DIMENSIONS of Early Childhood

Teaching Outside the Classroom

°

Quality, Safe Outdoor Environments

°

Outdoor Universal Design

°

Learning Inside Out!

Volume 41, Number 3, 2013

Join us in Williamsburg, Virginia for SECA 2014!

Children's Past Present and Future Play

Dr. Elena Bodrova

Friday Keynote

The Importance of Being Playful: The Science of Play and the Practice of Playful Learning

The presentation will focus on the role of make-believe play in the development of children's critical cognitive and social-emotional competencies. New research findings will be discussed as well as the applications of these findings to classroom instruction. Participants will learn about the characteristics that distinguish mature make-believe play and how to support this kind of play in early childhood classrooms.

Dr. Anthony Debenedet

Saturday Keynote

The Art of Roughhousing

"Roughhousing is play, which means that it is done for its own sake, it is joyful and it flows with spontaneity, with improvisation, and without any worries about how we look or how much time is passing by…roughhousing is physical, which means that it integrates our bodies with our brains, and promotes physical fitness, release of tension and well-being." From *The Art of Roughhousing*.

Ellen Galinsky, our SECA 2014 Friend of Children

Friday Keynote

Mind in the Making: What's New?

In her presentation, Ellen will use an interactive approach that is based on research-based principles of adult learning. Participants will be engaged in direct experiences that help them think about their own learning in relation to the seven essential skills. They will see videos of researchers "in action" sharing studies on the same topic, and they will be able to apply what they have learned to their own lives.

Dr. William T. Gormley, Jr.

Public Policy Luncheon

Early Childhood Education Policy: The Implications of the President's Proposal

Over the past several months, President Obama has proposed an ambitious new early childhood education program, funded jointly by the federal government and the states. What exactly would this proposal do? How does it differ from the status quo? What are the arguments for and against the proposal? What does the scientific evidence say about the effectiveness of early childhood education programs generally and the types of programs recommended by President Obama in particular? Finally, what are the prospects for legislative enactment?

SECA 2014

For more information and to register for the conference, go to http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/seca_conference.php

Southern Early Childhood Association

Editor - Stephen Graves
Cover photo courtesy of Our Neighborhood Child Development Center, Charlottesville, VA

Dimensions of Early Childhood

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SECA serves the interests of early childhood educators concerned with child development, including university researchers and teacher educators; early childhood, kindergarten, and primary-grade teachers; and early childhood program administrators and proprietors. The association has affiliates in 13 Southern states. Non-affiliate memberships are available to anyone living outside the 13 affiliate states. For information about joining SECA, contact the executive offices at P.O. Box 55930, Little Rock, AR 72215-5930, (800) 305-7322. Members receive a one-year subscription to *Dimensions of Early Childhood* and discounts on SECA publications and conference registration fees.

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DIMENSIONS of Early Childhood

Volume 41, Number 3, 2013

Refereed Articles

Non-Refereed Articles

Departments

President's Message

Nancy Cheshire

Dear SECA Friends,

As I look out the window today, I see the beautiful West Virginia hills. The sunshine reflects the wonder of trees now glowing with russet, orange, yellow and brown leaves. Autumn has arrived and soon 2013 will come to an end. As this season passes, so does my time as your SECA President. I appreciate your giving me this leadership opportunity. The accomplishments of your Board of Directors during these past two years have been built on the labors, dreams and foresight of our members from years past. Our previous leaders planted seeds of hope, camaraderie, and professional growth that made SECA the outstanding organization it is today.

I am reminded of a picture book given to me several years ago. It tells the story of an early childhood teacher, Mrs. Spitzer, who started each school year with a packet of seeds that she planted, fed and nurtured. These seeds were the children in her classroom. She watched the seeds sprout, grow and bloom, each in their own beautiful, unique way. Mrs. Spitzer tended her garden of children throughout the year until they moved on to their next teacher. *"But the plants will keep growing, uncurling their stems, stretching their leaves outward and showing their faces to the sun."* My dream for SECA is that we continue growing, stretching outward and reaching upward!

The SECA Board of Directors shares my desire for SECA to continue to bloom and grow. At the summer Board of Director's Meeting, they stepped forward to begin a new program designed to nurture and encourage future early childhood leaders. The proceeds from the 2013 Silent Auction will be used to initiate the **Janie Humphries Student Leadership Development Fund.** SECA state affiliates can apply for up to $250 annually to enhance student membership and leadership within their states. This amount may also be used as seed money to start a student group. We have the opportunity to encourage our future leaders as they grow and develop strong "roots" in our association.

As I reflect on this exciting new program, I thought of you and wondered if you would also like to help us grow new members and encourage them to bloom into our future leaders. Would you like to help increase the number of students we can nurture? A small donation from individual SECA members would make this possible and would also encourage growth within your state. A five dollar donation would be enough "to sprinkle these new member seeds" with the sunshine of encouragement and hope. If you would like to help tend our new garden of student members, you may do so and watch the miracle of blooming and reaching upwards begin. The SECA Board of Directors has "tilled the soil and planted the seeds" and I know you will want to help "our new student garden" grow and bloom.

Patton, E. (2001). *Mrs. spitzer's garden*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc.

Donation checks for the **Janie Humphries Student Leadership Development Fund** are made payable to SECA and mailed to:

SECA Student Development Fund, PO Box 55930, Little Rock, AR 72215.

Gifts may be designated in honor of an individual who nurtured your professional growth.

Introduction to Outdoor Learning

Donna Thompson, Ph.D. and Susan Hudson, Ph.D

There is an increasing amount of discussion occurring in the early childhood area about the importance of the outdoor environment and the role that it and immersion in nature has in creating quality early childhood programs. But many times, putting into practice what we know should happen, becomes more rhetoric than reality. There are numerous reasons for this, including not really understanding *why* the outdoor environment is important to the overall early childhood experience or *how* to implement the outdoor environment as an integral part of the curriculum planning process. The hope is that the four articles selected for this special edition, will provide early childhood professionals with the necessary information and resources which will allow them to develop a blueprint to implement ideas into action.

Because knowing the "why's" is always important, we will begin the discussion with the *Benefits of Teaching Outside of the Classroom*. In this article, Jacobi-Vessels outlines for us, how early nature play supports children's physical, cognitive, and social development in ways that enhance learning experiences in the classroom. These ideas are further supported in Olsen's article of *Creating and Enriching Quality and Safe Outdoor Environments*, where the author presents a framework on how outdoor spaces can be planned and developed for these opportunities to occur. Harte also elaborates on the methods of designing the outdoor learning space in her article *Universal Design and Outdoor Learning* by providing examples of ways to remove barriers and provide support to children as they engage in outdoor experiences. Finally, bringing the why's and how's together, Monsalvatge, Long, and DiBello describe two programs in Florida in their article, *Turning our World of Learning Inside Out!* that have taken the unique journey in developing meaningful outdoor learning and nature environments for children.

As all the authors note, incorporating nature and the outdoor environment as part of a comprehensive early childhood program can provide unique opportunities to enrich children's play and learning experiences. It also can provide children with an appreciation of the natural beauty of the world throughout their lives. As Jacobi-Vessels asks, "Isn't this worth the effort"? Hopefully, after reading the information contained in these articles, the resounding answer is a yes!

Donna Thompson, PhD., is an acknowledged national and international expert in the field of playground development and safety, and is the executive director of the National Program for Playground Safety. She has more than 20 years experience teaching, writing, and researching about playgrounds. She has done numerous presentations on playground development, including television interviews on ABC's *Good Morning America*, CBS's *Early Edition*, and NBC's *Today* show. She has served as consultant for numerous groups planning playgrounds, and has been an expert witness in trials concerning playground safety.

Susan Hudson, PhD., is also a nationally acknowledged expert in the area of playground safety and is the National Program for Playground Safety Educational Director. She has made numerous presentations nationally and internationally on playground design and safety, and is the author and co-author of over 100 articles concerning playgrounds. Dr. Hudson has held numerous leadership and committee assignments in national professional organizations, including the American Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, and the National Recreation and Park Association. She holds an endowed professorship at the University of Northern Iowa.

Discovering Nature: The Benefits of Teaching Outside of the Classroom

Are there really positive benefits when teachers engage young children in meaningful learning experiences about the natural world outdoors? This article substantiates the positive learning benefits found in research.

Jill L. Jacobi-Vessels

When asked to think about their favorite places to play when they were little, many early childhood teachers tell exciting tales of 'forts' behind bushes, making 'soup' from grass and pine cones, or catching tadpoles in a creek. Some remember quiet moments of solitude watching the clouds drift by or sunlight flickering through the leaves of a tall tree. In spite of fond memories of outdoor play and a desire to support children's development, many early childhood teachers are reluctant to take the class outside.

Teachers who did not spend enjoyable time outdoors when little may be even more hesitant to open the classroom door and explore the great outdoors. Some teachers do not feel that they know enough to be effective when teaching about the outdoors, and others avoid going out because they dislike getting dirty or being too hot or cold themselves (Copeland, Kendeigh, Saelens, Karkwarf, & Sherman, 2012). Smearing on sunscreen and putting on coats and hats is a lot of work. Is it really worth the effort?

Nature play sets the stage for lifelong approaches to learning.

Benefits of Nature Play to Children

Nature play can be an effective teaching strategy across the curriculum and may provide children and teachers with lasting memories. While a little hesitance to open the classroom door may be understandable, the rewards of class time spent with nature clearly outweigh the drawbacks. Research shows that experiences in natural settings provide multiple benefits to young children including increased physical activity, reduced obesity, and improved concentration and enhanced social skills.

Physical Benefits

It can be very difficult for working parents to find the time or energy to engage in active play with their children. Dinner and laundry do not take care of themselves, but still must be done after a hard day at work. Children's television programming may be a very tempting distraction tool. It is important, however, to know that patterns of active or sedentary behaviors begin to form as early as infancy and that early television viewing habits carry over to preschool and beyond (Certain & Kahn, 2002). Television viewing is sedentary by nature and has been linked with reduced bone mass in children, which may lead to more frequent fractures (Wosje, Koury, Claytor, Copeland, Kalkwarf, & Daniels, 2009).

Sedentary behavior may contribute to obesity. In spite of heightened awareness, obesity is a growing concern in this country and the prevalence of being overweight in young children continues to rise (Ogden, Carroll, Curtin, McDowell, Tabak, & Flegal, 2006; Sherry, Mei, Scanlon, Mokdad, & Grummer-Strawn, 2004). The good news is that regular physical activity reduces the health risks associated with being overweight. In fact, overweight individuals who are physically active have lower health risks than those with normal weight who are not active (Blair & Brodney, 1999). The message is clear, children need to get up and move.

Photo courtesy of GLOBE/Pre-K, Phoenix Magnet Elementary School, Alexandria, LA

Children's curiosity can be a tool to help them develop scientific inquiry, a focused and systematic approach to observation, documentation and investigation.

Childcare center practices have a strong influence on children's overall level of physical activity (Finn, Johannsen, & Specker, 2002). One might hope that children would have time for active physical play while at childcare. Unfortunately, preschoolers spend as much as 89% of their time in childcare engaged in sedentary activities. (Brown, Pfeiffer, McIver, Dowda, Addy, & Pate, 2009; Sugiyama, Okely, Masters, & Moore, 2012). Is it truly developmentally appropriate to ask a preschooler to sit still for 89% of the day?

Children are intrinsically motivated to move when given extended playtime in settings that are abundant with plant and animal life. In a two- year study, Bell, Wilson, & Liu (2008) found that children who lived in greener neighborhoods were less likely to gain in body mass index than children who lived in neighborhoods with less vegetation. The outdoors, where curiosity and nature invite children to rush from log to anthill and back again, is an ideal setting for children's physical development.

Many American playgrounds offer climbing equipment, slides cushioned by layers of mulch or rubber, sandboxes, and wheeled toys. Some playgrounds, however, are missing the greener ingredient. Outdoor play spaces with ample vegetation may actually increase the amount of physical activity over that of the typical commercially produced playground structures planted in a barren surface (Trost, Ward, & Senso, 2010). Rocks and hills tempt children to climb or race to the top while using muscles to balance and adjust to uneven terrain. Fjortoft (2001) found that the rocks and slopes in a nearby forest provided Norwegian kindergarten children frequent balance and coordination challenges. Indeed, the children who played in the forest had better motor skills than the children who spent their time on the traditional playground.

Cognitive Benefits

Approximately half of American preschool children do not have an opportunity to play outside under parent supervision each day (Tandon, Zhaou, & Christakis, 2012). Finding an appropriate place to play can be challenging. Parents who live in urban neighborhoods may not let their children play outdoors in an effort to protect them from neighborhood safety issues (Farley, Meriwether, Baker, Watkins, Johnson, & Webber, 2007; Kalish, Banco, Burke, & Lapidus, 2010; Molnar, Gortmaker, Bull, & Buka, 2004). Many young children now spend the hours that used to be spent playing whole-neighborhood 'hide and seek' watching television and playing video games. This migration from playing in the yard to playing a video game has led to what Richard Louv (2005) calls 'Nature Deficit Disorder'. While this is not a medical diagnosis, Louv points to the increase in childhood depression, obesity, and shortened attention spans as products of lost time communing with nature.

Children need to get up and move.

