

Project Description

When we first thought of this project, it was our intention to have each participant host a day in their school. Since our board spans across three regions: Laval, Laurentides, and Lanaudiere, we knew that the teachers would be able to experience a wide variety of outdoor settings. We planned to visit each school to test out our lessons with the children. Following that, we would gather together in the host school to carry out the planning part of the afternoon. We thought that if the teachers interacted with the children, trying out their lessons during different times of the year, they would have a broader sense of what outdoor learning can look like.

Just before we were to begin this project, the world was hit with the Covid 19 pandemic and everything came to a grinding halt. We had to rethink how we could do this project without gathering in a host school, without trying out our activities with the children, without being together. Gone were the ideas of us all playing in the snow or running through the school yard or even sitting around a table planning. We had no choice but to hold our meetings via Zoom and this way, we were at least able to plan and collaborate together. Although the project took on a very different feel, we still managed to learn a lot and to shift our practice tremendously.

On top of a global pandemic, mid-way through the project, the MEQ launched a new Preschool Cycle and a whole new program was implemented. We needed to address the changes and learn about how these changes would affect us. As it turned out, this new program puts an emphasis on outdoor learning, so our project became even more relevant and important.

Unfortunately, one of our lead teachers, Kristin Crowdis, was on a leave for the majority of the project and was unable to attend most of the meetings. Since she was a lead-teacher, we were not able to replace her easily. The situation with the pandemic and all of the imposed restrictions also made it difficult to invite another teacher. Since all of the teachers on the project were maxed out in the number of days they were allowed to participate in the project, we could not reinvest the money in the teachers who were already participating.

Over the course of the project, we met a total of five times as a group and one day was used by each teacher to extend their learning in a unique way. Details for these days are included further in this report.. During these meetings, we always began the day by reporting back to each other about the outdoor learning that had taken place since the last meeting. Although we were not able to execute the project as we had planned and be in each others' schools, we still encouraged teachers to take their children outside as often as possible and to document this learning through pictures and videos. The teachers surprised us with some of the wonderful activities they planned for their classes. As the year progressed, we could see that their level of comfort was increasing and the lessons outside were becoming more frequent and for longer periods of time. The teachers had more and more to say at each meeting.

After they had taken the time to share their experiences, we would always have some information to share with them. Sometimes, we asked our lead teachers, Kelly Fahey and Kristen Crowdis to speak to the members. On one occasion, we invited one of our school board occupational therapists, Rebecca Sciotto, to address outdoor play from the view of motor development. We always made sure to include some articles or other sources of learning for the teachers.

Our afternoons consisted of the teachers branching off and planning activities that they could then execute back in their schools. This proved to be a little more difficult through Zoom, as the teachers were not only trying to get to know one another, they were also learning to work in breakout rooms and learning how to use a shared platform. As the meetings went on, they became more and more comfortable.

We provided a lesson plan template for them to use as they were planning the lessons, but when the new curriculum came out, we realized that it might need some tweaking in the future. We all agreed that it could stay the way it was for the purpose of the project, since the first part of our project was based on the old program, but that if we were to use it again in the future, we would need to adjust it to better reflect the new QEP.

Day 1: Thursday, September 24, 2020 (on Zoom)

- We chose dates for subsequent meetings
- Kelly Fahey discussed her journey to outdoor learning and teaching
- Rebecca Sciotto, OT for SWLSB, spoke to the team about global child development and how outdoor play promotes the development of gross and fine motor development in a way that being in the classroom cannot
- Teachers went outside to do an inventory of their outdoor spaces in order to share them with the team. The idea behind this exercise was to get them thinking about activities that they could do outside with their students as well as to ask the team for feedback and support with this
- Teachers were put into small groups in breakout rooms to plan an activity that they could take back to their students and test out before the next meeting, as well as contribute to our collection of lesson plans

Day 2: Wednesday, October 28, 2020 (on Zoom)

- Sharing the activities that they had tried in their schools. They brought pictures and videos to show us all of the outdoor play that had been happening with their students since we last met.
- Focus on competency #2 of the K5 QEP: To Affirm his/her personality (old program). We discussed how the teachers currently look for success in their students regarding this competency and how they could shift that to an outdoor setting.
- Discussion on good learning goals and how to write them. We shifted our thinking from starting our planning with an activity to starting with a learning goal and then finding an activity that can meet that goal.
- Small groups write one or two learning goals per group then share those goals with the whole group.

