Considerations in Creating the Outdoor Classroom

Approaches that Honour Children and the Outdoor Environment
What’s the difference?

Appearance

**Traditional playground**
- Usually a playscape in the centre of an asphalt yard
- Built of plastic and metal and sometimes wood
- Hopscotch, lines on asphalt
- Basketball/soccer nets

**Outdoor classroom**
- Bushes, trees, rocks, soil, asphalt
- Aesthetically pleasing
- Variety of surfaces (hard/soft- asphalt, grass, wood, soil, mulch)
- Variety of materials (mobile & stationary)
What’s the difference?

Purpose

**Traditional playground**
- A place for gross motor development
- Running, jumping
- Balls, skipping ropes

**Outdoor classroom**
- Fine and gross motor opportunities
- Interaction with nature (variety of plants & living organisms)
- Variety of surfaces (hard/soft)
- Variety of activities for children to engage in
The outdoor classroom is a place where children can:

- Investigate
- Explore
- Experiment
Outdoor Spaces Prior to Full Day Kindergarten

Primarily focused on gross motor activity space

- Running (play tag)
- Riding tricycles
- Digging in sandbox

Staff were viewed as supervisors
Outdoor Classrooms Now

Viewed as an outdoor classroom where children:

- investigate
- explore
- experiment
Impact of the Outdoor Classroom

The teaching team shapes children’s thinking by:
- responding, 
- extending and
- challenging their learning
• Integrates the following 6 domains:
  o Personal and Social Development
  o Language
  o Mathematics
  o Science and Technology
  o Health and Physical Activity
  o The Arts
Outdoor Classroom

Children actively take on the roles of

- Collaborator
- Author
- Illustrator
- Mathematician
- Scientist
- Artist
Outdoor Classroom

Educators use the outdoors as a way to explore along with the children by asking open-ended questions to extend and connect learning.

“I wonder what we might see if we turn over the rock”
Outdoor Classroom

The learning taking place indoors extends to the outdoors...
Outdoor Classroom

... and back into the classroom through writing, illustrations, explanations, pictures, models...
Use of Space

“When planning for the use of space in the classroom and outdoors, Early Learning-Kindergarten teams should . . . use appropriate spaces for a range of activities in the outside play area

• planting,
• water play,
• gross-motor activities,
• science and technology investigations);”

FDELK, 2010
Varied learning Environments

• “The learning environments for early learning include the school yard, fields and trails in the vicinity of the school, and various other outdoor venues.

• Teaching children to appreciate and respect the environment is an integral part of being active in these spaces . . .

• To facilitate these connections, Early Learning-Kindergarten teams are encouraged to take children out of the classroom and into the world beyond the school to help them observe, explore, and appreciate nature.”
To meet the needs of these inquisitive children, the learning environment must be:

- active,
- hands-on,
- child-centred, and
- inquiry-based.
TCDSB Kindergarten Playground Standards

Preferred Elements:

Security
Area
Shade
Variety of Surfaces
Access to Nature

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TCDSB Kindergarten
Playground Standards

Preferred Elements:

- Seating
- Water
- Storage
- Room to run and ride tricycles
TCDSB Kindergarten Playground Standards

Additional Elements (subject to community budget)

Changes in topography
Sand Play Area
Outdoor chalkboard
Large Clump Shrubs
Planters
TCDSB Kindergarten Playground Standards

Additional Elements
(subject to community budget)

Corduroy bridge/rumble strips
Logs for climbing/balancing
Space for fixed elements
Hooks/storage
Pavement painting
Reasons for Supporting Naturalized Playgrounds

Developmental Benefits for Children

- **Physical**
  - Climbing
  - Balancing
  - Jumping

- **Emotional**
  - Contact with nature
  - Experience seasons

- **Intellectual / Cognitive**
  - Supports children’s curiosity
  - Inspires creativity
  - Develops good judgement

- **Social**
  - Cooperation
  - Sharing
  - Negotiation
Reasons for Supporting Naturalized Playgrounds

Good Practice

- In keeping with the philosophy and spirit of the Catholic school Board
- Stewardship of the earth
- Supports inquiry based learning and the curriculum
Reasons for Supporting Naturalized Playgrounds

City of Toronto Municipal Requirements

- Urban heat island reduction
- Storm water retention
- Enhance the urban forest
- Better air quality and reduced greenhouse gas emissions
Consultation

- Decisions as to what goes into a playground are part of a collaborative consultation process including:

  Teachers
  Principal
  Parents
  Students
  Community members
  Facilities and Capital Staff
  Custodian
Considerations

- What is the size of the space?
- Who will be using the space? (Ages)
- When will the space be used? (during school, summer, evenings)
Considerations

• How will the space be used?
• How will children interact with the space?
• What do the children want to see in the space?
• What elements do the stakeholders want in the space? (relate to purpose)
• What materials will be used? Will the materials be cycled through the space or will they be stationary?
Considerations

• What is the level of funding available?
• Will fundraising take place to enhance the space?
• Will grant applications take place?
• How will decisions be made?
• How will the information be communicated? To parents? To staff? To children? To the community?
Considerations

- How will children be taught how to use the space?
- Will children be taught how to take care of the space?
A picture is worth a thousand words...
Documenting the transformation

Creating an outdoor learning environment will spark a young child’s imagination and their ability to engage in deeper inquiry.

In an outdoor learning environment:
- Being outdoors is a prime impact on children's socio-emotional well-being and helps all aspects of children's development.
- Being outdoors offers opportunities for doing things in different ways and on different scales than indoors.
- It gives children first-hand contact with weather.
- It provides children with a sense of well-being.
- Outdoor environments offer children freedom to explore, use their senses, and be physically active and resilient.

What a powerful tool that the outdoors can be on a student's ability to spark new learning opportunities for themselves.

Our team also believes that by providing greater access to nature in the outdoor environment, the children will become more curious and open to inquiry.

We believe the children can...

Join a group of other students in the outdoor environment and learn about their thinking. Encourage them to observe, describe, and compare their thinking about the ideas they encounter.

Do more analysis of the outdoor environment and arrange to have the children focus on the different features and aspects of the space.

Encourage the children to think about their own thinking, and ask questions about their personal experiences.
The Making Of Our 'Place of Wonder'

Take a stroll around our natural learning environment.