While running and jumping on playground equipment keeps children moving, exposure to plant and animal life has great rewards. The cognitive benefits of sustained outdoor play in plant rich environments spill over into the classroom, providing children with increased attention after they go back inside (Holmes, Pelegrini, & Schmidt, 2006). Indeed, Faber Taylor and Kuo (2009) found that a twenty-minute walk in the park increased the attention of 7-to12-year-old children with ADHD more than a twenty-minute walk downtown or through a neighborhood. They suggested that "doses of nature" may be a safe and inexpensive tool for helping children with ADHD. In a similar study, children in the Netherlands with ADHD showed greater concentration skills

when in the woods than they did when visiting a nearby town (Van den Berg & Van den Berg, 2010). In a U.S. nationwide study, parents of children diagnosed with ADHD reported the effects of different types of leisure activities on their children's symptoms. The children showed fewer symptoms after play in green natural settings than after playing indoors or on installed playgrounds. (Faber Taylor & Kuo, 2009; Kuo & Faber Taylor 2004).

According to Howard Gardner (1999), knowing about nature is an intelligence of its own. Gardner added naturalistic intelligence to his theory of multiple intelligences. Naturalistic intelligence includes the ability to identify plants and animals and their relationships with other parts of the environment and to understand one's own relationship to other living things. By fostering naturalistic intelligence, we help children become stewards of the environment. Teachers support the development of naturalistic intelligence by providing early and frequent exposure to local plants and wildlife. Such exposure helps children establish respect for living things and the natural world around them (Wilson, 1993).

Teachers can use children's curiosity about nature to help them develop scientific inquiry, a focused and systematic approach to observation, documentation, and investigation. Scientific inquiry involves several stages, including wonder and exploration, taking action, extending and clarifying questions, searching for patterns and relationships, and sharing ideas (Chalufour & Worth, 2003; Worth & Grollman, 2003) and is evident in many forms of children's nature play. Children are intrinsically motivated to observe, examine, compare, and experiment when faced with unknown plants, animals, and physical environments. During nature play, children take in a wide variety of information that is not available indoors. They use all of their senses as they explore and create in outdoor settings. They may see a lizard scamper under a rock, smell the rain, hear squirrels chastise them from the tree tops, stroke the soft surface of a dandelion, or taste tomatoes ripe from the vine.

Social/Emotional Benefits

Nature play provides rich fodder for young imaginations, growing vocabularies, and budding social skills as children negotiate themes and scenarios and settle disputes. Children rather than teachers often direct nature play, thus building a sense of competence and collaboration. The Nature Action Collaborative for Children (NACC) provides universal principles for connecting children with nature. According to NACC, children should 'be respected as competent, powerful learners and risk-takers who have a voice in what they create and learn through nature.

Teachers who provide nature play set the stage for lifelong approaches to learning. When they encourage children to investigate, ask questions, and seek solutions, children begin to trust their own ideas. In early childhood classrooms, everything has its purpose and place. Unit blocks and foam bricks are for building in the block area. Scissors, glue, and paint are for masterpieces created in the art area. While the structure and predictability of the classroom meets many of the needs of children, nature play offers different and important experiences for children that include real and open-ended objects (Talbot & Frost, 1989).

Children experience stress and irritability for many reasons and often struggle to find socially acceptable ways to relieve strong emotions. Reading in the shade of a tree or tending flowers in the sunshine can provide children with a sense of peace and freedom that they cannot

Photo courtesy of Dora L. Lewis Family & Child Development Center, Richmond, VA

Block play is not just an indoors activity. Creative use of natural materials to provide building materials can be an innovative approach to a traditional activity.

necessarily find indoors. Frustrations with friends who would not share may melt away when the classroom door opens. In his book, *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv states that children "bring the confusion of the world to the woods and wash it in the creek" (Louv, 2005, p. 7).

Many early childhood teachers seek to instill in children a sense of belonging not only within the classroom but also in the community and the world. Nature play provides hands-on opportunities to teach children to care about other people, living things, and their environments. Personal interactions with nature help children develop a caring and respectful attitude for all living things (Basile & White, 2000). Children who know and value the plants and creatures around them may be more likely to personally find ways to protect and preserve the environment (Blanchard & Buchanan, 2011).

Photo courtesy of Westlake United Methodist Preschool, Austin, TX

Teachers play an important role by helping children connect with nature. A positive attitude and modeled curiosity can go a long way.

Making Nature Play Part of Every Day

Research provides clear evidence that taking the class outside into green spaces is worth the effort. Opening the door to nature play is not as difficult as it may seem. Taking one step at a time rather than climbing the whole mountain will make the journey enjoyable for all. The following sections provide some ideas to make the adventure as smooth as possible.

Finding Time for Nature

In childcare centers, outdoor time is often scheduled with little opportunity to spend extra time because other classes are waiting for their time to use the playground space. How then can teachers give children in-depth opportunities to explore nature with the time and resources available? It is helpful to remember that there is more out there than the fenced-in playground.

Many of the same activities can take place both indoors and outdoors.

If a center is fortunate enough to be located near a field or small woods, it has a ready-made, cost-free location for play. Teachers who work in urban areas may feel that nature is not available to them yet cities abound with pigeons, worms, and squirrels. Regular walks through the neighborhood or visits to a nearby park provide ample opportunities to discover nature's best. We simply need to be attuned to the dandelions forcing their way through the cracks in the sidewalk and other instances of nature in the city. Many neighborhoods are home to dedicated yard gardeners who are happy to talk about their hobby. Teachers and children can enhance their own nature environment by planting a tree on the playground or tending container gardens.

Bringing the Indoors out and the Outdoors in

Viewing animals up close can be fascinating and exciting. Feeding stations such as birdfeeders and corn trays for squirrels are relatively inexpensive and bring nature to the classroom window. When children learn that the red birds are cardinals and the brown ones are sparrows they may search for the names of other birds that they encounter at the feeder and enthusiastically share their newfound knowledge with friends and family. Because the birds are local, the children are more likely to see them repeatedly and apply what they learn in other settings.

Outdoor spaces lend themselves easily to many of the same activities that take place in the classroom. Children may enjoy reading books on a blanket on the grass, writing and drawing in nature journals to document the growth in the garden,

or painting the shadows cast by a tree. Adding portable play equipment that is typically used indoors to the playground can increase the level of physical activity (Hartle, 1996; Kreichauf, Wildgruber, Krombholz, Gibson, Voegele, & Nixon, 2011). Block building may take on new meaning outdoors, especially when the typical unit blocks or waffle blocks are supplemented with rocks and natural pieces of wood. A container of magnifying glasses, plastic jars with holes in the lids, binoculars, and trowels can lead to in-depth exploration and discovery. With a little brainstorming and creativity, all types of indoor learning centers can be transferred to the outdoors. Meals and even naps can be successfully conducted outside (Torquati, Gabriel, Jones-Branch, & Miller, 2011).

Teacher engagement when children are outdoors increases their activity levels and enhances learning (Trost, Ward, & Senso, 2010). A positive teacher attitude and modeled curiosity can go a long way toward encouraging children to explore the world around them. Teachers play an important role by helping children connect with nature and by providing ongoing and active support of children's learning (Dowdell, Graya, & Malone, 2011).

Teachers can encourage children's familiarity with nature by bringing items from outdoors into the classroom. Tending indoor plants gives children additional opportunities to build a sense of responsibility and to care for living things. Being the plant waterer for the day is a job with real value that children recognize. An acrylic fish tank is a fairly simple and low-maintenance addition that may hold a variety of creatures such as fish, snails, or hermit crabs. If children find a living creature outside and, with teacher permission, bring it into the classroom, they should be taught to understand what the creature needs for survival so that they can temporarily meet those needs. After a short visit, the creature should be released so that it can thrive and children learn to do no harm. Because it is native to the area, the creature will likely survive after release and will not harm the local ecology (Hachey & Butler, 2012).

Teacher engagement with children outdoors enhances learning.

Thoughts on Safety

Appropriate supervision and teacher interaction is just as important outside as inside. Teachers should place themselves strategically to ensure that children remain within both line of sight and range of voice. Simple precautions and common sense will reduce the risk of illness and injury. Teachers should remove hazardous or broken materials. They should also know the local flora and fauna so that they are able to identify and avoid hazards such as a large patch of poison ivy. A well-equipped first aid kit and a cellular phone are important nature adventure tools and should always be with the teacher.

Teachers must take weather conditions into consideration when deciding whether or not to go outside. Be aware of extreme heat or cold and of possible air quality advisories. In summer, it may be possible to spend a little time outdoors in the morning before it gets too hot. When possible, direct children to play in shady areas as they reduce sun exposure and increase physical activity (Boldeman, Blennow, Dal, Martensson, Raustorp, Yuen, & Wester, 2006). Even when adventuring in shady spaces, sunscreen is an important precaution for all children.

Winter presents different challenges. Some teachers are reluctant to go outdoors when it is cold but children may not get to play outside at all if the class does not go out. Short days in winter mean that it is often dark when children arrive for care and dark when they leave. Making a snowman and watching icicles drip are adventures not to be missed. Bundling up in appropriate clothes and waiting until the sun has had time to warm things up a bit will help keep everyone comfortable and having fun.

It is important to ensure that all plants and animals brought into the classroom pose no risk to children and are allowed by regulation and policy. Plants such as amaryllis or mistletoe may seem harmless but are actually serious health hazards. Teachers should print lists of nontoxic and toxic plants to take along when shopping and post them in the classroom to raise the awareness of others. Care is also necessary when selecting animals to be brought into the classroom. Well-intended donations must also be reviewed for safety. Years ago, a parent offered to donate tropical fish to the classroom science center. The fish were actually piranhas and had to find friendly waters elsewhere.

Conclusion

So many of us have forgotten or never known the joys of spending

time with nature. Early childhood teachers are invaluable guides to children's experiences and have a direct impact on development and learning. By giving children frequent opportunities to play outdoors in plant-rich settings, teachers prepare children to recognize, appreciate, and reap the benefits of the natural beauty in our world throughout their lives. We have only to step outside of the classroom door to pique children's curiosity and take learning to a new level. Is it worth the effort of getting the whole class ready to go out? **Yes.** Yes, it is.

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Photo courtesy of Westlake United Methodist Preschool, Austin, TX

Being the "waterer" for the day is an important job that provides an opportunity to build a sense of responsibility.

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In Memorium

Nancy Eubanks Bacot (January 20, 1940-August 30, 2013)

Nancy Bacot served two terms on the SECA Board of Directors (1992-1997) as the representative of the Arkansas Early Childhood Association (AECA). She also served as President of AECA and the Northeast Arkansas Early Childhood Association. She was a member of the SECA Publications Committee for many years. Nancy was dedicated to SECA, was actively involved in the Division for Development Auction each year, her state organization, her local affiliate, and mentored many others as leaders within the organization. She will be greatly missed.
From her colleagues at Arkansas State University

Nancy Bacot was a mentor, friend, and role model to so many in SECA and AECA! She gave me strength and encouragement when I needed it and laughed with me in good times. She was a southern lady who represented SECA well, worked hard to improve quality programs for young children and families, and enjoyed being a Fossil tremendously! Dianne Lawler

From Her Colleagues Throughout the South:

- *She was such a lady and so well spoken.* Suzanne Gellens, Executive Director of Florida AEYC
- *What a lovely person and kind soul.* Dr. Pam Schiller, Past President of SECA
- *She was one of the first people I met when I became the TN Rep to the SECA Board. She was very special and will be missed.* Kathy Ennis, Former SECA Board Member from Tennessee
- *Nancy was truly a Southern belle of SECA.* Beverly Clayton Oglesby, Past SECA President
- *Nancy was a special lady and will be missed by so many people. She took me under her wing when I became a member of the SECA Board of Directors and I will always remember her!* Janet Stomer King, Former SECA Board Member from Tennessee

In Memory of

Marianne Leonard (mother of Mary Jamsek)
by Nancy Cheshire

Nancy Bacot
by Dr. Milly Cowles

Memorial donations made to SECA will be placed in the Janie L. Humphries Student Leadership Development Fund that will support the development of the next generation of early childhood professionals and leaders.

Creating and Enriching Quality and Safe Outdoor Environments

Can teachers of young children create stimulating and enriching outdoor environments that are also safe? This article will give you lots of excellent suggestions.

Heather Olsen

I was asked to be part of a playground planning committee a few years ago for an early childhood program, called Play Everyday Child Care. Play Everyday Child Care is a non-profit organization, operating under policies set by an independent board of directors. The center's fee-scaling program is supported by a local United Way. Play Everyday Child Care is located in a middle class community of 9,800 community members. The program was licensed for 140 children ages birth through five years and the program is open from 6 a.m. until 6 p.m., five days a week, throughout the year.

The planning committee had a diverse mix of staff including the center director, one teacher from every classroom, two support staff members, one parent who had a child with cerebral palsy, a board member, and myself (the independent consultant). When I arrived to the first meeting, it was obvious that each person was truly excited about the future of Play Everyday Child Care.

The first statement of the planning meeting was from the director who proceeded to tell the committee that the new building proposal for the center was passed for a projected $3 million. Then, the director said, "I asked you all here today so we could design the playground." My response-"Does the program have a budget for the playground?" The director replied, "No. Honestly, we haven't discussed the playground up until today."

