

Chapter 4

Tumbling Down the Green: Nature–Based Play and Learning in Young Children

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ABSTRACT

Interactions with natural surroundings provide young children with an opportunity to build knowledge, promote social skills, develop emotional dispositions, and can help them develop a caring and positive attitude toward themselves and the environment. This chapter focuses on the partnership between Towson University College of Education and the campus-based University Child Care Center and their concerted effort to bring nature-based experiences to children in spaces both outside and inside their classrooms. The authors also provide specific examples of how recycled waste is used to create instructional materials and games that help the classroom community to become more eco-conscious. The chapter also includes suggestions for future educational research into how children interact and gain knowledge from the environment and the impact this has on children's growth and development. Recommendations are provided for early childhood educators to advocate for green spaces and include environmental activities for children, families, schools, and communities.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the partnership between Towson University (TU) College of Education, Early Childhood Education (ECE) Department and the Towson University Child Care Center. The Child Care Center has served as a lab school for TU faculty and pre-service teachers to observe and work with young children ages 2-5. The ECE Department and the Child Care Center share the importance of implementing developmentally appropriate practices with young children. The current state-of-the-art Child Care Center building includes a colorful, open, child-friendly indoor space and an outdoor nature playscape. Accordingly, the Child Care Center upholds that,

The arts and nature programs are rooted in the ideal that the early childhood years should be full of joy, inquiry, discovery, challenge, healthy risk, and secure relationships! We believe that the earliest memories of a school environment should be full of learning experiences which stimulate all of the senses, includes ample outdoor play in our nature playscape, making mud pies, jumping in mud puddles, and climbing on rocks.... (The University Child Care Center. (n.d.). <https://www.towson.edu/childcare/>.)

The authors, therefore, will focus on one of the key features of the University Child Care Center namely the outdoor nature playscape along with the indoor nature-based classroom spaces and activities. It will also describe the kinds of play and learning observed by the teachers at the center. The authors provide examples of materials and activities created by in-service and pre-service teachers from discarded recyclable materials. Additionally, possible areas for future inquiry and research are presented. Recommendations are also proposed on how early childhood educators can advocate for green spaces and plan eco-conscious activities for young children in any classroom as they move through the grades.

Background

According to the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF, Sustainability and Children's Rights, 2014), young people at every stage of their education should be informed about the dangers of environmental degradation, overuse of fossil energies, and the prospects of renewable energy. Therefore, educators are urged to include environmental and energy-related topics in the curricula and the everyday life of the school community.

During the preschool years, before children enter kindergarten, educators focus on developing early skills in literacy, numeracy, science, and other disciplines. These skills can be effectively and expertly promoted from an early age within a nature-

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