The Joys & Challenges of Managing a Nature-Based Program
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A bit about me...
- Nature-based early childhood education consultant (Founder of Samara Early Learning LLC)
- Author of Establishing a Nature-based Preschool & Preschool Beyond Walls
- Doctoral candidate at Michigan State University
- 10 years as founding director of Chippewa Nature Center’s Nature Preschool in Midland, MI

Today’s Agenda
1. What is Nature-based Early Childhood Education (NbECE)?
2. Addressing the challenges of NbECE implementation...
   - Convincing naysayers
   - Pedagogical leadership
   - Administrative leadership
Nature is all the rage...

Nature Preschools are growing!

www.naturalstart.org

The blending of two disciplines

Nature-Based Early Childhood Education (NbECE)

Early Childhood Education
Child Development

Environmental Education
Environmental Sustainability

Nature Kindergarten
Nature-Based Preschools
Nature-Based Childcare
Sorting out the different models

**Nature-based preschools:**
- The 1 or 2 years before Kindergarten
- At least 30% of time is outdoors
- Historical roots in U.S. nature centers

**Forest preschools (a.k.a., "forest kindergarten"):**
- The 1 or 2 years before Kindergarten
- 70-100% of time is outdoors
- Historical roots in German "Waldkindergartens"

**Nature kindergarten:**
- The grade before 1st grade (5-year-olds)
- At least 30% of time is outdoors

**Nature 1st-3rd grade:**
- Grades 1st-3rd
- At least 30% of time is outdoors

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**Forest school:**
- UK term
- Regular visits to a natural area led by a Forest School certified practitioner
- Similar to field trips in the U.S. to nature centers

**Pedagogy is more important than program model!**
• Disrupting the human/nature binary

“Nature is always trying to tell us we are not so superior or independent or alone or autonomous as we may think.”

- Wendell Berry

What counts as nature?
Nature-based pedagogy

- Disruption of the human/nature binary
- Extensive, daily outdoor time
- Child-driven emergent curriculum (thus seasonal) emphasizes learning with nature

Learning in, about, & with nature...

...emphasizing learning with

Learning in nature

- Physically occurs outdoors
- Does not depend on nature for learning to occur
- Mostly teacher-led
- Examples: Sensory table outside, reading a story about trucks, drawing ballerinas
Learning about nature
- Physically occurs indoors or outdoors
- Content focused on nature
- Mostly teacher-led
- May build over time
- Examples: life cycle of a frog; names of birds

Learning with nature
- Physically occurs outdoors
- Outside teacher’s plans
- Mostly child-led because it emerges out of experience
- Builds over time
- Examples: Discovery & asking questions about scat; studying a found dead bird

Nature-based pedagogy
- Disruption of the human/nature binary
- Extensive, daily outdoor time
- Child-driven emergent curriculum (thus seasonal) emphasizes learning with nature
- Learning occurs in, among, between three physical spaces: Inside, Outside, Beyond
Inside
- Designated areas
- Areas & materials labeled (i.e., environmental print)
- Extensive human-made materials; some natural materials

Outside (natural play area)
- General zones not designated areas
- Not labeled for specific use (environmental print can be integrated in other ways!)
- More even balance of human-made & natural materials
- Varied sizes of loose parts to manipulate

Beyond
- Designations for communicating in conversation, not labeled
- Natural materials dominate, some human-made materials
- Non-human elements as another teacher—for both children & adults
Nature-based pedagogy

- Disrupting the human/nature binary
- Extensive, daily outdoor time
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- Learning occurs in, among, between three physical spaces:
  - Inside
  - Outside
  - Beyond

The common journey of NbECE implementation

- Convincing naysayers
- Pedagogical leadership challenges
- Administrative leadership challenges
Challenge:
Convincing staff &/or families of the value of NbECE

Speak to their minds & hearts
- Share the research (Children & Nature Network has a great research library)
- Share the successes of other programs (Natural Start Alliance has program spotlights)
- Ask them to reflect on their own childhood (Though recognize not everyone had nature experiences)

The joy of management is...