As can be interpreted from the playground planning committee, fortunately, outdoor spaces in early childhood programs play an important role in the daily schedule. In fact, the outdoor environment plays a vital role for young children as the space can help in the physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development of all children. Unfortunately, the outdoor space is often the last area that is discussed or planned into curriculum. The opening story is too often familiar with early childhood programs. The outdoor space is an after- thought. Play Everyday Child Care had spent close to three years planning and seeking approval for the new building and location, but did not even discuss the outdoor space.

Our Discussion

Myself: "Do you believe that when children are at your program from 6 am to 6 pm, they are learning?"

Committee Members: "Yes"

Myself: "Does staff strive for a quality and safe environment when the children are here during the 12 hours you are open?"

Committee Members: "Yes"

Myself: "How much time is allocated for children to be outside?"

Committee Members: "3 ½ hours"

Myself: "Applause to the staff because that is about 30% of the day. Does the program believe children are learning when they are outside?"

Committee Members: "Yes"

Myself: "Does the program want to provide a quality and safe outdoor environment?"

Committee Members: "Yes"

Myself: "Since the program has a $3 million building project approved and the program spends 30% of time each day outside…and, the committee agreed that children learn outside….and the committee believes the outdoor playground is part of the program, **then I am projecting a $900,000 outdoor classroom**."

Committee Members: (a long silent pause)

Director: "We just don't have that kind of money to put in the playground. But, we definitely want a playground."

Myself: "How about this group places the term "playground" on the shelf and uses the phrase "planning for a quality and safe outdoor learning environment?"

Committee Members: "Great!"

This article highlights early childhood outdoor safety standards and presents a framework for creating quality and SAFE™ outdoor environments in early childhood programs that support children's interest and best practice. The outdoor environment is an extremely important place within early childhood programs. There are endless opportunities for developmentally appropriate practice in the outdoor spaces. Early childhood professionals can use the information and resources to justify the significance of maximizing the outside environment.

Childhood is a time for discovery and learning.

Photo courtesy of Highland Plaza United Methodist Preschool, Chattanooga, TN

Outdoor play spaces should be intriguing and appropriate for young children. They should invite children to discover and learn as they spend time outdoors.

Outdoor Play

Early childhood educators are well aware of the importance of setting aside time for young children to explore outdoors and the value in providing outdoor environments that encourage learning and development. While there has been a recent emergence of getting young children outside and connected to nature, a more comprehensive discussion about what constitutes a quality outdoor play environment is needed. Childhood is a time for discovery and learning. There has been a tremendous amount of literature written about the importance of play and outdoor play for young children. Outdoor play has been observed by researchers and it has been repeatedly stated that playing outdoors encourages children to communicate, to express their feelings, investigate and discover the world around them. It provides opportunities for children to foster all aspects of the child (Clements, 2004; Guddemi, Jambor, & Moore, 1999; Kellert, 2002).

In fact, studies have shown that even small exposures to nature have had positive effects on (1) children's attention (Grahn et al. 1997), (2) reduction of stress levels (Wells & Evans, 2003), and (3) reducing childhood obesity (Liu et al. 2007). Researchers have also raised awareness that when children are given time to be outside they have a chance to make sense of the world (Elkind, 2007). "Nature provides children with an inexhaustible supply of renewable play materials, motivating them to think independently, work together democratically to solve problems, and carry out self-initiated projects, with a sense of pride in their accomplishments". (Moore & Marcus, 2008, 158).

Oftentimes, programs struggle to determine best practice on how to create inspiring and healthy outdoor play areas that create meaningful experiences for young children. Outdoor spaces in early childhood programs need to be more than a cluster of playground equipment and toys scattered throughout the space. Outdoor play areas are the

one special place for children to engage in motor, cognitive, and social skill development because of the spontaneous free play that occurs on the playground (Morgan, 2003). While we all agree outdoor play is important, it is the responsibility of educators to provide safe and quality outdoor spaces that support the early childhood program's goals. Providing safe and quality outdoor spaces begins with understanding the guidelines and regulations. There are several professional organizations that address the professional standards for early childhood outdoor play guidelines and regulations.

Compliance with Outdoor Standards

There are many resources worldwide for information on compliance and meeting standards. Some states have very specific requirements for early childhood programs and set standards that control the operation of the childcare facility. Educators must take guidelines and standards seriously in the beginning of the planning process or future setbacks could occur. A description of the guidelines for early childhood outdoor environments can be reviewed in Table 1.

Design and safety awareness for children's outdoor play areas have come a long way in the last fifty years. In the past, early childhood educators and programs faced a lack of information, but many organizations today have contributed to quality designs that enhance enjoyment and learning. Children, especially young children, deserve to play in a safe, accessible, and appropriate environment which fosters growth and development. Thus, it is critical for all outdoor environments to be planned and managed according to the guidelines and standards.

Table 1. Standards for Early Childhood Outdoor Environments

Organization	Brief Description
American Society for Testing Material (ASTM International)	ASTM International is a private organization whose purpose is to publish voluntary safety standards for many kinds of products. ASTM International has published various standards that influence the design of playground equipment and the manufacturing of playground surfacing materials (F1148, F1292, F355, F1487, F1816, F1918, F1951, F2075, F2223, F2373)
Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC)	CPSC has issued voluntary guidelines for the use of public playgrounds since 1981. The guidelines are published in a handbook called *Public Playground Safety Handbook*.
Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS-R)	This scale has the ability to be very accurate when used in the classroom (indoor and outdoor) for self-assessment or for an outside observer to use to monitor, evaluate, or improve a program. It is designed for programs serving children ages 2 ½ to 5.
Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale (ITERS-R)	This scale has the ability to be very accurate when used in the classroom (indoor and outdoor) for self-assessment or for an outside observer to use to monitor, evaluate, or improve a program. It is designed for programs serving children from birth to 30 months.
National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)	NAEYC has a physical environment standard that addresses the safe and healthful environment that provides appropriate and well-maintained indoor and outdoor physical environments.
National Health and Safety Performance Standards (NHSPS)	NHSPS are published jointly by the American Public Health Association and the American Academy of Pediatrics. The standards are published in *Caring for our Children: National Health and Safety Performance Standards: Guidelines for Out-of-Home Child Care Programs*. These standards address health and safety as an integrated component of child care.

Figure 1. Enriching Early Childhood Outdoor Environments

QUALITY opportunities + S.A.F.E. spaces =

Enriching Outdoor Environments for Young Children

Enriching the Outdoor Environment

Given the important role outdoor spaces play in early childhood programs, their design is often similar to the elementary school model with a traditional approach of installing a composite piece of playground equipment and then offering free time (otherwise known as recess) for children to be outside. Using the recess approach in early childhood education is not best practice for young children because they are not given enough time to reach the full potential of learning, sparking excitement, wonder, and investigation.

Outdoor play areas in early childhood programs should be transformed to quality outdoor learning environments that incorporate opportunities for engagement such as engagement with natural materials and activities for physical movement. With a focus of transforming the "playground" concept to "an outdoor play environment" it is important to recognize that the transformation goes beyond the building, the equipment, and the materials. However, before a program purchases materials and equipment to enrich the outdoor environment, educators must first carefully consider the purpose of the outdoor environment. The transformation should support the philosophical belief of the program, emphasize the importance of child development, and build a sense of community. Understanding the purpose of the space can be accomplished through conversations with the early childhood staff as well as through observations of children during unstructured and structured play.

What is needed is a framework that helps early childhood educators visualize the outdoor play environment. The framework is to provide guidance on enriching the outdoor space to support the operation of the program and enhance the children's experiences. Enriching the outdoor environment involves incorporating QUALITY opportunities and S.A.F.E.™ spaces. Together, providing QUALITY opportunities and S.A.F.E. ™ spaces set the framework for creating enriching outdoor environments for young children (see Figure 1).

As stated previously, a majority of early childhood programs utilize the outdoor space as recess for children to run and burn off steam. But the benefits of the outdoor play environment are more extensive than burning energy and taking "a break" from the indoor curriculum. Making an outdoor space that is purposeful does not necessarily mean a big composite climbing structure but rather should be viewed as an extension of the indoor classroom to support the curricular goals. For instance, if during science children are studying worms, the investigation should be done outside. It does not make sense for children to go outside, collect worms and then bring them back indoors to investigate. Children should be able to explore worms in their natural habitat.

Quality Opportunities in the Outdoor Environment

Quality environments include incorporating the curriculum into the outdoor space. Figure 2 illustrates the meaning of QUALITY outdoor environments. Specifically, creating an outdoor environment that includes materials and activities can support the child's physical, emotional, social, and intellectual development.

Figure 2. QUALITY early childhood outdoor environments

Quality includes having opportunities for children to be engaged with natural play, dramatic play, loose parts, building materials, movement opportunities, and discovery play. Therefore, educators must consider these opportunities that can support curricular goals.

- **Natural play** – Natural play will automatically occur when vegetation and other components of the natural world are incorporated into the design of the outdoor area. Trees and vegetation should be present in all early childhood programs. Moore et al. (1987) indicated landscaping can satisfy the need for shade, wildlife habitat, and sensory variety. Further, it has been noted that plants provide moods, offer seasonal interests, secret places to play and experience with, color, smells, sounds, and natural loose parts such as logs, stumps, stickers, or branches (Keller, 2008). Vegetation and other natural components should be selected that fit the mission and values of the program.
- **Dramatic play** – Children are born with a natural curiosity about the world. It is through

Photo courtesy of BB International Preschool and Kindergarten, Pompano Beach, FL

Quality outdoor play environments encourage children to explore and provide a place for children to engage in motor, cognitive and skill development.

discovery and pretend play that they can learn about themselves, their peers, and their world. Whenever possible discovery play should be present in the outdoor environment. There are many variations that can be designed. For instance, stages, gazebos, decks, and amphitheaters are ideal to encourage pretend play. In addition, storage is critical around outdoor spaces. Tricycle routes, playhouses, mailboxes, gas pumps, and dramatic play vehicles should be added to stimulate pretend play. "Dramatic play props" such as dishes, cash registers, and dress-up clothes should be organized and secure. Several smaller storage units near each play area may work better than a single large storage shed.

- **Loose parts** – Loose parts consist of materials that children can pick up, throw, kick, examine, arrange, and chase. It was stated by two early childhood outdoor designers that loose parts (such as balls and dramatic play materials) make the outdoor play environment complete (Dempsey & Strickland, 1999) and increase physical activity with young children (Hannon & Brown, 2008).
- **Building materials** – Children are imaginative and love to build. The outdoor environment should include materials for children to build. Building materials may include shovels and spoons, blocks, sand and water areas, containers, stones, and sticks.
- **Movement opportunities** – Children need opportunities and environments to move about. Unfortunately, during the past decade there has been an increase in sedentary behavior and a reduction in physical activity with young children. Physical development is often taken for granted because it is assumed it happens automatically. A variety of opportunities for vigorous movement should be present, such as open space for children to gallop, run, or skip. Music outdoors is another tool that can get young children moving.
- **Discovery play** – Children love to discover new materials, equipment, words, and feelings. Incorporating mathematics, literacy, science, and other curricular goals outside encourages discovery play. For instance, life science gives children a chance to closely observe, care for, and enjoy living things. The outdoor environment has physical science when it has manipulative objects such as wheeled-objects, cars, trucks, and wagons, magnets, balls, marbles, paper airplanes, cooking materials, cylinders and spheres, hand pumps, ramps, pathways, levers, balances and weights, floaters/nonfloaters, buckets, and prisms. Earth science can be part of discovery play when children study their surroundings, which is part of their world and the environment.

The outdoor environment should be safe, accessible and appropriate.

S.A.F.E. ™ spaces in the outdoor environment

In addition to providing QUALITY opportunities, the other part of the framework is for early childhood educators to create S.A.F.E.™ spaces. As previously highlighted, providing QUALITY opportunities with S.A.F.E. ™ spaces set the framework for creating enriching outdoor environments for young children.

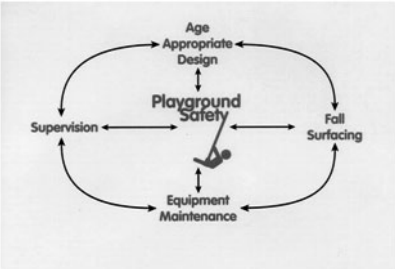
Unfortunately, approximately 218,815 preschool and elementary children each year receive emergency medical treatment for playground-related injuries (O'Brien, 2009).

During the time period (2001-2008) of the injury data, a majority of the injuries (54%) were with young children (ages 0-4). Using this information concerning unintentional playground injuries which is available through the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), the National Program for Playground Safety identified four interactive risk factors (S.A.F.E.™), regarding injuries to children on playgrounds: Supervision, Age- appropriate design of equipment, Fall surfacing, and Equipment and surfacing maintenance (NPPS, 2004). The four risk factors interact with one another to create a S.A.F.E.™ play environment

Photo courtesy of Westlake United Methodist Preschool, Austin, TX

Areas for dramatic play, such as this outdoor space that can be transformed by both teachers and children into a variety of settings, provide the opportunity for the imagination to soar.

