

# EVERYONE HAS A PLACE TO THRIVE

## Positive Perspectives on Nature Explore Outdoor Classrooms in the Los Angeles Unified School District

by Ranae Amezquita and Dean Tagawa

**D**uring an observation in Room 6, Leilani shared her enthusiasm about the Nature Explore Classroom. The students often talk about the Nature Explore Classroom with their principal, because he makes a point to spend time with them outdoors, engaging in activities and having discussions about nature, birds and flowers.

*“The trees and the flowers are my favorite at my school,” Leilani said. “My dad takes me on nature walks and we collect leaves like the ones at my school. My mom planted two avocado trees so I can have trees, too.”*

*Via Zoom, Leilani and her father proceeded to show the students the avocado trees they planted. Her father explained to the class, “If we live in*

*the city, we can bring plants, trees and grow a garden like you have at school. We have to be close to nature, because nature needs us like we need nature.”*

*The students were excited to see the avocado trees, and then began talking about how they are bringing nature to their homes. They have gained an appreciation and respect for nature and understand their role in protecting our environment.*



Ranae Amezquita is the director for the Early Childhood Education Division in the Los Angeles Unified School District. In her role, she oversees instruction, principal professional development, assists with teacher evaluation and provides support for Early Education Centers,

California State Preschool and Extended Transitional Kindergarten programs. She also serves as the district representative on the Child Care Local Planning Commission for Los Angeles County. She was previously the principal of Brooklyn Early Education Center, the first certified Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom in Los Angeles Unified School District. She continues to support the district's Nature Explore Classrooms through board presentations, staff development and ongoing advocacy for additional funding.



Dr. Dean Tagawa is the executive director for the Early Childhood Education Division in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Over the past year, early education and transitional kindergarten programs in LAUSD have grown to over 30,000 students.

During that time, he has developed preschool inclusion programs and implemented a new curriculum with a focus on concept development and social emotional learning. Tagawa has been instrumental in building Nature Explore Outdoor Classrooms for the students, making instructional technology a reality in the early education centers, and has focused on bringing 23 dual language programs in Armenian, Chinese, Korean and Spanish into the district's preschool programs.

Many studies over the years have found that families living in urban environments are forced to use their attention on awareness, instead of enjoyment and creativity. Kaplan and Berman's research in 2010 and 2015 found that natural environments help restore focus and provide opportunities for increased attention. Focusing attention is a critical developmental milestone for young children preparing for kindergarten, so outdoor spaces are critical to a child's overall development.

Because of this, when the nation's second largest school district embarked on its mission to create outdoor spaces for children, the district conducted intensive surveys, in order to determine which school communities did not have access to a safe park near the school. The findings helped the district prioritize which schools needed to create safe spaces for children to play.

As we continued building outdoor classrooms at sites throughout the district, members of the early childhood education division met with parents, principals, mental health consultants and teachers in order to discuss the impact the outdoor classrooms have had on their children. Each group of stakeholders was able to articulate the benefits for their children of time in nature classrooms.

## Digging for Bugs: Parent Responses

Parents have reported that their high-energy children are calm and focused during learning outside in the Nature Explore Classroom, as compared to indoors, where they are often overwhelmed and have a hard time focusing. Outdoor play has many benefits, and parents have seen them firsthand, going so far as describing them as ingenious. This play encourages children to be creative, discover

## Origins of a Project

The idea of creating natural play spaces in an urban school district began in 2009 with some very forward thinkers in the Los Angeles Unified School District. Three years later, Brooklyn Early Education Center held a ribbon cutting ceremony and became the first Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom in the district. Since that time, 10 more centers have cut ribbons and introduced NECs to their respective communities. Based on a growing body of research about the benefits of outdoor classrooms, LA Unified parents, principals, and staff members are experiencing the benefits of these beautiful outdoor spaces.

To understand the significance of what is being done, it is important to recognize that LA Unified's Early Childhood Education Division serves over 21,000 income-eligible families in its early education programs and another 8,000 preschool students with special needs. They are served through a variety of programs, which include preschool programs in more than 380 elementary schools. In addition, the district maintains 88 early education centers that are stand-alone sites serving children 2-5 years old.