Children's joy!
Challenge:

Convincing families children will be ready for Kindergarten

Articulating the learning
- Translate activities to development
- Talk in lay language not teacher language (e.g., thinking skills vs. cognitive development)
- Provide ongoing family education about the role of nature in learning (e.g., family newsletters, FB posts, family education nights, etc.)
- Encourage families to volunteer

The joy of management is...

Keeping the FUN in learning academic skills
Challenge:

Yeah, but... clothing!

Yes, clothing is a necessary tool

- **Have it**
  - Purchase class sets
  - Have a stockpile of “extras”
  - Ask families to donate what they’ve outgrown

- **Clean It**
  - Kids & clothes are washable ☺
  - Dry, shake & then wash (for mud)
  - In the meantime, have a place for dirty gear outside of classroom

- **Store It**

The joy of management is...

Seeing children connect to something bigger than themselves
The journey includes challenges around...

- Convincing naysayers
- Pedagogical leadership challenges
- Administrative leadership challenges

Challenge:

Teachers aren’t engaged in outdoor play

The outdoor space IS a classroom
- This isn’t recess!
- Bring indoor classroom materials outside
- Add a variety of natural & human-made loose parts
- Changing the environment will change the play
Challenge:
Connecting learning across all three physical spaces

Inside   Outside   Beyond

Connect learning inside, outside, & beyond

Connect learning inside, outside, & beyond
Challenge:

Documenting learning outside & beyond (in all weather)

Be creative & realistic
- Notetaking on note-size paper (not clipboards)
- Use technology to your advantage:
  - Video
  - Photos
  - Voice memos
  - Documentation apps (if applicable)
- Document the study as a group
- It’s okay NOT to document sometimes!!

Challenge:

Implementing sustainable practices that align with nature-based values
Be intentional about sustainable practices

- Rain barrels outside for water play (rather than potable water)
- Natural loose parts rather than manufactured ones
- Real plates, utensils, etc.
- Cloth napkins & towels

You may have to make tradeoffs, but be intentional & thoughtful

The journey includes challenges around:

- Convincing naysayers
- Pedagogical leadership challenges
- Administrative leadership challenges

Challenge:

Finding professional learning opportunities for staff
Nature-based support DOES exist
- Identify your team’s need
- Find the right person to help
  - Speakers you’ve heard at conferences
  - Authors of your favorite books
  - Ask other nature-based educators who they’ve used
  - Early Childhood Investigations Directory
- Natural Start Alliance
- Be creative in implementation—don’t limit yourself to a one-time workshop

Challenge:

Working with State Regulators
(e.g., Licensing, Quality Rating Improvement System)

It IS possible
- Maintain an attitude of possibility
- Remember the shared goals
- Reflect on the intent of rules/standards
- Have a dialogue with regulators
- Look to other states & programs for their experiences

Nature-based, safe, & high-quality are not mutually exclusive terms!
The joy of management is...

Finding like-minded educators

“You nature people in early childhood are just as passionate & vocal as the play people!”

Challenge:

Once you’re successful, other professionals will want to visit!

Share with other educators...as you’re able

- Does sharing align with your mission?
- Be realistic about your constraints
- You might:
  - Limit tours to certain days of the week/month
  - Host quarterly open houses for educators only
  - Host tours when children aren’t there
  - Create an educator’s FAQ page on your website
  - Ask for a donation
  - Host a nature-based speaker for a workshop open to local educators
The joy of management is...

Influencing the way we
the field of early
childhood operates

Where we’ve been

1. What is Nature-based Early
   Childhood Education (NbECE)?
2. Addressing the challenges of NbECE
   implementation...
   • Con vinc ing naysayers
   • Pedagogical leadership
   • Administrative leadership

Looking to the future...

• Remember the WHY of this work
• Connect with others doing similar work
• Be patient with yourself, team, children, &
families

Keep changing lives!