Figure 3. The S.A.F.E. model for playgrounds



- **Playground supervision** is an active yet unobtrusive monitoring of the play environment (Thompson, Hudson, Olsen, 2007). Supervision behaviors are crucial in order to prevent injuries and provide for a quality environment. Supervisors should be trained how to inspect the playground environment, prevent inappropriate behaviors, and create a quality environment.
- **Age-appropriate design** relates to the fact that playground equipment should match the developmental skills and abilities of children. The layout and design of the playground area should meet the developmental needs of the children using the space. Public playground equipment is built for children ages 6 months to 23 months, ages 2-5, and ages 5-12 (Consumer Product Safety Commission, 2011).
- Proper **fall surfacing** under and around the playground equipment is a crucial element in providing a safe play environment (Hudson, Olsen, & Thompson, 2004). Selecting the appropriate surfacing for a specific playground involves the determination of (1) acceptable surface materials, (2) the height of equipment and depth of material, (3) the surfacing coverage in the use zone, and (4) the depth-maintenance requirements of materials within the use zone (National Program for Playground Safety Surfacing Guide).
- Nearly 60 percent of all injuries that result in litigation list lack of **equipment maintenance** as the primary cause of injury (Hendy, 2004). The lack of regular maintenance can void a manufacturer's warranty, put children in physical danger, and waste dollars on unusable equipment.

The guidelines for the standard of care for early childhood outdoor environments should comply with the professional organizations presented in Table 1.

Quality and S.A.F.E.™ outdoor environments are important for young children

Early childhood outdoor spaces should be planned to be places where children can learn, discover, develop, and live. The opening planning committee example brings to light the importance of valuing the outdoor environment. Despite the lack of attention Play Everyday Child Care had initially on the outdoor environment, the outdoor environment today is an instrumental piece of the daily curriculum. The teachers are dedicated to the outdoor space and devote time and energy into incorporating the outdoors into the curriculum. From 50 square feet of prairie flowers, open grass area, playground equipment, play house, paths, gardens, and loose parts, the children are engaged outside every day.

A case has been made for the importance of creating QUALITY opportunities and S.A.F.E.™ spaces in the outdoor environment. Creating these spaces is not a haphazard process, but rather should be based on a foundation that all children deserve a right to play in meaningful and purposeful environments. It is essential for early childhood educators to recognize that the outdoor space for children is important and there are endless possibilities for incorporating curriculum outside.

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Heather Olsen, Ed.D., is the assistant director for the National Program for Playground Safety. She has been associated with the development of playgrounds and educating the public about maintenance, supervision, and age appropriateness of outdoor spaces. She is also a professor at the University of Northern Iowa.

Photo courtesy of Westlake United Methodist Preschool, Austin, TX

Incorporating natural elements into the outdoor space automatically encourages natural play. Jumping from stump to stump encourages the development of gross motor skills and balance.

Universal Design and Outdoor Learning

Read how the use of "universal design" can be applied to young childrens' outdoor play and learning.

Helene Arbouet Harte

The Importance of Outdoor Play and Learning

Engagement in the natural environment provides authentic and concrete opportunities for children to enhance development in all domains (Bailie, 2010). As children play and explore in nature they build gross motor development moving through the outdoors. Searching for items, carefully picking up leaves, branches and insects provides opportunities to develop fine motor skills. Collaborative interactions such as caring for gardens, making maps or doing scavenger hunts encourage social and emotional skills. Regarding cognitive development, children ask questions about the outdoor world and seek the answers to these questions using hands on examination (Baile, 2010). Each subject area is addressed as children use math skills to count, find shapes and see patterns; science skills and methods to examine and care for living things; social studies as they learn the geography of their communities and language arts in learning the vocabulary of the outdoor world. Learning outside and in nature not only allows for learning across subject areas and developmental domains, but also creates opportunities to inspire children when discovering the treasures of the outdoors.

Outdoor play promotes hands-on learning across curriculum.

Children are interested in being outside. Accessibility to outdoor play and a variety of types of spaces including private, personal and social is important to children (Clark, 2007). The outdoor environment allows for child initiated exploration of found objects or loose materials such as rocks, pinecones and leaves. Children already express an interest in these items and teachers can build on this interest to enhance learning and teacher child interaction (Waters & Maynard, 2010).

There are many benefits to outdoor play such as hands-on learning across curriculum areas including science, art and music. Children also learn problem solving skills and increase dexterity as they navigate materials that are not necessarily evenly spaced. Interactions in the outdoors can help children and adults to rediscover their sense of wonder (Rosenow, 2008). Getting children outside is only one step: the environments in which they are interacting must be of high quality. Safety is essential; however, when children only engage in the same sterile playground environments, they may not be motivated to attempt new skills or even have opportunities to challenge themselves (Little & Eager, 2010). Effective early childhood educators ought to be intentional in planning in all environments (NAEYC, 2009). Interesting outdoor environments with high quality developmentally appropriate experiences are beneficial to learning and growth and should be accessible to all children. In planning outdoor experiences, it may be helpful to consider Universal Design for Learning (UDL).

What is Universal Design for Learning (UDL)?

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is a framework that helps educators to remove barriers and provide supports while also challenging students. It is about flexibility in our practices including expectations, strategies, evaluations and materials to accommodate

variability in students (CAST, 2011a). Universal Design for Learning does not mean one size fits all. It refers to the development of environments that children can access regardless of linguistic differences, culture or disability. Instead of making changes as an afterthought, children are afforded a range of ways to learn and to express themselves (CAST, 2011b; Lieber, Horn, Palmer & Fleming, 2008). The three main principles of UDL are:

- multiple means of engagement
- multiple means of representation, and
- multiple means of expression (CAST, 2011b).

Multiple means of engagement or the "why" of learning is how we as educators motivate students and provoke interests (CAST, 2011b).

Multiple means of representation refers to instruction and how materials are presented. It is the "what" of learning or the way information is presented.

Multiple means of expression is the "how" of learning and refers to the ways students can demonstrate knowledge.

Universal Design removes barriers and increases accessibility.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is not exclusive to any one teaching strategy, but can be applied to any learning environment with careful intentional and flexible planning and implementation of curriculum. It can therefore certainly be applied to outdoor learning.

Principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) are consistent with the project approach (Harte, 2010). Teachers can facilitate children in engagement with the project approach in both indoor and outdoor settings. Interests that may serve as a catalyst for projects often come from outdoor explorations and observations such as noticing a bird's nest and exploring more about birds. Use of the project approach also includes meaningful opportunities for parent engagement (Harte, 2010). As educators plan to incorporate outdoor learning experiences, careful consideration must be given for inclusion of and access for families.

Examples of Outdoor Learning and Multiple Means of Engagement

To provide for multiple means of engagement, teachers can spark children's interest by use of novelty and providing a reason to be interested. Engagement means there is a purpose and children care about what they are going to learn. It is relevant. In using the outdoor environment, teachers can expose children to new and interesting natural items.

1. *Bring natural materials into the classroom.* Include familiar and unfamiliar items. Provide opportunities to look at things in different ways such as cutting something like a tree pod in half.
2. *Use outdoor experiences as a catalyst for project work.* Go on a nature hike or walk around the school grounds. Listen to students and follow their lead.
3. *Ask questions to extend thinking.* When introducing natural materials ask children what they think the items purpose is. Encourage children to make predictions about what would happen to the natural items in various circumstances, such as being wet. Ask children what they already know and what they want to know. Find out about previous experiences with the materials.
4. *Provide opportunities for novel outdoor experiences beyond commercial play sets.* Recess or gross motor time is typically in the same outdoor area, blacktop or playground. Try to go to a park or nature center.
5. *Partner with environmental educators.* Bailie (2000) describes a continuum of early childhood programming with nature centers that may range from a brief one time field trip to seasonal field trips to a nature-based preschool operated by a nature center. One key component to success at any point along the continuum is the opportunity for teachers and environmental educators to learn from one another. Support from environmental educators can help provide an important resource in making various topics relevant to

Raised gardening beds allow children who may have special needs to participate in the gardening activity. A child in a wheelchair can plant, water and harvest.

Photo courtesy of BB International Preschool & Kindergarten, Pompano Beach, FL

students as well as engaging in authentic experiences.

6. *Provide choices.* Remember that there is no one thing will interest all students (CAST, 2011). There may be a choice in materials to explore or if collecting natural materials outside, children may have a choice of tools to use.
7. *Provide opportunities for collaboration.* Working with others may not only help with supports but may also help to sustain engagement (CAST, 2011a).
8. *Creating a safe space is extremely important.* Children who are afraid or distracted are not engaged (CAST, 2011a). Know the children in your class and consider what might be upsetting to them, therefore serving as a barrier. For example, a student who dislikes loud noises might wear ear muffs or headphones or have some other buffer for noise. Some children might need extra time or breaks.

Photo courtesy of Dora L. Lewis Family & Child Development Center, Richmond, VA

Thoughtful and planned design of the outdoor classroom includes all children.

Examples of Outdoor Learning and Multiple Means of Representation

To allow for multiple means of representation, keep in mind that the way we take things in as learners and the way we understand things as learners varies. Whatever materials, experiences or information is being presented, it has to be done in a way that different learners can access it. Think about ways to remove barriers and present materials in a variety of ways.

1. *Consider additional supports for children with low muscle tone.* Generally think about how supports in the classroom could be used outside. Partner with occupational therapists, physical therapists and parents.
2. *Consider access for children with walkers, wheelchairs or small stature.* Include stepstools, ramps and pathways and trails free of debris.
3. *Provide another way to access auditory components of outdoor learning.* Ex: Picture cues, sign language, touching items, feeling vibrations
4. *Provide another way to access visual components of the outdoors.* Allow children to listen for sounds or provide verbal descriptions.
5. *Work with families to learn and represent things that may be explored outdoors in the home languages* of children in your class.
6. *Pre-teach any vocabulary or symbols that may be needed.* For example, if you will be using a map or following signs on a trail, you would review key words and images in advance of going for a nature walk.
7. *Use technology.* Using portable devices such as an iPad, video cameras or even cell phones, sights and sounds at different levels can be recorded and either immediately projected to other devices or later shared and displayed using smart boards or projectors and screens.

Examples of Outdoor Learning and Multiple Means of Expression

In order to provide multiple means of expression, teachers must consider that we all as learners show what we know in different ways. Students should have many options for being able to express themselves. There should be opportunities to communicate and create in a variety of ways.

1. *Children can create a story about their interests or what they have learned using paper and drawing materials or digital storytelling.*

Photo courtesy of the author

As children experience nature, they develop motor skills, work collaboratively together and are engaged in learning.

2. *Children can share orally, using sign language, drawing pictures, modeling with clay, building with blocks, using video or photographs, writing or using augmentative communication devices.*

Using principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL), early care and education providers can create settings that allow a range of children to be successful (Lieber, Horn, Palmer & Fleming, 2008). Just like indoor environments, outdoor areas should be guided by developmentally appropriate practices with opportunities for free exploration, intentional teaching and quality interactions in quality environments. Also like indoor settings, engagement outdoors should be accessible to all children. Children should be able to access materials in a variety of ways, show what they know in a range of ways and have many ways be motivated and engaged. Some of the same strategies used indoors can be used outside such as children expressing knowledge orally, using sign, drawing pictures, writing and using augmentative communication devices. Accessibility to areas can be built in using ramps, careful attentive supervision, use of picture cues and bringing aspects of the natural world indoors.

The key idea is to plan in advance to address the widest range of needs and interests to the advantage of both students with and without disabilities, allowing for all children to be successful and engaged. See Table 1 for an overview of the connection between Universal Design for Learning and Outdoor Learning.

Conclusion

Outdoor learning is an important way to engage young children. There are many benefits including helping children to be more connected to the outdoors and learning across content areas. When planning outdoor education, universal design for learning or planning in advance to address diverse needs can help all children to successfully participate. Teachers engaging in developmentally appropriate practice in the classroom can use many of the same strategies

Table 1. Applying UDL to Outdoor Learning

Components of Universal Design for Learning (UDL)	Outdoor Learning
Multiple means of engagement – It is important to make learning relevant to students and help them to be motivated to learn (CAST, 2011a).	Children are interested in being outside and the natural environment provides many opportunities to capture children's interests while adults follow their lead, responding to those interests and facilitating learning (Waters & Maynard, 2010).
Multiple means of representation – Information needs to be presented in a way that it can be recognized and so that children can truly grasp it (CAST, 2011a).	The natural environment provides visual, auditory and tactile materials. Teachers can build on this, including additional supports such as picture cues and audio descriptions, home languages and use of technology.
Multiple means of expression – The way children can successfully express themselves varies from one child to another and multiple options need to be provided (CAST, 2011a).	Outdoor learning provides opportunities to use a range of approaches. Using the outdoor environment as a catalyst, teachers can engage in projects. The project approach allows children to express themselves in a variety of ways and is consistent with UDL (Harte, 2010).

outside as well as bring the outdoors into the classroom. In planning for outdoor learning, consideration of UDL by removing barriers and providing supports can lead to not only providing access for all students, but also to engaged learners. Universal Design for Learning allows early care and education providers to consider a range of ways to present materials, motivate learners and provide opportunities for students to express themselves. Learning outdoors affords all of these same opportunities and is consistent with Universal Design for Learning. Early care and education providers can and should plan using the principles of UDL in outdoor settings.

Photo courtesy of Westlake United Methodist Preschool, Austin, TX

Children need time for free exploration and water play is a wonderful opportunity to engage children in the outdoor environment.

