and educators stated was collaborating with supporting nonprofits or community organizations. The opportunity of collaborating with these organizations, would allow for an outdoor educator to be hired and for a tailored program to be brought into a school. These programs could look like school garden projects, outdoor classrooms, outdoor kitchens, etc.

From my understanding this school district already has some elementary schools that collaborate with a supporting organization. Keeping this in mind, my goal is to make more schools aware of these partnerships to help increase outdoor education efforts. Inclusive to many of these partnerships are opportunities to have teacher trainings and develop an outdoor program. Down below I have included [The blooming classroom](#), community resource, who will be having a free summer training in June. The focus of this training is learning how to utilize an outdoor garden space. I contacted the co-designs and was informed that teachers can subscribe to the newsletter that will be published on May 12. By subscribing to the newsletter, [subscribe to newsletter here](#), participants will receive information and registration links to this program.

I have also included the names of two other community resources who support schools that would like to develop outdoor programming. For example, [Sunflower Garden Project](#) has applications that schools can fill out to reward them with grants that help support outdoor classrooms. Green Gates is another resource that schools and teachers can connect with as a way of developing momenting towards outdoor education efforts or having professional development opportunities.

In conclusion, I would like to say thank you for being a part of my project. I hope after reading my letter, more teachers will be aware of the upcoming opportunities and will be inspired to connect with the supporting organizations I have included. Please feel free to take a look at the included resources. If you are interested in connecting with these organizations, they would be more than happy to communicate with your school. Thank you.

Sincerely,

Sandra Anaya

The Sunflower Garden Project

Sunflower Garden Award
Encinitas, California 92024
sunflowergardenproject.org

James Powell & Linda Mill

Co-designers
The Blooming Classroom Project
Berkeley, California 94703
learning@bloomingclassroom.org

- Click to [subscribe to newsletter](#)

David Blench & Janette Wagner

Co-Executive Director(s)
Green Gates
Santa Cruz, California 95064
admin@greengates.org