

## **OUTDOOR LEARNING - GROWING THE MINDSET**

*A global perspective on promoting advantage for all children through the use of the outdoors to redress vulnerability.*

Norway and New Zealand are well known for their outdoor lifestyles and an intrinsic focus on learning in the outdoors. Friluftts barnehage, outdoor life kindergartens in Norway inspired us to think differently about our approach to outdoor learning in Australia. Outdoor learning isn't only in forests or the bush, but also by the seaside or the surroundings of a lake and in the mountains. The outdoors provides a range of adapted learning environments for all students to experience success. The Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF) for Australia and Age Appropriate Pedagogies (AAP) for school age children underpinned our work and is transferrable across different contexts for children of all ages. This presentation is a stimulus for pedagogic reform underpinned by Carol Dweck's Growth Mindset model, to redress some of the challenges facing 21<sup>st</sup> century learners.

Modern technologies and engagement in highly structured activities resulted in children having over scheduled busy lifestyles, and an increased reliance on instant gratification derived from passive entertainment. Children had limited opportunities to explore natural environments and be active decision makers in their own learning. The innate desire to play appeared to have been lost as children were not initiating or sustaining engagement. They lacked focus and gave up easily, especially when confronted with challenge. Teachers noted an intensification of undesirable behaviours, aggression, acting out and disconnection. Increasing numbers of children were presenting with social and emotional challenges and/or a diagnosis, resulting in an over-reliance on iPads to assist with co-regulation.

Our early childhood and outside school hours centre is fortunate to have an outdoor learning environment complete with mud, moss, roots and rocks where children have a strong sense of ownership, responsibility and connection to the land. (Way, Boland, & McFadden, 2014, p. 27). *Being* in the natural environment supports well-being, encourages wonder and curiosity, discovery and physical/practical challenges. When children can 'Be' in the moment and feel at one with nature, the potential for anxiety and sensory overload is reduced. 'Grounding' is a wellness term we use to refer to life-force connections through the natural elements of fire, water, earth and air, a basic need of all humankind. The affordances within the natural environment for well-being and engagement is well known, however little empirical evidence was found conceptualising the use of the outdoors as a strategic intervention with children who are diagnosed on the autism spectrum, as well as children who have social and emotional challenges. The outdoors offers a different context for learning, challenge and success, which goes beyond the constraints within traditional school/kindergarten inside environments.

Our research encourages organizational flexibility to embrace diversity and challenges preconceptions and mental models about learning and pedagogy. Inspired by the Growth Mindset model, challenge was identified as a fundamental influence on the development of resilience and grit. Redefining challenge and struggle meant we stopped doing everything for children and gave them time and space to question, wobble, discover and practice skills.

*Through continuous engagement with the outdoor space, children are involved in theory building, construction of new knowledge and inquiry based learning (Coates, 2011).*

Through play based exploration and authentic learning of life skills in the outdoors children developed higher levels of agency and self-efficacy. They were able to self-regulate and found new strategies to cope with challenging emotions and situations. Intentional teaching was built into pedagogical practice, complemented by child voice to map the pathway of learning. Child-centered and relationship based pedagogies from (AAP) use hooks to engage, build on prior knowledge, socially construct learning, encourage exploration, wonder, dialogue and wobble.

Our interactive presentation brings a global perspective to outdoor learning. We aim to expose bias, develop shared understanding and inspire educators to seek opportunities inherent in the outdoors. Participants will be involved in practical challenges and dialogue to support their thinking and to share strategies through experiential engagement.

Intentionally creating a learning need/want that immerses children in authentic learning leads to meaningful engagement, collaboration and acceptance of diversity. When children have a sense of agency the need for managing behaviours and co-regulation is reduced. Rather than impose formal learning through extrinsic rewards, children are intrinsically motivated. Learning life skills and curriculum content is woven into the fabric of child initiated hands-on play, intentional teaching and 'seize the moment' opportunities (DWEER, 2009, p. 15). Connections to others and place, help children feel physically and emotionally safe, sense that they *belong*, and experience success. Growth mindset thinking and outdoor learning are strategic interventions that build resiliency and self-efficacy for all children. These dispositions are crucial for learners meeting 21<sup>st</sup> century challenges and provide a foundation for (EYLF's) *belonging, being and becoming*.