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Notification to Members of a Dues Increase

Southern Early Childhood Association

SECA

From the Executive Director

In July, the SECA Board of Directors voted to increase the annual SECA dues from $20 to $22 per year. **The dues increase will be effective beginning September 1, 2014.** This notification is being provided according to the By-laws of the Association. SECA By-laws: Article IV—Dues

Dues for each class of membership shall be determined by the Board of Directors. The membership shall be informed through their state affiliate boards and by written notice from the SECA office at least 6 months prior to any dues alteration. (SECA Policies and Procedures, page 7, http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/upload/file/Leadership%20Page/Board%20Resources/Policies%20and%20Procedures%202013.pdf)

- **Current SECA dues are $20 per member/per year. On September 1, 2014, SECA dues will increase to $22 per membership year.** State dues, as determined by individual state associations, are added to the SECA dues to determine yearly membership dues. States that include NAEYC membership in their dues structure (AL, FL, GA, KY, OK, TN, TX, VA & WV) add the cost of that membership to state and SECA dues to determine yearly membership dues.
- **This is the first SECA dues increase since 2004.**
- SECA dues include all individual member benefits as well as support to state affiliates.

Turning Our World of Learning Inside Out!

How did two early childhood programs transform their outdoor learning experiences for young children? Read this article to find out how programs can improve the outdoor learning experiences for children.

Laura Monsalvatge, Kris Long, and Lilia DiBello

Early childhood professionals constantly reflect upon how to improve the quality of educational experiences for young children. We are often encouraged to create centers which support the development of language, literacy and mathematical concepts inside the classroom, but we often forget that there is an untapped world of learning just outside our classroom door. This article describes the story of two South Florida early childhood programs that took the challenge and made students' outdoor time more than just recess or free play. These programs encouraged the faculty to be purposeful with their approach to learning by addressing the outdoor environment. They turned their early childhood world 'inside out' by creating outdoor learning environments that tapped into the natural curiosity of all young learners.

Mary Help of Christians Preschool (MHOC) in Parkland, Florida and **Miami Country Day School (MCDS)** in Miami Shores, Florida, both started their outdoor classrooms with the creation of a dedicated children's garden. The gardens offered a place to grow vegetables and flowers and were surrounded with a butterfly garden to attract local species of butterflies for observation. Classrooms visited the garden at least once per week to tend vegetables, dig in the dirt and delight in discoveries of butterflies and caterpillars. Recognizing that the garden provided a unique time and place for the children to experience outdoors - the question arose: *How can we give the children more opportunities to experience nature?* Each school took its journey in a unique direction as outdoor classrooms were created. The story of each unique program is shared, along with a short list of lessons learned for other programs to consider as they seek to create better outdoor spaces for learning.

Miami Country Day School (MCDS) in Miami Shores, Florida

Miami Country Day School (MCDS) was established in 1938 and became a co-educational school in the 1970's. It has grown from a K-8 program to a PreK-12th grade college preparatory school. The school focuses on the whole child. The Early Childhood Program is a play-based program that educates young children through indoor and outdoor play, giving children many opportunities to explore and have valuable learning experiences.

There are many outdoor arenas to explore, create and play with purpose (Davis & Elliott, 2004). MCDS has pathways that lead to treasures throughout the campus. It has an outdoor "mud area" that is being restored, a garden with fairy homes, fluid play area, a "jungle"/tricycle area, and big soft foam building blocks.

The work of children is play.

Outdoor areas naturally lend themselves to literacy development in young children. Oral language and imagination are the only true pieces of equipment a teacher and student need to have outside to enhance literacy. The work of children is play and waiting outside our classroom doors are numerous opportunities for young children to learn and grow.

In the planning stage for the new playground, the kindergarten students were invited to illustrate what their dream playground would look like. Their imaginations

were much better than real life. A much-needed playground for three- and four-year olds became a reality this year. It is a musical playground and provides wonderful opportunities for gross motor skills to be developed such as climbing, balancing, rolling, crawling and running.

The Abess Center for Environmental Studies (the ACES lab) provides countless opportunities for both structured and unstructured natural play, and is a centerpiece for learning at MCDS. The lab incorporates the study of animals and gardening on a weekly basis for the early childhood children. Three, four and five year olds' eyes light up as they experience first-hand bearded dragons, baby rats called pinkies, and baby chicks! Students interact with animals up close in this open, safe and supervised environment. ACES also allows students the opportunity to plant and care for a garden on a weekly basis. ACES effortlessly stimulates the five senses to learn. Growing and then tasting French Sorrel is a favorite treat! Seeing and catching caterpillars, or having a butterfly land on an outstretched finger, is a wonderful and natural opportunity to learn about life cycles. Students feel, smell and harvest veggies and fruits.

As students meander, there are fairy gardens amongst the butterfly plants to stop and visit. Their joy and widened eyes are visible as their stories flow freely and creativity is enhanced in these outdoor spaces. Students share their fairy stories, and those who are quiet are dreamingly looking at the fairy houses as they listen and imagine. The garden is an essential play-based natural learning environment that encourages pre-literacy skills and a joy of learning.

Space is limited on this beautiful campus, but that does not hinder the emergence of many outdoor areas for the students to enjoy and utilize. A barren area with no grass quickly became a mud pie area. Art class became a time of joy and exploration of mud pies, imagination and dramatic play. A small problem for the early childhood program is that these areas are sometimes developed into lovely grassy areas over the summer holiday, leading us to recalibrate our plans and seek other areas to play in! We scouted a great area to begin again and in this scouting stage the art teacher mindfully scaffolded with spoons, pots, pans, and a water basin with just enough water in it in order to create some fun. Some challenges arose, such as prepping kids to get dirty, time for clean-up, scaffolding of materials, storage of materials and adult buy-in. Kids are invited to wear water shoes or rain boots, so clean up of the area and kids can be effortless. Having a plastic bin to house materials is currently being discussed. Instead of toting water out each time, a simple slope into a barrel collects rainwater.

Areas constantly being tweaked and improved are fluid play, the jungle and foam blocks. Fluid play includes sand and water tables, shaving cream, paint, and anything that can be a bit messy! Children can investigate or will have specific tasks

Photo courtesy of the authors/Miami Country Day School

Children at MCDS have the opportunity to garden each week in the ACES lab garden, providing countless opportunities for learning.

in the fluid play space. This area was once a staple inside the classroom, but as an early childhood team we decided to restructure our approach to allow for explorative messiness with easier clean-up.

The jungle has large beautiful trees creating a natural canopy and also has a traditional jungle gym, slides, basketball hoops, rock climbing wall, and tricycles. Storage of the tricycles is a constant concern. Foam life-size building blocks are a joy to use, but present student clean-up challenges. Having students sort, match and fit pieces together helps in clean-up efforts, along with facilitating clean-up in a timely manner.

Last, shifting the mindset of adults that outdoor time is not break time is important (Wilson, 2008). Adults often forget how much fun it is to play in mud and get messy! Not only are these experiences fun, but also outdoors provide opportunities to explore first-hand life cycles of plants, animals, the seasons and weather in informal ways (Dowdell, Gray and Malone, 2011). This area will lend itself to literacy, science, math and dramatic play experiences for many years to come.

Mary Help of Christians Preschool (MHOC) in Parkland, Florida

Living in South Florida presents wonderful weather opportunities to spend time outdoors, but because it is so densely populated there is little open space for children to explore. Here is the story of one preschool's journey to create a nature-infused playground for children to play, discover and learn.

The preschool began with a vegetable garden as a way for the children to be able to dig in the dirt, plant seeds, watch the plants grow, and eat the vegetables they grew. Language, science and math come alive through gardening. It provides the children a real world situation in which to learn. They work and play side-by-side, while learning to care for the plants by weeding and watering. They keep journals to log the garden's progress. Plants are measured with unifix cubes and rulers. Children create seed markers to identify plants. They ask questions, search for answers and discover some of what nature has to offer.

This small garden has grown to a large garden area with the help of a grant from the National Garden Association and Home Depot, parent donations, and community volunteers. Those entering the garden area through a vine covered arbor encounter a large space where vegetables grow and butterflies flutter to plants designed to attract them. There is a potting table supplied with empty pots, soil, seeds and shovels for children to plant, and a dirt area left "raw" just for digging and discovery. Children run and play among the trees, stooping to discover a caterpillar under a leaf, while others may sit on child-sized benches and listen to wind chimes and observe the wonders of nature.

Photo courtesy of the authors/Mary Help of Christians Preschool

Stump jumping can be a fun activity when teachers closely supervise the experience.

Photo courtesy of the authors/Miami Country Day School

The Fairy Garden stimulates children's imaginations and encourages pre-literacy skills.

The children loved being outdoors in the garden so much that the preschool director, Ellen Munnelly, wanted to provide the children with more nature experiences. She only had to look to the playground and knew she had found the place. Thinking about Richard Louv's book, *Last Child in the Woods* (2008), and remembering her own childhood adventures outdoors, she created a team of teachers and parents to plan the new playground.

The first step was to remove the large jungle gym from the center of the playground, replacing it with a man-made hill with a built-in double slide (there are no hills in South Florida). Now children can climb the hill, roll down the hill, and lie on top of the hill. The hill also serves as a natural ramp for racing balls, cars and even pumpkins. The rubber mulch was removed in favor of natural wood mulch. Native shrubbery was planted along the fence adding more greenery and providing a home for lizards and bugs- favorites among the preschoolers. These changes immediately made the playground feel less traditional and more inviting.

Next, an area under two trees was designated to be the building area. The area was set with pavers to provide a flat building surface. A shelving unit for tree blocks, stumps, sticks and tree cookies, which are 1-2" thick cross-section slices of a tree trunk, was placed in the building area. Other materials: cardboard boxes, wooden crates, ramps, and cardboard tubes, are rotated to stimulate new thinking and cooperative building. Additional props, such as pinecones, palm fronds, river rocks, pumpkins, and pine branches are added from time to time.

A big challenge was to incorporate a water element near the sandbox area. Water and sand naturally go together. At the time, a water fountain was located at the entrance to the playground and a sandbox was at the far end of the playground. The children repeatedly would take buckets from the sandbox and run to the water fountain, fill it with water and run back to the sandbox. This was unsatisfactory for everyone. The children never had water fast enough, and the plumbing bill for removing sand from clogged pipes was growing high. The solution was a rain barrel with an extended hose placed next to the sandbox. Of course, the rain barrel empties quicker than it can be filled with rain, so it is filled every morning, providing the children with a plentiful supply of water.

This water also supplies the nearby dirt/mud digging area: a/k/a "the mud kitchen". Initially, the dirt area was to be a small garden patch for herbs, but eager young gardeners picked plants too early and watered them too much. Eventually this small would-be garden became just the dirt garden. Although nothing green grows in the dirt garden, mud pies emerge, stick-leaf soup stews are prepared in pots, and birthday cakes of every flavor are baked with sand sprinkles and small sticks for candles. Stories are told, children play together and learning grows from a small patch of dirt.

Make a variety of props available.

One of the most important elements for the success of this new outdoor space was the hiring of a teacher to oversee this area as if it were her own classroom. She plans the lessons, sets up and maintains the space, and nurtures the children's love for what nature provides. She is there to marvel at the children's discoveries and support the indoor classroom teachers as they strive to increase their knowledge of nature.

The outdoor classroom continues to grow and change as new ideas are implemented and new materials are acquired. The 'way' children now play has changed as well. Rather than just run and chase, they explore, ponder and discuss their ideas with each other and their teachers. There is less conflict, more cooperation and as a result, more play and more learning.

Like to know more?

Miami Country Day School
http://www.miamicountryday.org

Mary Help of Christians Preschool
http://www.mhocrc.org

Abess Center for Environmental Studies
http://abess.miami.edu

Five Important Lessons

Planning outdoor spaces is a challenge for any early childhood program, and the faculty/staff from these two unique learning environments learned many lessons along the way. We tell the story of these two magical outdoor learning environments because it is important to share the lessons learned with others. The five most important lessons are shared for you to consider, as we hope to inspire you to expand your outdoor learning/exploratory spaces.

Lesson One: The Importance of the Planning Phase

When planning outdoor spaces, first sketch out a vision for how the area will look. This is important in considering flow, traffic and areas of interest for students. This is best done in collaboration with the team using the area. Another important element that is often overlooked is who will maintain the area and how will it be maintained. In the planning phase, storage should be considered and included in the sketch if that is feasible for the physical location. Teachers need training and development. It is often assumed that early childhood is just playing; however, successful early childhood teachers are thoughtful and strategic in their approaches to indoor and outdoor lessons. According to Wilson (2008), adults sharing an interest is an important factor in encouraging and supporting children to enhance connections with nature and natural play. It is important to be open and ready for bumps in the road, as generally, nothing goes as planned and there will always be room for growth and improvement.

Lesson Two: The Need for Dedicated Spaces-Outdoor Learning Centers

The need for outdoor spaces is undeniable. The first factor in encouraging children in natural play is recurrent constructive experiences outdoors (Wilson, 2008). When planning outside spaces, setup is the key. Look at the space and think about establishing learning centers the same way that centers in a classroom would be set up. The large open area of a traditional playground needs to be subdivided into smaller areas that are conducive to small social play groups (Blanchet-Cohen & Elliot, 2011). Consider where to put the quiet centers and where to put the more active or messy centers.

For example, sand and water innately work together and should be placed near each other. They can be in sensory tables or, on a larger scale, in a sandbox area with a water source such as a rain barrel, water pump, or hose. A mud area definitely needs its own separate place as it can get very dirty - mud pies are messy business.