- Kelly Fahey talked to the team about preparing themselves to go outside. She had prepared a PowerPoint full of great ideas that the teachers could use right away as well as ways that they could overcome obstacles such as weather, concerns about student behaviour, parents' concerns etc.
- The small groups we had formed in the morning to write up activities that would target the learning goals we had previously written.

Day 3: Friday, May 14, 2021 (on Zoom)

- Teachers shared the outdoor lessons they have been doing with their classes.
- Kelly Fahey talked about creating natural outdoor spaces.
- Kristin Crowdis presented on the importance of gross-motor development. She talked to the team about how you can support gross and fine motor development while playing simple games outside, such as creating an obstacle course. We learned about vestibular development and other areas of development in the brain that are aided by gross-motor play.
- Small groups for planning some lessons around the theme of spring, keeping in mind language development as well as gross-motor development.

Day 4: Wednesday, September 29, 2021 (on Zoom)

- Teachers recapped what they had been doing since we had last met. This included the end of the year last year as well as any new initiatives they have undertaken since the beginning of the school year.
- Focused on the Cognitive Area of Development: what the domain covers and what the teachers need to be aware of in this particular domain.
- We looked at executive functions, what they are and why they are so critical to the development of children. We watched 2 short videos highlighting the executive functions that are at work in functioning adults as well as how young children learn and develop them.
- Discussion about observation and how teachers can observe effectively when outside with children. We watched a video to try to "practice" observation skills and we discussed some techniques that can be used when observing children's play outside.
- Planning session in break-out rooms targeting the cognitive domain.

Day 5: Friday, November 25, 2021 (in person)

- This was our final meeting as a group. We started the meeting with time for sharing
- Teachers chose between 3 different articles to read on social development
- Discussion around each article and how we can use outdoor learning to support the children's social development. There was definite consensus that this year's cohort is really lacking social skills due to the pandemic and that outdoor learning really seems to help the children
- Teachers completed the final survey and reflective questions

- Planning more activities, touching up the ones that were already there and putting all of our resources together. The teachers continued to talk about all of the learning they felt they had gathered over the course of this project

Day 6: various dates

- On this sixth and final day, the teachers decided that they would like to use it to "spread the news" so to speak. They each chose a day where they could do various things that would get the word out about outdoor learning.
- Teachers chose to:
 - plan activities with their cycle partners and have a day of outdoor fun with the children in their cycle.
 - take the day to dig a little deeper into outdoor learning and plan more activities that they could then use with the children in their classes, as well as share with their school.
 - create a video about the importance of outdoor play, using some of the footage from activities run at school.
 - visit a forest school from Lester B. Pearson School Board (Forest Hill) and spend the day outside, learning from the lead teacher and her students. We learned how to overcome obstacles to outdoor learning, from cooperating with colleagues and administration to easing parent concerns, to the organization of materials and resources, not to mention taking tons of pictures and getting very inspired!

Project Goals and Outcomes

Despite all of the challenges, we feel that we met the learning objectives of the PDIG, which were:

- to broaden teachers' knowledge of outdoor learning by providing networking opportunities which capitalize on the knowledge and skills of specialized teachers within our community;
- to help teachers see nature for the potential educational space that it is and the vast possibilities that it provides for all areas of learning, with sensorimotor development embedded in every lesson;
- to re-connect teachers with the outdoors, broadening their perceptions and making them more at ease with risky, outdoor play;;
- collaboration between the teachers to create a bank of resources such as lessons, activities, games, and media exemplars

- and to participate in the growing movement toward increased outdoor and sensorimotor play

On the first day that we met, we asked the teachers to complete a pre-project questionnaire where we polled them to get a better understanding of:

- how often they took their children outside,
- what they felt were the benefits and challenges of outdoor learning,
- what their comfort levels were with regards to taking children outside as well as risky or rough and tumble play,
- about how much time they spent planning for outdoor learning.

The data from this questionnaire showed that before the project began only 50% of the participants were very comfortable taking the children outside for learning and 50% of them were not very comfortable with risky play.

