

Participant Feedback from the Eleventh McKee Learning Lunch

Pre-school Outdoor Education

November 30, 2016

This learning experience is co-sponsored by the Wauhatchie School Forest Kindergarten and the McKee Chair of Excellence in Learning, University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Introduction

A worldwide wave of interest and start-up action involving the value of taking very young children outdoors is taking place. The movement, which focuses on purposefully exposing children to nature, started in Europe and is spreading rapidly throughout the United States. One of the most common applications of this movement is *forest kindergarten*.

There are now several forest kindergartens in and around Chattanooga. What is driving this initiative locally as well as globally? Is the concept worthy of our further consideration as a community? If so, what steps should be taken to address and support it? We explored those questions at this McKee Learning Lunch.

The session began with three short videos about forest kindergartens in Germany, England, and Chattanooga. Then, in accordance with the process used at every McKee Learning Lunch, there were three general feedback opportunities, or Assignments 1, 2, and 3. The participants, who are listed at the end of this report, have provided their insights and questions about the topic. Those responses and insights are presented below.

Assignment 1

Post-presentation Questions: Following the discussion, participants posed questions about forest kindergartens. The questions are listed below.

Awareness and Training

- How can we convince state-level education leaders of the need for a forest kindergarten in every school?
- Why are pre-service teachers not being trained in outdoor education?
- What type of training is required to support an outdoor classroom?
- How do we educate parents and the general public about this?
- Are there specific strategies with which [outdoor-kindergarten] teachers are equipped?

Curriculum and Instruction

- Is there a specific curriculum, or do lessons evolve from the children's curiosity?
- What should schools look like for these students throughout early childhood?
- Would there be any "base" facilities used, or would everything be outside?
- How are lessons (such as math) demonstrated outdoors for all the students to learn the new materials (e.g., a whiteboard to show the problem, etc.)? How are they integrated with nature?
- How is instruction incorporated into outdoor education?

- How do forest-kindergarten teachers connect nature, learning, and play?
- How is pre-school outdoor education structured to be developmentally appropriate?
- What age or developmental stage is defined as pre-school?
- Why limit forest schools to pre-school and kindergarten?

Linkage to State-mandated Learning Standards

- What successes have U.S. outdoor schools had with addressing a mandated curriculum while staying true to the outdoor classroom model?
- What learning standards are attached to the curriculum, if any?
- Is forest kindergarten recognized as a certified kindergarten program by the state of Tennessee? Georgia? North Carolina?
- Does the forest-kindergarten program meet all of the kindergarten standards for Tennessee? Georgia? North Carolina?
- How do we keep children “safe” (from a public perspective)?

Critique and Assessment

- What are the goals of outdoor education for pre-school?
- How do teachers track and assess learning?
- How do U.S. examples of outdoor education compare to their counterparts in the originating European countries?
- What outcome differences do you see with outdoor pre-school vs. regular pre-school?
- Are modified pre-school settings as successful as standard settings?
- How do parents respond to and support or oppose outdoor experiences? Are their reactions personal or educational?

Pre-kindergarten Outdoor-school Programs (Present and Future)

- How many forest kindergartens in the U.S. are based on the European model?
- How many pre-school outdoor programs are there in this region?
- What are some pre-kindergarten outdoor-education programs in our area (not just field trips)?
- What is the growth rate in recent years, now that this has become more of a conversation?
- What does the future of outdoor pre-school education look like as the climate changes?
- How do we make it happen in Chattanooga?

Benefits and Impact

- Does forest kindergarten cost less than typical pre-K and daycare programs?
- Does the program help kids focus?
- What can pre-school outdoor programs do for children who do not have a good home-life?
- Are there long-term benefits?
- What impact will this type of learning have on our technology-prone world?

Assignment 2

Discussion Question: After the presentation, participants, in groups of four, discussed three assigned questions. Questions and responses are listed below.

Question 1. What is your earliest memory of being outdoors in nature?