The art area in an outdoor space can be extra messy- no worries about getting paint on the floor. Nature also provides art materials and tools. Children can paint with berries, or use leaves, sticks and rocks as painting

Photo courtesy of the authors/Mary Help of Christians Preschool

An outdoor puppet theater (complete with stump seats) provides an opportunity for collaborative play and creative expression.

Photo courtesy of the authors/Mary Help of Christians Preschool

Young children can learn valuable skills using water, funnels and tubes.

tools. The same nature items can be used to make a collage. They can also become props for a dramatic play adventure as in the children's story *Roxaboxen*, by Alice McLerran. The lesson here is look for what nature provides in your own backyard and use it.

The block area takes on a different dimension outdoors. Building can be LARGE! First, the area for block building needs to have a flat, firm surface such as wood or pavers. Blocks used for building do not have to be manicured wood blocks; instead use tree branches, tree cookies, cardboard and wooden boxes and palm fronds. In other words, educators need to think outside the classroom about what can be used in these outdoor areas. Another popular option is a dedicated woodworking space.

A music area is a must for an outdoor classroom. The outdoor classroom allows children to go to the limits and play as loud as they want without disrupting other children's play- a problem when instruments are played indoors. Instruments can be as simple as pots and pans with wooden or metal spoons, garbage cans with lids, bamboo sticks, wind chimes or, if the budget allows, many large outdoor musical instruments are available for purchase. The important thing is to provide the instruments so the children can experiment with them and play them LOUD!

On the quieter side, reading outdoors is also valuable. Having books and blankets set in a shady spot invites children to read and relax. They can also use this area for a respite to lay back and just watch the clouds. Clipboards with paper and crayons should also be provided in this area to draw or write.

Lesson Three: An Outdoor Classroom Teacher

The success of the outdoor classroom is enhanced by having a teacher dedicated to it, just as any other early childhood classroom requires a dedicated teacher. Like the indoor classroom teacher, she/he is responsible for creating and maintaining the learning centers with an adequate supply of materials such as paint, books, blocks, and water. The teacher is there to facilitate the outdoor classroom, to scaffold children's learning and provide support to indoor classroom teachers.

In addition to the qualifications of an early childhood classroom teacher, the outdoor classroom teacher must possess curiosity, enthusiasm and an interest in nature. It is just as important to have an adult to guide and nurture the children's discoveries as it is to provide the outdoor space itself. From her book *The Sense of Wonder*, Rachel Carson (1965, p.55) said it best, "If a child is to keep alive his inborn sense of wonder he needs the companionship of at least one adult who can share it, rediscovering with him the joy, excitement and mystery of the world we live in." Teachers become partners in the learning process with the

children. There are sustained, shared interactions that happen when the child brings natural discovery to the teacher. They talk, discuss, share, discover, learn and form deeper bonds (Waters & Maynard, 2010).

Lesson Four: A Supply of Loose Parts

Kids love tinkering with loose parts, and it is important to have these things on hand in order to allow for exploration. An outside area for building needs tree stumps, branches and empty boxes. These items must be maintained and kept safe for children to use. Parents are great resources for collecting these items. In dramatic play areas, children need a variety of props. Old pots, pans, bowls, spoons, fabric, and even old clothes are great stepping off points for creative play in or outdoors. Students do not need premade costumes or brand new items with batteries, which stifle imagination and allow limited student expression. Natural settings offer loose parts for play which, because of their open-ended characteristics, prompt children's creativity and imagination (Davis, 2010).

Take advantage of teachable moments.

Lesson Five: Taking Advantage of Teachable Moments

Educators must take advantage of teachable moments whenever they are presented. Dowdell, Gray and Malone (2011) found the teachers that interacted with students in indirect ways while outdoors, allowed opportunities for students to examine and make connections to indoor classroom lessons. Nature is in constant flux, and there is always something new for children to uncover (Davis, 2010). Whether there are seasonal changes to note, animals and insects to study or gardens to be tended to--nature is the best teacher!

Photo courtesy of the authors/Mary Help of Christians Preschool

Exploring nature can focus on many areas of the curriculum. The teacher can use this exploration as a teachable moment.

Conclusion

Our world is a classroom! Children gain so much from the outdoors (Cordell, Green, & Larson, 2011). Providing opportunities to discover is quality, especially when done in a purposeful way (Davis & Elliott, 2004). Young children need to be able to explore their surroundings in safe environments. Experience with natural surroundings gives young children the ability to expand sensory development and supports the development of the whole child. The enthusiasm of the children as they run outside to see what new things are there to discover is wonderful. We hope these stories inspire your staff to consider turning your world of learning inside out, because as one child said, "This is the best place ever!"

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CLASS: The Newest Thing in Early Childhood Assessment with María Hernández

Want to know more? Know the basics and want to go the next step?

Join us at SECA 2014 for a pre-conference session devoted to learning more about CLASS.

When: Thursday, January 16, 2014

Where: SECA 2014 at The Lodge in Williamsburg, Virginia

Session #1: A CLASS Overview (9:00-12:00 pm)

Session #2: Using CLASS to Improve Instruction (1:00-4:00 pm)

María has been in the early childhood field for 23 years and has taught in both the private and public sectors. She currently oversees the educational component of six early childhood programs at the Florida City RCMA (Redlands Christian Migrant Association) and provides professional development opportunities for its teachers.

For a copy of the session agendas and registration information, go to http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/seca_conference.php

The Janie L. Humphries Student Leadership Development Fund

At the July 2013 Summer Board Meeting of the SECA Board of Directors, a new initiative was born, the ***Janie L. Humphries Student Leadership Development Fund***. This fund was created to support the development and leadership capacity of early childhood students as emerging leaders in our states and is in honor of Dr. Janie Humphries of Louisiana, SECA President 2010-2011, who has worked tirelessly to support student groups in her state and in the SECA region.

- The Fund will be capitalized by the proceeds of the Silent Auction at the annual SECA conference and memorial and designated donations that are made to the Association.
- State affiliates will be eligible to apply for $250 per year to support student membership, the development of student chapters/groups in their states and to provide leadership development opportunities for those groups.

SECA is committed to supporting our next generation of professionals and to strengthening our voice as advocates for young children and their families. Application criteria is being developed and will be available to state affiliates by November 1, 2013.

Consider donating to the fund….our field is only as strong as our next generation of leaders!

The 2013 SECA Exemplary Outdoor Classroom: We Have More to Share!

To honor our theme for the 2013 SECA Conference,* Hand-in-Hand: Children and Nature*, SECA launched a search for exemplary outdoor classrooms in the Southern region. One overall winner was selected and winners at the state level also were designated.

Applications were reviewed based on the following criteria and, upon designation as a potential winner, on-site visits were made by members of the SECA Board of Directors to verify the application components.

Criteria 1: Natural modifications and innovations in at least five of the following areas: large motor, climbing/crawling space, building area, art area, music and movement area, garden area, storage, water, dirt digging, sand and wheeled toy area.

Criteria 2: Effective and appropriate monitoring of children in these areas by caregivers/teachers.

Criteria 3: The use of natural materials in the outdoor classroom.

Criteria 4: The use of materials specific to the region/community.

Criteria 5: Ease of maintenance of the outdoor classroom.

Criteria 6: Compliance with local/licensing regulations.

In our first and second issues of ***Dimensions of Early Childhood*** in 2013, we introduced you to the overall winner of the **2013 Exemplary Outdoor Classroom Contest**—Highland Plaza United Methodist Preschool in Hixson, Tennessee-- and the three state winners—B. B. International Preschool & Kindergarten in Pompano Beach, FL; Westlake United Methodist Preschool in Austin, Texas; and Dora L. Lewis Family & Child Development Center in Richmond, Virginia. Through photos and text, we led you through the wonderful outdoor spaces that have been developed for young children.

But these weren't the only exceptional outdoor spaces for children: we still have more to share! We'd like to introduce you to programs that we felt merited honorable mention and recognition for components of their program that were "exceptional".

Honorable Mention

- ***Starting Points Child Care*** in Knoxville, TN
- ***Westminster School for Young Children*** in Nashville, TN
- ***Hillsborough Community College Dale Mabry Child Development Center*** in Tampa, FL

Recognition for Exemplary Components

- *Parent Involvement:* ***Gunter Child Development*** in Montgomery, AL
- *Innovative Budgeting:* ***Canterbury Community Nursery School*** in Richmond, VA
- *Infant/Toddler Spaces:* ***Our Neighborhood Child Development Center*** in Charlottesville, VA

Once again, we'll explore these outdoor spaces for young children through photos and text and hope to share their ideas and strategies for developing spaces that excite and engage young children.

Our Selections for Honorable Mention

Starting Points Child Care

Knoxville, Tennessee
Contact: Kathy Lorenz, klorenz164@yahoo.com
www.startingpointschildcare.com

This play space includes a variety of areas: large motor space, climbing/crawling space, building area, music and movement, garden (herb, gourd and pollinator), water, sand and wheeled toy.

For art, the children may create anywhere on the playground. Additionally, they are developing their dirt digging area…the space they chose is too full of roots and the children are having a hard time digging. More dirt may be the answer!

Special Features

Gardens

The space encompasses *three types of gardens*. The children enter the playground through a gated arbor and walk on brick pavers through the *Pollinator Garden* that includes plants such as Butterfly Bushes, Butterfly Weed, Primroses, Zinnias, Marigolds, Purple Cone Flowers, and Black-eyed Susan.

There is an *Herb Garden* that includes various types of mint, pineapple sage, lemon verbena and lavender…..all plants that emit wonderful aromas when touched or rubbed.

The *Gourd Garden* includes ornamental gourds, bottle gourds and pumpkins.

These gardens were planted by the children and they are responsible for maintenance which includes watering, weeding and 'dead-heading' the flowers. By planting and maintaining the garden, the children have explored the life cycle of these plants. For example, they planted the pumpkin seeds, watched them sprout, grow vines, flower and grow pumpkins. They also saw a pumpkin decompose last year and then discovered all the vines that grew from those seeds. They have learned about conservation as they use the water from their water play area to water the plants and have also learned about insects, birds, and other wildlife that visit these plants.

A willow tunnel.

A Willow Tunnel

An inventive use of materials created the Willow Tunnel which children utilize to play active games such as hide-and-seek and tag. (It's a great hiding place!) A wire frame provides the structure over which willow can grow and the possibilities for play are unlimited. The tunnel provides the illusion of a private space while the teachers can still supervise. The children are responsible for watering the willow.

Loose Parts Building Area

The "loose parts" building area contains a variety of items to be used for building, including sticks, bamboo, rocks, bricks, pinecones, 'tree cookies', both large and small. This area promotes skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, creativity, physics and many more.

Maintenance

The outdoor classroom does not require a lot of maintenance. The children take care of weeding, 'dead-heading' and watering. The teachers weave the willow branches of the tunnel as necessary. More extensive trimming is handled through the center's lawn service but this is required only once or twice a year. Parents help on workdays to add mulch a couple of times a year. The majority of plants are perennials and this eliminates the need for annual planting. Parents are a great source of materials….trees that have fallen in their yards, bags of fall leaves, etc. One person will cut and haul items to the center.

Children help to maintain the gardens by watering, weeding, and dead-heading the flowers.

Information for this article excerpted from the 2013 SECA Exemplary Outdoor Classroom application submitted by Starting Points Child Care.

Westminster School for Young Children

Nashville, Tennessee
Contact: Maria TeSelle,
mteselle@wsycnashville.org
www.wsycnashville.org

Westminster School for Young Children (WSYC) incorporates the guidelines of the state of Tennessee and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in planning, developing and maintaining their outdoor space. Student free choice in play and exploration is at the foundation of the school's curriculum. The outside classroom is designed for unstructured, free exploration so students can learn through their play experiences.

Westminster's outdoor classroom is designed to develop children's learning across multiple domains-cognitive, social, and physical. For example children have varied opportunities to participate in large motor activities that stimulate a variety of skills, enhance sensory motor integration and develop controlled movement like balance, strength and coordination.

Insect hunting!

Special Features

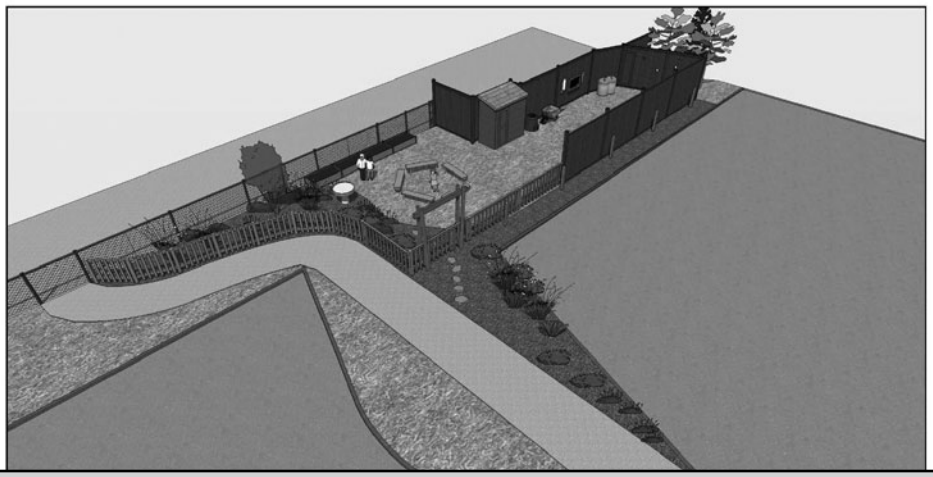
Supervision

A unique feature of Westminster's outdoor play space is that it constitutes three contiguous areas which can be divided in different ways by a series of gates which makes the size of the play area extremely flexible. Teachers cover supervision and interaction in specific zones as numbers of children and teachers fluctuate depending on the time of day. In compliance with state guidelines, class roles and emergency numbers are taken to the outdoor classroom and, if emergencies arise, teachers are in cell phone contact with the school's administrative office to ask for assistance.

