Reflection on the Value of Taking Students Outdoors and Doing Environmental Education

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Participating in the Teaching Environmental Education Workshop Series has been a wonderful experience for me. I have always been interested in the outdoors and when this opportunity came along to help me work more of the natural environment into my teaching I jumped at the chance. I have always considered myself somewhat of an environmentalist, but the four workshops really opened my eyes to many more things I can do and all the wonderful ways I can work the environment into my classroom.

The number one workshop for me was the PLT workshop. I am currently a kindergarten teacher for Detroit Public Schools and the Project Learning Tree workshop was geared towards the age of the children I teach. I also was thrilled with the workshop on installing an outdoor classroom. It is because of this workshop I was able to open some doors for the school I am currently at and we are now in the process of having an outdoor classroom built for the school. The entire school’s population is enthusiastic about this opportunity, and as an added bonus, it has encouraged the maintenance staff to now care for the area that it is being built in. This sends a positive message to our students that they are worth providing opportunities such as this for, and I am excited to start working with them.

I am a very big man that has always struggled with weight and other problems that are normally associated with an inactive life style. As a child, my parents helped me by getting me interested in the outdoors and away from sitting all day inside in front of the television. I feel that many of the diseases that our urban children are facing today, obesity, childhood diabetes, and asthma, can be minimized or possibly eliminated by taking our children outside everyday. The more we can teach our children to enjoy the outdoors the more likely they are to turn off the TV and head to the backyard to watch the real show of a life time. There have been studies done to show that children who go outside are more likely to weigh less and thus be far less likely to suffer from diabetes. So just teaching our children that the outdoors is a safe and fun place to be will help their health.

The workshop that I am currently incorporating into my lesson plans was presented by the Greening of Detroit. This was focused on how to have and use an outdoor classroom. We just finished building benches and raised garden beds. We will also be installing a white board so a teacher will have a fully functioning classroom in our courtyard. The Greening of Detroit and the children have also planted a tree in this space. I plan on taking my kindergarten class out to our classroom to teach them about the life cycle of plants and other living organisms, parts of a plant, and what plants need to live. This would be a great time to also introduce what people need to live, and to expand this idea to social studies and the concept of human needs and wants.

I will also use this space for other content areas. In social studies, I will teach mapping. I plan on using the space to help in math. For example, I will teach measuring by monitoring the
growth of a tree shoot in the spring (this is an idea that came straight from Mike Mansour and his PLT workshop). I will also teach measuring by having my children measure the depth of the snow (I have Brian Rajidl to thank for this lesson) in our outdoor classroom. Our school’s ultimate plan for this outdoor classroom is to install a pond and alternative power sources like solar and wind to teach our children how to harness the energy our environment gives us and not harm it while doing so.

The outdoor classroom will provide a hands-on lab for all the children in our school. By taking the children outside in this classroom, it is not only teaching them what is written in the lesson plan, but it also teaches them that there is more to do outside than just hang on a street corner to throw dice. By using this space to learn about plants and flowers, it takes these things out of the boring old textbook and puts it into the child’s hands. It is less of an abstract concept and becomes connected to what they can touch and smell. The outdoor classroom will have its challenges---like rain, bugs and getting the children to learn how to focus on the teacher and not those things---but the more they get used to the space, the less they will be distracted by other stuff. I will have the challenge of training the children take care of the space and take ownership of the area, but from what I learned from the planting of trees on Arbor Day, the more our children are involved, the more they will care for the area.

The Project Learning Tree workshop gave me great ideas on how I can incorporate the outdoors into my classroom. It also taught me that it is very important to start taking children out at an early age. I was excited to take the concepts that Mike Mansour presented at this workshop and put them into practice. For example, I plan on hanging a tree branch from my ceiling in my classroom and instead of having a word wall I will have a word branch. There were so many great ideas presented that day. One idea that I already use is a flower press, but Mike presented suggestions for things to press in addition to flowers. I will also have my children make instruments out of natural things like sticks and shells. Also it helped me come up with recycling ideas for making classroom instruments using bottle caps, plastic jugs, and metal cans. This will work great with teaching the concept of counting and associating a number with a corresponding group of objects. The PLT workshop was full of wonderful ideas like these that were geared towards early childhood learning, which is my favorite age to work with. If we can teach the little ones to learn, work in, and enjoy the outdoors, they will have this for a lifetime. The more I can get my kindergarten children outdoors, then hopefully they will want to continue to go outdoors when they are older. The PLT workshop presented many ways to get the little ones interested in learning about and in the outdoors.

These four workshops (Winter Ecology, Project Learning Tree Early Learners, Creating A Schoolyard Habitat, and Taking Kids Outside) have been a wonderful opportunity for me to learn more about getting my children outside. I have always been one for recess outside, but now to have ideas on how to work the curriculum in to the outdoors is invaluable and I am extremely appreciative of the opportunity that these professional development opportunities offered me. I think and hope that I can teach children to love, enjoy, and appreciate the environment the way I do or more. These workshops have given me the tools to do that.