As the pandemic has lasted longer than most anticipated, access to green space in many of these communities is highly limited. Many researchers have also found that outdoor environments benefit students "in terms of their development of social competencies and social relations such as self-esteem, self-confidence, trusting relationships, and the sense of belonging" (Becker, Lauterbach, Spengler, Dettweiler, and Mess, 2017). Other researchers have also positively associated outdoor classrooms with lower levels of stress, depression and anxiety (Kaplan, 2010). Ultimately, the district has a goal to build outdoor classrooms in all 88 EECs. Currently, existing sites have provided children and staff with the opportunity to teach, learn, and enjoy the outdoors in urban communities.



*Safe celebration at a ground-breaking ceremony during the pandemic. Left to Right: Dr. Dean Tagawa, Executive Director, Sheila Taylor Hardy, Principal, Kelly Gonez, Board President and Martha Borquez, Director.*



*Making music in nature activates the senses and engages the whole body.*

new things, and take risks and try new activities. Their increased vocabulary and knowledge of plants, vegetables, insects, recycling, protecting our environment and trees is incredible.

When families have the opportunity to observe their children in the mud pit and digging for bugs, they quickly understand and appreciate the value of play and the learning that takes place in the Nature Explore Classroom. Interviews also show that children's attitudes about going to school changed. During one of his visits to a Nature Explore Outdoor Classroom, LAUSD's chief facilities director Mark Hovatter stated, "A little child came to me and asked me why I was coming to their park?" This child's perspective is an important piece as many children do not see their campuses as learning centers, but as parks where learning occurs.

One parent noted that her children are curious about insects and their impact on the environment. They ask her questions, and when she cannot answer their questions, they look up

the information on the internet and have a discussion about it. The family is learning together! Many families have extended the learning at home by creating gardens, taking nature hikes and engaging in conversations about the "noticings" they have when outdoors. They are taking time to

listen to the sounds in their environment and enjoy the beauty outdoors.

These interviews also confirmed findings around Attention Restoration Theory which is founded on the concept that the beauty, peace, and exposure to nature supports better concentration and improved focus (Kaplan, 2010). ART therapy is often referred to in mental health literature, as it supports the health benefits of natural environments.

Many parents who have participated in centers with NEOCs have taken their learning home by creating gardens in small spaces, discussing nature on walks with their children, and incorporating natural objects in their indoor and outdoor play. Children run to smell the flowers and observe insects and worms in their environment. They understand the connection to sustaining the environment. Teachers have also made connections through virtual learning, by teaching from the NEOC to support children's emotional well-being. A teacher at Brooklyn EEC connected with her students through



*Working with dirt encourages calm concentration.*

the grapevine growing in their garden. They discussed size, color, shapes and length of vines that they observed. This lesson was conducted throughout the month, with students excited to chart the growth and changes they observed.

## Nature Classrooms and Special Education

Our interviews also included the examination of the relationships between other early educational professionals who worked at these sites. We were able to connect with principals, teachers, and mental health consultants. For example, the preschool special education teacher at Glassell Park EEC noticed the immediate effects the environment has on her students. Her class is called Preschool for All Learners Collaborative Classroom. Ms. Conley reports,

“As the PAL/CC teacher at Glassell Park EEC, I spent a great deal of time outdoors with the students. This aligns with my own philosophy of education. Therefore, I have always sought to maximize my students’ interactions with the natural world. It is a dream job. Having spent many years as a substitute teacher at a school in Boyle Heights, where the entire environment was concrete and steel, I was immediately struck by the light-heartedness and joy that I witnessed upon my move to Glassell Park EEC. The natural environment produces a more relaxed atmosphere among the staff and the students, without sacrificing attention to professionalism and the preschool learning foundations.”

The increased exposure to natural environments mentioned by Ms. Conley is another example of how ART therapy becomes naturally embedded into these locations. The idea that she felt the joy and relaxed



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*Nature Explore Classrooms are intentionally designed with distinct areas for different activities, such as playing with sand.*

atmosphere is also a testament to the efforts by the principals at these locations.