Focus on Animals & Wildlife

The outdoor classroom has a variety of opportunities to observe, identify and care for animals and wildlife. Birds, rabbits, skunks, squirrels and chipmunks are easily identified. Bird feeders provide opportunities for measuring, estimating, caretaking and development of fine motor skills. Insects such as ladybugs, butterflies, cicadas, grasshoppers and crickets promote development of observation skills and knowledge of life cycles.

Some of the more unique features that promote these types of explorations include a Bat House that can be viewed high up in a tree and a composting bin in which little investigators are sure to find worms.



A floor plan for the outdoor learning center at the Westminster School for Young Children.

Place-Based Model

Children learn from their own backyards, their own local spaces on Earth. Being stewards of the personal environment creates authentic meaning and purpose to learning. Having native species of plans introduces a wonderful cyclical effect to the outdoor classroom. If native plants are in the outdoor classroom, native wildlife are attracted and educational opportunities are enriched. Students become grounded in their own experiences and environment before expanding their knowledge to the world as a whole.

Native trees such as hackberry, oak, tulip poplar (the state tree) and hemlock are found on the grounds. You'll also find hydrangeas arborescens, iris (the state flower) and black eyed susans in abundance.

Information for this article excerpted from the 2013 SECA Exemplary Outdoor Classroom application submitted by Westminster School for Young Children.

Hillsborough Community College Dale Mabry Child Development Center

Tampa, Florida

We want to share this outdoor area with you because of the creative and innovative elements that it contained. After its selection for an Honorable Mention for the 2013 Contest, the Center was suddenly closed. Fortunately, the closure was temporary and the Center re-opened in late August. However, we're sad to report that many of the outdoor areas were dismantled and/or eliminated and most of the original educational team who designed and created this space has moved on.

Following is the information submitted with this application in 2012. (*SECA cannot confirm that this outdoor space is still intact but the information and photos from 2012 will be valuable to programs that wish to enhance the design of their outdoor environment*.)

The outdoor classrooms were designed and developed utilizing the Ten Guiding Principles outlined by the Nature Explore program. The outdoor space was divided into clearly defined interest areas with unobstructed views, allowing for maximum supervision at all times. Each area had a simple name and could be identified by a wooden sign. A variety of natural materials and elements, many of them regional, were chosen to not only enhance the beauty of the outdoor areas but to also provide children with daily opportunities to explore, discover and learn about the wonders of nature in a natural setting.

Special Features

Entrance and Gathering Areas

Butterfly habitats line the walkways leading to a picket fence that opens onto an outdoor classroom. A seasonally appropriate "Welcome" sign greets all who enter and invites them into a special place filled with beauty, discovery and joy.

The "gathering area" is for small and large group gatherings such as a circle time, story time, nature observations or a visitor presentation. The area is shaded by a tree and surrounded by St. Augustine grass. It includes benches, a basket of sheets/blankets, books and magazines, binoculars and magnifying glasses.

Sand Area

The sand area is very large, filled with white beach sand and surrounded by palm trees. A split wood log is located near one edge and is used for sitting, balancing or as a table top. Children use metal buckets, scoopers, shovels and sifters for digging. They also use large tree cookies, pebbles, rocks, seashells, bamboo stalks and plastic animals to create microdramatic playscapes in the sand. This area offers a different tactile experience, encourages social interactions and supports eye-hand coordination and fine motor development.

Intentional Planning

Forethought and intentional planning went into designing each phase of the outdoor classrooms.

Children use metal buckets, scoopers, shovels and sifters in the sand area.

Children were free to choose which outdoor center they will explore.

Careful consideration concerning supervision, safety, interest and accessibility was given as each area was developed and enhanced. The goal was to create outdoor environments that offered children challenges and opportunities to explore, discover and learn. Each specific area in the outdoor space was chosen based on easy accessibility for children and unobstructed supervision by adults. The program maintained a 2:9 ration (small group time) or 3:18 ratio (large group time) when children were using the outdoor area.

For small group time, a teacher and an assistant teacher brought half of the class outdoors for a brief circle time and activity from the *Growing UP Wild* curriculum. Children were then free to choose which outdoor center they would first explore. During small group time, as well as large group time, teachers stationed themselves on opposite ends of the outdoor area while children were allowed to engage in exploration and play. Teachers moved about freely in their designated zones, participating in and supporting the children's play in various interest areas or activities.

Information for this article excerpted from the 2013 SECA Exemplary Outdoor Classroom application submitted by Hillsborough Community College Dale Mabry Child Development Center.

Programs That Merited Recognition

Gunter Child Development Center

Montgomery, Alabama
Contact: Jonnie Clark
Jonnie.clark@us.af.mil

This program was selected to highlight the role of **parent involvement** in making child care and early childhood programs special places for young children. They showcased the opportunities intentionally provided for parents and volunteers to support and contribute to the program's success. Opportunities included:

- *Planting the garden*—Children, parents and staff planted the garden, choosing flowers, trees and shrubbery with lots of colors and textures and perennials that would come back year after year.
- *Planting trees*—An Arbor Day celebration was hosted to allow the children, teachers, parent volunteers and other military staff members to assist in planting trees.
- *Preparing materials for use by the children*—Parents were asked to cut bamboo poles and wooden twigs into small sections for the building area. The local military community cut small logs from trees that had already been cut down and placed them in the outdoor classroom.

Parents at work with their children at the Gunter Child Development Center.

- *Designing the entrance to the outdoor classroom*—This was a joint project of parents and children.

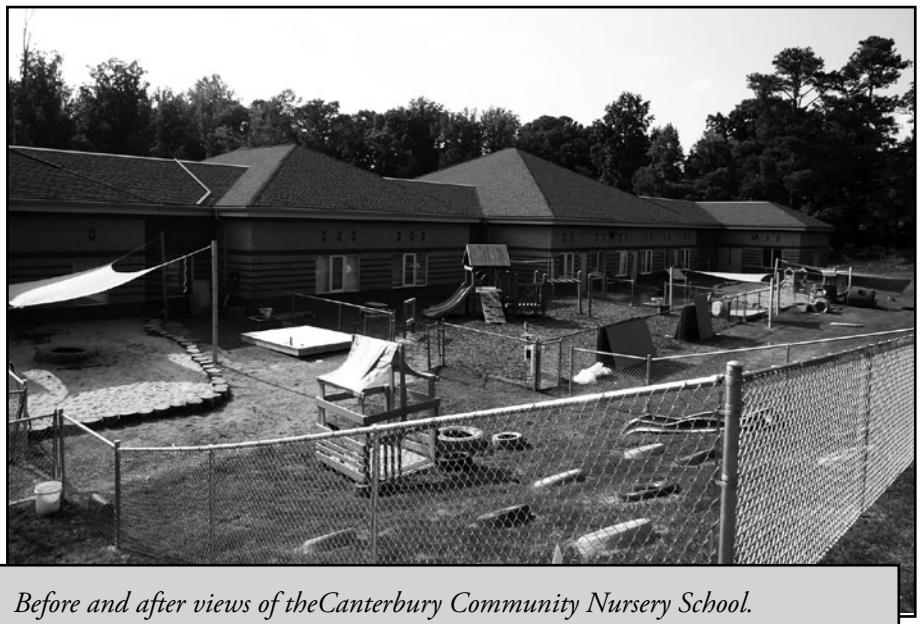
Canterbury Community Nursery School

Richmond, Virginia
Contact: Mia White
miaccns@comcast.net

A new space and a **limited budget**…a familiar story for many early childhood programs Canterbury staff had learned that they would need to move from their home of over 25 years. That move would yield larger classrooms, more modern facilities and a huge outdoor space---a huge empty space. The space had an old climber that had to be removed, some broken plastic toys, and some fencing. It was a blank canvas but the program had "very little money to buy paint".

With a budget of $7,000, the Canterbury staff and parents embarked on the design and development of their outdoor space. The effort included a lot of sweat, strained muscles, Craig's List finds, generous gifts and sheer will. Guided by Canterbury's mission statement, *Canterbury will educate children in a creative nurturing environment in partnership with family and community*, everyone wanted a space that would encourage creativity, not a traditional playground where the equipment limits the creativity of the play.

"Guided by these goals, we developed a dynamic space that is loved by children and adults alike. At any moment, you will find Olympic sprinters racing for gold, gourmet chefs in the mud pie kitchen, pirates sailing on the sea, engineers designing dams and bridges, ballerinas performing elaborate twirls, and so much more. And, underneath all that play, there are children learning, growing and developing."



Before and after views of theCanterbury Community Nursery School.

Our Neighborhood Child Development Center

Charlottesville, Virginia
Contact: Jennifer McDonald
Director@ourneighborhoodcdc.com

Our Neighborhood is a small center in Charlottesville, Virginia that serves children ages birth-three. As an exclusively **infant and toddler** program, they hold a high value for low ratios (1:3 for infants, 1:4 for toddlers, 1:5 for 2-year-olds), continuity of care and free exploration of the world. Their philosophy is inspired by the schools of Reggio Emilia, shaped by the work of Magda Gerber, the books of Margie Carter and Deb Curtis and the Conscious Discipline guidance philosophy.

The Center has two playgrounds designed to support outdoor exploration for all the children who typically split their time between the two playgrounds (front and back) with ample opportunity to play in both areas. They incorporate many of the areas that we've seen in previous classrooms (dirt digging, art, music, large motor,

etc.) but the areas reflect the ages of children served and are designed to be developmentally appropriate for those age groups.

Some special features include:

- *A big bowl of chalk* is kept on the back playground for drawing and exploring. Some mornings, finger paints appear in that area.
- The *music area* is located in the front yard and includes opportunities to make music together, sing songs, dance and blow bubbles. A homemade four foot xylophone resides in the front yard.
- The front yard *slopes down to a fence* and children often crawl down the hill to peak out of the fence at the city. For young crawlers and walkers, climbing back up the big hill can be a real challenge but helps them to practice a developing skill.
- *Wheeled toys*, big and small, are available throughout the outdoor classroom. Some are for working together, some for building young muscles, some for balance and some for transportation on a cold day!

We hope you've enjoyed the journey over the past year as we've highlighted those marvelous outdoor spaces that have been created for young children throughout the South. We know that programs don't have unlimited resources to develop outdoor spaces but we've been able to show you what a little grit and determination (and a lot of help!) can do. We also hope you've focused on the importance of ***connecting the indoors with the outdoors*** and expanding learning opportunities for young children through outdoor classrooms.

We've just concluded the **second year of our Exemplary Outdoor Classroom Contest: *Creating a Nature-Inspired Outdoor Learning Environment on a Shoestring Budget.*** Beginning with the first issue of *Dimensions of Early Childhood* in 2014, we'll share how programs developed great spaces with low to moderate budgets. We hope you'll look forward to another year of great, thought-provoking examples of what dedicated staff and parents can create for young children.

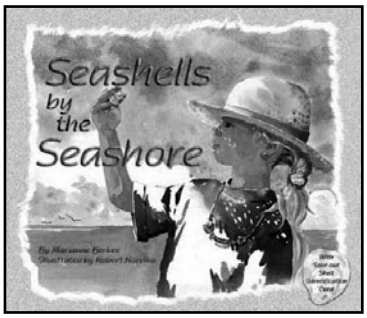
Finger paints are used for drawing and exploring.

Teamwork and development are built with the help of wheeled toys.

CHILDREN'S LITERATURE RELATED TO OUTDOOR CLASSROOM EXPERIENCES

Nancy Jane Cheshire
SECA President

Nature Books



Seashells by the Seashore
by Marianne Berkes, Illustrated by Robert Noreika
Dawn Publications, Nevada City, CA (2002)

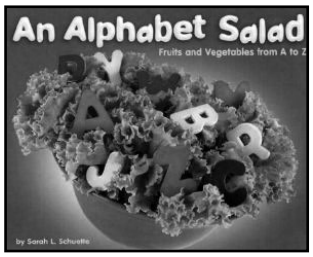
This is a beautiful picture book for children living near the ocean, visiting the ocean and or dreaming of seeing the ocean one day. Lovely watercolor pictures set the background for a book filled with information, shell identification guides and shell counting.

Vulture View
by April Pulley Sayre, Illustrated by Steve Jenkins
Henry Holt and Company, New York (2007)
(A Theodor Seuss Geisel Honor Book)

Children soar with the turkey vulture as they enjoy a simple story showing the hunt for food as these graceful birds serve in the role of nature's cleanup crew. Informational pages for adults at the end of the book provide conversation starters as well as facts that can be shared with the children.