- Outdoors with animals on grandmother's farm, growing up on four acres, getting stung by bees, playing with brothers, following great-granddad, fishing, playing in the horse barn on family property.
- Going out early in the day and playing until the dark, playing with other children in the neighborhood. Everyone spent many hours outside. We climbed, ran, and investigated regularly to experience the world around us.
- Being able to go outside with class if workbooks were done by lunch, hiking with parents in Colorado, field trips.
- Looking under rocks, lying on a fallen tree while reading a book, picking daisies and violets (there were *fields* of them!), collecting pretty pebbles, catching bees in jars to hear them hum (Of *course*, I released them!).
- Playing outside after school until dark, spending time on the porch with family and friends, unsupervised daily activities, camping and fishing with brothers and families, building forts and playing in the neighborhood while all the families watched over the kids.

Question 2. How do you think that being outdoors in nature is different for pre-schoolers today from what it was 50 years ago?

- Our living and housing arrangements do not always provide children with the opportunity to play outdoors like those formerly typical for our area.
- Kids used to play outside until the fireflies came out and lamps came on. Today, it is more dangerous to let kids wander around. Also, technology is a distraction.
- Stronger degree of trust, pre-K was optional, the preparation for our kids for kindergarten and first grade is different today (more academic focus).
- Pre-K did not formally exist; therefore, kids were at home with family. Technology was less of a distraction, the neighborhoods and communities were safer.

Question 3. What does Chattanooga have to offer relative to pre-school outdoor education?

- Innovative culture combined outdoor settings.
- A wide variety of outdoor areas and exposures: water, mountains, animals, plants, Project Wet and Wild, schools (such as Red Bank Elementary School) with outdoor-kindergarten programs.
- Natural landscape. Chattanooga has been recognized as being an outdoor destination spot, and there are tremendous opportunities for outdoor education.
- Previously existing outdoor school programs.
- Wonderful outdoor settings [and] many schools with adjacent lands for exploration.

Assignment 3

Post-discussion Question: After the discussion, we asked participants to respond, in writing, to two additional questions. The questions and responses are listed below.

Question 1. What is the most important thing you learned today?

Foundational Pre-kindergarten Outdoor-education Knowledge

- Learning more about outdoor education and being able to hear about its benefits, how it has already been implemented in other countries, and seeing interviews with parents and educators.
- Students are not ready for academics in pre-school; they still need play.
- Trust is necessary for student learning and exploration. Students will perform as “expected.”
- Pre-school—not kindergarten as we know it here in the states.
- Forest kindergarten is a pre-K program in U.S.

Common Interest

- The great amount interest in and support for outdoor education and pre-school.
- The interest is here on a broad level in Chattanooga. So excited that this study group was put together to start the conversation!
- I am very excited that others are interested in this movement and believe that this group or type of group should continue to meet or keep in touch to keep the support moving forward.
- There is already a movement here, and there are many interested entities. We have the potential to make Chattanooga the forest-school capital of the U.S.!
- There is diversity in the people who are interested in this topic.

Impact on Learning

- How forest pre-kindergarten and kindergarten can be a wonderful foundation for later learning.
- Organic experience leads to organic learning.
- The value that people see in outdoor education and how it leads to investigation and unstructured but invaluable learning.

Recent Growth in the U.S.

- How this is growing here!
- The large number of local programs doing outdoor learning.

Question 2. What unanswered question(s) are you leaving with?

Support and Approval

- Will the Hamilton County Department of Education support the idea of outdoor pre-K, since they have the opportunity to [make an] in this way?
- How do we get teacher-education and public-school-administration programs to promote this type of learning?

- How do we confront teachers who have been through the system [but] who hesitate to figure it out for themselves?
- With the current emphasis in schools on assessment, how can we popularize this movement?

Comparison to Other Pre-kindergarten Programs in the U.S.

- Does the forest-kindergarten curriculum meet the State of Tennessee program standards? If not, should we rethink it as a pre-K program?
- How are public schools going to address state and district academic expectations within the outdoor classroom model?
- How do Montessori and forest-kindergarten schools compare?
- What are the statistics for forest-kindergarten schools?
- What are the learning requirements and cost analysis of implementation?
- How will this movement grow?

Next Steps/Implementation

- How can we keep the discussion and collaborative learning and inquiry continuing?
- Are there any obstacles or barriers we did not mention or address in this Learning Lunch?
- What are the next steps to making Chattanooga the forest-kindergarten capital of the U.S.?
- What is the next step? What timeframe and place are we looking at?

Participants

We would like to thank the following participants for their interest in and contribution to this McKee Learning Lunch.

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