## The Mental Health Connection

Deyanira Vera, psychiatric social worker in LAUSD, stated, “During our time spent outdoors, we have observed the benefits for many students, especially for students who experienced strong emotions and needed time for self-regulation. The nature exposure provided these students a calm and accessible space to regulate in a safe and effective manner. We have seen the children engaging in exploration with so much curiosity, when learning about the plants and the animals/insects that inhabit the environment. We have also seen children demonstrating empathy towards one another, as well as towards nature’s inhabitants. We constantly saw students’ excitement in learning about worms, rollie pollies, and sharing their joy in showing and sharing with others. The children have demonstrated patience as

they plant and wait to see the growth of their garden.

“We have observed that the calm outdoor environment has also benefitted the staff, as it provides great opportunities for the staff to ground themselves through the use of all their senses, enhancing the ability to be present to support the students. The NEOC also offers opportunities for staff to use it as a form of positive distraction, when supporting the students with self-regulation.”

## The View from the Principal’s Office

Viken Kazarian, principal at Arminta Early Education Center, stated that he has seen a difference in the behaviors of children who have access to a Nature Explore Classroom and those who have the traditional asphalt playground. He explained that children in the NEC are engaged and show interest in activities both indoor and outdoor, whereas those in asphalt environments lacked engagement with

materials and activities and have a difficult time staying on task.

Ernestine Lara, principal at Escalante EEC, said, “I have witnessed how children’s challenging behaviors de-escalate when they are in our Nature Explore Classroom. It is amazing to observe the difference and impact that nature makes on our students. A child who is angry or sad and may be having a rough day inside of the classroom immediately transforms to an explorer of nature once the door opens and they see our beautiful outdoor environment.”

Once outdoors, students are able to investigate the natural world. Principal Lara added, “I cannot say they had one favorite thing to do, because I have observed students engaged in watering the plants, building with logs, stacking rocks, collecting leaves, creating with loose parts, sharing magnifying glasses to look at the insects, and exploring the feeling of mud on their hands.”

Another principal describes an active child that had difficulty engaging in activities inside the classroom but who, when outside in the Nature Explore Classroom, became an avid “rock collector.” Each day he searched for, as he called them, “interesting rocks.”

He talked about their size, shape, color and weight as he continued to collect them. He was engaged and focused and was excited to share his rock collection with everyone.

### Conclusion: We Will Not Stop There

Teachers and staff at the district’s Nature Explore sites are often found eating lunch and walking around outside. You can regularly observe them during their breaks and lunch periods relaxing in the peaceful environments. Many of them have stated they use the park-like outdoor spaces to de-stress. During the pandemic and the subsequent closure of the district’s 86 early education centers, a staff member at Escalante EEC reduced her stress by maintaining the outdoor classroom. She would begin each day at the center walking and beautifying the gardens by planting seeds, pulling weeds, and watering.

“I hope my work here will make the kids happy when they return, and I am anxiously awaiting a return to normalcy,” she said.

During regular operation, parents can often be seen relaxing outside in small groups or by themselves, as they watch their children get in their last opportunities for play before heading home. The staff member at Escalante EEC added, “Nature has a calming effect on the body as you take in the beauty, fragrant breeze and sounds around you.”

Since 100 percent of the preschool children in the district’s programs qualify because of an identifiable need, it has been critically important that these preschool children have an opportunity to play and learn in a natural environment. Coupled with COVID-19 and the fact that LA Unified is a vast, urban district covering 710 square miles, children are spending less time exposed to natural environments. However, the district’s early education programs continue to push back against this trend. In turn, children are developing attention restoration, cognitive growth, and physical development from participating in these programs. There are also long-term behavioral benefits associated with each of these, as children carry these attributes into adulthood. The importance of what the parents and early education professionals shared will continue to inform the division’s work moving forward, as we work to bring an outdoor classroom to each of our centers.

In closing, we are looking to broaden our programs, so that every child in an early education center will have the opportunity to experience a nature-based learning environment.

“Safe places for children to learn and play is a right that all children should have,” says Dean Tagawa, executive director for the early childhood education division. “We have completed 11, broken ground on the next three, and planned the next 22 sites. And we will not stop there!”

### Reference

Berman, M., Jonides, J., & Kaplan S. (2008). The Cognitive Benefits of Interacting with Nature. *Psychological Science*.



*Even snack time takes on a special flavor outdoors.*