

Special Issue: Outdoor Play and Learning

## Guest Editor's INTRODUCTION

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It is an interesting time in human history. Being outdoors generally costs nothing and can be extremely pleasurable. Yet outdoor opportunities that were once taken for granted are diminishing (Bhosale, Duncan, & Schofield, 2017; Milteer, Ginsburg, & Mulligan, 2012; Woolley & Griffin, 2015). Rhee (2016) noted that in many Asian regions, preference for more academically oriented activities in early childhood education settings has led to both indoor and outdoor play being sidelined. Outdoors is considered to be riskier and there is still a strong image of real learning occurring indoors. While the value of outdoor play and learning is often acknowledged, many questions remain regarding pedagogies, research approaches, benefits, and even basic definitions. This special issue of Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education contributes to current debate, empirical findings, and recommendations for policy and pedagogy regarding the outdoors.

Studying outdoor play and learning is challenging. Outdoor environments are more difficult to manage and less predictable than indoor environments. Outdoor environments are also difficult to define. While the term "outdoors" evokes images of contact with nature, outdoor areas deemed appropriate for children's play and learning can involve little more contact with nature than would be found indoors. Unpredictable and risky aspects of nature are often replaced with artificial ground cover, purpose-built equipment, and manufactured

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toys. There are no clear definitions of outdoors or guidelines on how outdoor environments in which children are permitted to learn and play are connected to the broader landscape and community. To date, the 'Position Statement on Active Outdoor Play' provides the best overall guidance, covering environmental, attitudinal, and legal concerns as well as promoting the benefits (Tremblay et al., 2015).

Diminished opportunities for urbanized populations have led to normalizing of impoverished natural environments. Small amounts of vegetation may be perceived as a natural environment. This change in perspective over time has been referred to as environmental generational amnesia (Kahn & Weiss, 2017) where there is a loss of understanding of the vastness of nature and the place of humans within nature. Child-initiated approaches to outdoor play and learning are frequently promoted, particularly, in the west. Child-initiation is in contrast to many approaches in cultures and subcultures with a strong connection to land. The following example of learning and teaching from country by an Indigenous Australian elder illustrates this point:

“When the time is right for young children to be taught about certain stories, to be taught how to learn on the land, learn about the history, the time comes when the elder of a clan of the land decides and says it is right for me to go and tell these certain stories about this land to these people” (Guyula, 2010, p. 18).

The Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education is an important forum for discussion of outdoor play and learning. As the journal of the Pacific Early Childhood Education Research Association (PECERA), it has played a central role in identifying some of the conflicting views of play and learning in the Pacific Rim countries (e.g. Grieshaber, 2016). PECERA, through its conferences and local chapters, has been instrumental in facilitating a range of opportunities for understanding play and learning from traditional cultural practices and thinking through to broader international debates. Through conference presentations and visits to centres, PECERA has consistently promoted advancement of understanding of policies and practices in urban and rural settings of the diverse countries within the Pacific Rim. With a global trend for increased urbanization, it is important for scholars to document and understand outdoor play and learning in contexts where there is a close connection with land such as where learning is to respect land is essential to survival.

This special issue includes contributions from New Zealand, Japan, Italy, and Australia. It starts with a study of risk-taking in the New Zealand bush by Bateman and Waters. Their case study highlights how natural environments combined with collaborative approaches between children and teachers can build resilience through problem solving. Aside from contributing to an understanding of the role of collaborative learning in children's development, Bateman and Waters demonstrate the value of qualitative approaches for interrogating the subtleties of outdoor play and learning. Their work raises questions of the connection teachers/educators have with nature. In order to work collaboratively with children, it is important for educators to understand and possibly extend their own connections with nature. The second paper from Italy by Schenetti and Guerra examines educator responses to nature. Their study introduces a new method of heart maps as well as lived-experience descriptions to reveal some of the difficulties experienced by educators that must be understood if children are to benefit from outdoor opportunities.

Moving to two highly quantitative studies, we look first at a large questionnaire study from Japan by Tsujitani, Akita, Kaori, Mariko, and Yuta. The study revealed large variations in centres: the importance placed on the outdoors; whether outdoor play should involve direct or indirect guidance; and considerations for fostering children's stamina and physical skills. Large studies of this type are important for identifying diversity in beliefs and practice and challenging assumptions of homogeneity that are often made about early childhood approaches within countries. Wyver, Bundy, Engelen, and Naughton's study of after-school hours activities in Australia used electronic delivery of short surveys to capture 'what the child is doing now'. With increased availability to electronic devices, it has become easier to capture in-the-moment snapshots of activities rather than relying on onerous observational techniques or retrospective accounts. While this type of method is in the early stages and requires further refinement, it offers a new way of understanding what children do outdoors. Their study shows that children were more active when outdoors and with peers, but that children spent most of their after-school hours in screen time.

Our final paper from O'Sullivan is also in the Australian context. O'Sullivan provides a challenging review of educator perception and use of outdoor spaces for children's learning. She identifies slippages between national curriculum and quality documents and practice. It is interesting to read her review alongside the 'Position Statement on Outdoor Active Play'

(Tremblay et al., 2015). The difficulties experienced by educators would perhaps be reduced by a stronger adoption and implementation of this position statement such as through reducing fear of litigation when accidents occur outdoors.

Papers in this special issue were gathered through an open call for submissions of original articles relating to outdoor play and learning. The articles accepted and included in this issue highlight the importance of significant others, such as educators, siblings, and parents, in outdoor environments. The issue also highlights the importance of use of different and innovative methodologies to tackle research questions on outdoor play and learning.

As guest editor, I hope this issue extends understanding of outdoor play and learning internationally. More importantly, I hope the articles stimulate discussion amongst practitioners and researchers in the Pacific Rim. Success of this special issue will be measured by encouragement of new voices in discussions of outdoor play and learning and new and provocative papers published in the *Asia-Pacific Journal of Research in Early Childhood Education*.

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