We asked them to complete a similar questionnaire on the last day of the project and 83% of them now said that they were comfortable taking their children outside for learning, an increase of 33%, and 67% of them were comfortable with risky play, an increase of 17%. This data shows that we achieved our goal of broadening the teachers' knowledge and improving their perceptions of outdoor play and learning, as well as increasing their level of comfort in risky and rough and tumble play.

Although the data from the questionnaire only shows a slight increase in the number of hours spent outside per week, the teachers' comments about their shifts in perceptions speak volumes. Here are some quotes:

"I'm much more open to the idea. I've started looking at all of my planning units and figuring out how to incorporate outdoors (sic) learning activities regularly. I often change activities I have used in the past in order to do them outside instead of inside. After this experience, I am able to see that there is way (sic) to provide high quality learning situations to students outside of the classroom. I really like that this project has challenged me to approach teaching and learning from a new lens. I always strive to engage in evidence-based practices, and this project has helped me see a new way of teaching my students the content & competencies I need to teach."

"I loved hearing about all the incredible outdoor learning opportunities that happened in other schools and it has inspired me to take the students outside more often. I have taken to going on rain walks, advising the parents ahead of time to send in an umbrella and having their students appropriately dressed for the rain. The students have loved being out there in the rain, observing puddles and raindrops and making paths in mud using sand toys in order to watch water run in different directions."

"When I first became involved with this PDIG, I was very unsure of where it would take me in my teaching practice. I would describe myself as NOT an outdoor person (especially Winter)! However, this group has helped me overcome this and has taught me to not only appreciate the outdoors but always wanting to be outdoors! After the first attempts of going outside with my students, I quickly noticed the engagement, the excitement, and the simple joy of being outside! They quickly began to ask for it everyday. I have learned so many different ways of exploring the outdoors and in simple ways. Another fear that I had was that lessons would have to be complicated and involve to (sic) much

planning. However, I quickly realized that some of the most simple projects created so much learning. I am eager and always finding news (sic) ways to explore and bring my students outside whenever I can. I was also able to share my knowledge with colleagues and foster a love for outdoor learning within my cycle! Thank you for this opportunity and I'm looking forward to building greater resources for an outdoor space that will be used by my entire school."

"This PDIG project has made me realize, even more, the importance of providing connections with nature for my children, and the important role I have to make sure they have different opportunities to learn outside. The PDIG has strengthen the inner child in me and made me reflect on my own teaching practices. It has made me slow down and do less, but with more depth and appreciation. It has lit up my teaching passion again that was slowly phasing out. It has given me a purpose again and a "why" to my teaching practice. This PDIG allowed me to visit Sylvie Ozelle at Forest Hill , which was a career changing, eye-opening moment. Her passion and convictions about outdoor classrooms have inspired me to implement different learning/play environments for my school. This PDIG was the gentle push that I needed to shift my teaching to more outdoor learning. I am so grateful for this wonderful opportunity, I am very blessed."

Reinvestment

Despite some rather large obstacles and some other smaller hiccups, we feel that we are ready to share a resource that will help to inspire many teachers to take their children outside. We have many great resources to share, namely:

- multiple activity plans for each of the four seasons,
- a powerpoint on getting ready to go outside and how to overcome some of the challenges
- a powerpoint on how outdoor learning supports motor development,
- a video on the importance of getting outside,
- many pictures featuring children happily learning outside.

We will share this resource with all of the teachers in our school board via our shared Microsoft TEAMS page. All of the preschool teachers have access to this resource. We all also bring this to our DEEN subcommittee, so that preschool cycle consultants from other English school boards across the province can share it with their teachers.

We definitely feel that this would be a project worth repeating. Given the shift that we saw in the participants and the changes that they have reported in their visions of outdoor learning, we feel that any teacher would benefit from participating in a project such as this one. It would be very interesting to see how it would be different if it were able to run the way it was originally planned, where the teachers were actually in each other's schools, interacting with children to try out their activity ideas, and able to sit face-to-face to plan with each other. All in all, we feel that this project was a great success and we hope that the resources and all the work that the teachers put into this project will inspire other teachers as much as it has inspired all of us.

Link to the shared resources:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1kl2GCDANX-mKWrw457jErpiyjJmL12Av?usp=sharing>