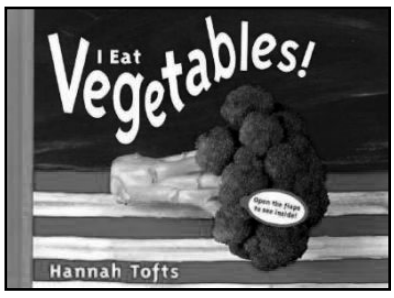
GARDENING AND BOOKS ABOUT FOOD

Most outdoor classrooms provide space for growing flowers and vegetables. Many beautifully illustrated books are available to serve as resources in both the outdoor and indoor classroom as children learn about the many vegetables and fruits that provide us nourishment.



An Alphabet Salad: Fruits and Vegetables from A to Z
by Sarah L. Schuette
Capstone Press, Mankato, Minnesota (2003)

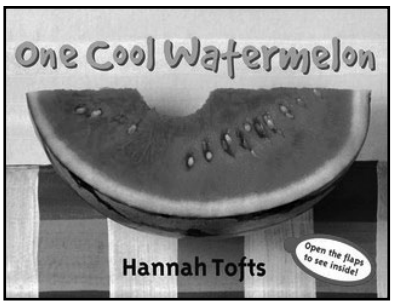
"*An Alphabet Salad* uses color photographs and a nonfiction format to introduce children to various fruits and vegetables while building mastery of the alphabet."



I Eat Vegetables!
By Hannah Tofts
Zero to Ten, Chicago, Illinois (1998)

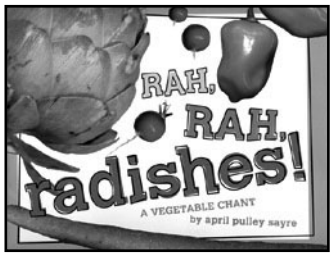
This beautiful picture book shows vegetables as they grow, but upon opening the folded page, the reader sees the vegetable as it is seen in a grocery store and additional views of the vegetable.

An example: Head of green cabbage is shown, but upon opening the folded page there are cabbage leaves (cabbage as seen at market), cabbage heart (side view of head of cabbage cut in half) and shreds of cabbage.



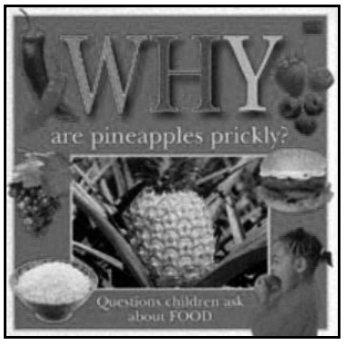
One Cool Watermelon
by Hannah Tofts
Zero to Ten Limited, London (2006)

Colorful pictures show various fruits combined with number recognition and counting. An example: 7 oranges are shown, but upon opening the folded page, pictures of oranges are depicted to illustrate related vocabulary including juicy, half, seeds, peel and segments.



Rah, Rah, Radishes! A Vegetable Chant
April Pulley Sayre
Simon & Schuster, New York, NY (2011)

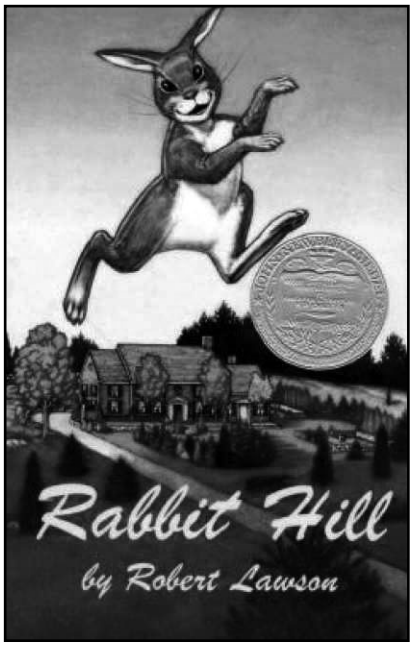
"Welcome to the farmers'market! Meet vibrant veggies as they take the stage in this celebration of tasty and nutritious treats. It's a rollicking, rhyming trip past piles of peppers, potatoes, pumpkins, and much, much more."



Why are Pineapples Prickly? Questions Children Ask About Food
DK Publishing, New York, NY (1997)

Many questions asked by children about food are answered in short, easy to understand answers. A few of the questions include "Why does ice cream melt?", "Why are lemons sour?", "Why do some peas hide in pods?", and "Why are raisins wrinkly?"

A CHAPTER BOOK FOR OLDER CHILDREN



Rabbit Hill
by Robert Lawson
The Viking Press (1944) (A Newbery Award Book)

Rabbit Hill is a classic children's book that will bring joy and new understanding to school age children. Little Georgie brings exciting news to the rabbit family when he announces that new Folks are moving into the Big House. The delightful rabbit family hopes the new Folks will plant a garden so there will once again be wholesome, delicious food for the animals. But what if the new Folks don't make a garden? Or even worse, "What if the new Folks bring dogs, traps, and guns?" The author provides each animal a personality that brings joy and pleasure as the reader eagerly awaits the discovery that comes when the new Folks move into the neighborhood.

I discovered this book several years ago. I was searching for Newbury Award Books and found a dingy brown heavy used book titled *Rabbit Hill*. I was tempted to put it back on the library shelf but I opened the book. In the handwriting of a young child were penciled the words, "This is the best book I ever read." I checked out the book so I could discover what had led a child to make this impressive statement. After reading the book, I can say, this is truly one of the best books I have ever read. What a delightful way to learn about the interdependency of nature, animals and humans.

Welcome to the New Editor!

We are pleased to welcome Dr. Marí Cortez to the SECA family as the new Editor of *Dimensions of Early Childhood*.

Marí is currently serving as the Chair of the Department of Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching at the University of Texas at San Antonio and brings a wealth of experience in the early childhood field to this new venture.

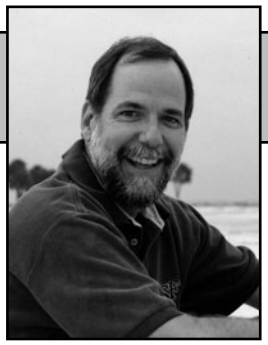
She received her Bachelor's degree from St. Mary's University in San Antonio and her Master's degree from the University of Texas at San Antonio. She went on to earn a Doctor of Philosophy degree at the University of Texas at Austin with a specialization in Curriculum and Instruction. Her areas of specialization include: Multilingual Studies and Early Childhood Education and her Research Interests include Latino Family Engagement, Developmentally Appropriate Environments for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Children, and Children's Play in School Settings.

Her latest publication, *Parents as Partners in Education: Families and Schools Working Together* was published with co-author E. H. Berger in 2012 by Pearson. Her articles have appeared in *Young Children*, *Multicultural Education*, the *Journal of Early Childhood Teacher Education* and *Journal of Early Childhood Research*.

Marí officially began her duties with SECA on October 1, 2013. She will have her first meeting with the SECA Editorial Committee at the annual conference in Williamsburg, Virginia in January 2014.

We are delighted that Marí has agreed to work with SECA to support the further development of our journal and to bring a new and diverse perspective to the role. Welcome, Marí!

Thank You Stephen and Karen!



Our thanks go out to Dr. Stephen Graves and Karen Leffler who have served in an editorial capacity during 2013, a transition year as SECA moves to a new editorial system. Dr. Graves as served as *Dimensions* editor while Karen assisted him as a copy editor. Their contributions to the process have been valued and we appreciate their service to SECA.

How the Editorial Process Works

We hope that you are considering submitting a manuscript for consideration by our new *Dimensions* editor and reviewers, and we thought it might be helpful to explain how the process works.

- Authors prepare a manuscript for submission based on the guidelines that can be found at http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/publications.php. We require that the manuscripts be prepared according to APA style.
- Manuscripts are sent as e-mail attachments to editor@southernearlychildhood.org.
- Authors are notified that the manuscripts are received and the manuscript is forwarded on to the *Dimensions* Editor.
- At that point, the Editor determines whether the manuscript should be sent for review and assigns three (3) reviewers for the manuscript. (If the manuscript is not prepared according to the published guidelines, it will automatically be declined.)
- Upon receipt of the reviews, the Editor determines if the manuscript will be accepted, accepted with revisions, recommended for re-submission with revisions or declined.
- Depending upon the recommendation from the reviewers, authors may begin the process of readying the manuscript for publication. Authors will be kept informed of every step during the process.

We accept manuscripts at any time during the year and the review and editing process is a continual one. Articles are generally published with 12 months of receipt. We also encourage authors to submit photos to illustrate their articles and those guidelines can be found at http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/publications.php. Click on Submit Photos for information.

Remember, *Dimensions of Early Childhood* will become an on-line only journal in 2014, so we have the capacity to add significantly to the design of the article and will publish in full color.

We look forward to receiving your manuscript!

Hands-on, Heads-on, Hearts-on Learning

with Chris Kelley

Join us for the **2014 Trainer's Institute** for 6 hours of "hands-on, heads-on, hearts-on" adult learning, centered around the conference theme *Children's Play: Past, Present and Future*. Chris will introduce brain-based learning and how adults need certain things to happen in training in order to grab attention, build interest and encourage retention.

For the "hearts-on" learning, you'll explore toys and games from the past (jacks, pick-up sticks, Red Rover) to demonstrate techniques to engage learners. She'll tie the concept of "heads-on" learning to present practice in ECE and use a case study as an engaging, effective, problem-solving technique. For the "hands-on" learning, you'll explore the future with technology (polling, chats, etc.)

About Chris: Working with young children, their families and teachers for over 30 years, she has served in a variety of roles: classroom teacher to center director to agency executive to public school administrator to teacher trainer. In her current position at Children, Inc., Chris mentors teachers in partnering with families, trains mental health and early childhood professionals in the Devereux Early Childhood Program, teaches CDA scholars and works with programs to align curriculum with Early Childhood Standards. Chris is a TIPP Master Trainer, providing Beyond Fundamentals of Effective Training modules to credentialed trainers. She holds a Master's Degree in Early Childhood Leadership from Bank Street College, which she thanks for providing a rich perspective about adult learners.

2014 Trainer Institute

Cultivating the Outdoor Classroom: Why, What, How?

with Eric Nelson

The Director's Seminar is designed each year to provide directors and administrators throughout the SECA region an opportunity to network and gain knowledge and information about a topic of interest to program administrators.

We are fortunate to be able to provide our participants in the **2014 Director's Seminar** with an expert who can share the why, how and when of developing these spaces, recognizing this is something that does not occur overnight, requires buy-in from staff and parents and will be developed as resources allow. Eric will share strategies for those who are just getting started and those who would like some new ideas.

Eric Nelson, M.A, is the Director of Consulting and Education Services for the Child Educational Center, Caltech/JPL Community and the Director of the Outdoor Classroom Project (OCP) which has delivered training in outdoor programs and environments since 2003. He currently directs the Outdoor Classroom Project and the Preschool Food and Healthy Habits Initiative in Santa Barbara County, California. He is the author of *Cultivating Outdoor Classrooms*, published in 2012 by Redleaf Press.

2014 Director's Seminar

For the Institute and Seminar agendas and to register for the conference, go to http://www.southernearlychildhood.org/seca_conference.php

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Toll Free: 800-305-7322
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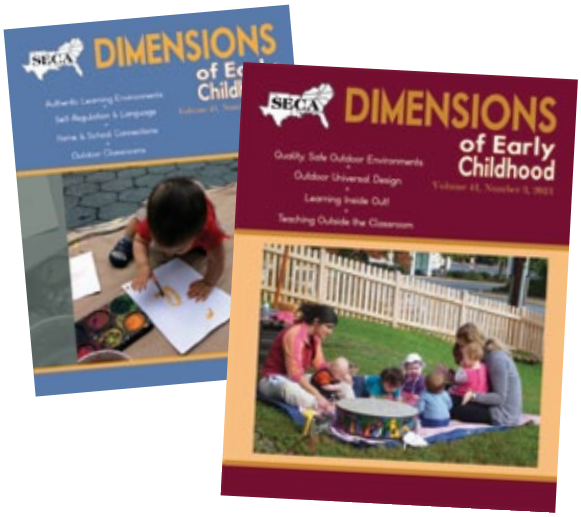

This issue of *Dimensions of Early Childhood* will be your last printed copy that will arrive in the mail.

We've made the decision to produce the journal in an on-line format for the following reasons:

- We can produce an issue in full color throughout the publication, enhancing the visual interest and quality of our articles. (Compare this copy with the summer 2013 issue that was on-line only…..see the difference?)
- The cost of printing and mailing has become prohibitive without a significant dues increase and the SECA Board of Directors is committed to keeping your dues as low as possible.
- Access to the journal will be 24 hours per day/365 days per year since you will only have to go to the website to access it. No more lost journals in the summer!
- The on-line format will allow you much more versatility in copying and pulling out the items that you need from the journal.

Don't forget, we need your e-mail address to make sure you receive notification that the journal is available. You can send an update or new address to info@southernearlychildhood.org.

But I Want a Print Copy!

We heard you, so we're offering that print option with an additional subscription. The cost of the print subscription will be $15 per year in addition to your SECA dues. You'll pay this subscription fee separately each year and we'll print and mail you a copy. (You will also still have access to the on-line version, so you have the best of both worlds!)

For information on how to access the print subscription, go to www.southernearlychildhood.org or call the SECA office at 1-800-305-7322. We're pleased to be able to offer you such a low cost alternative.