The Development of Teacher Agency in Nature Preschools: Perceptions of Teachers and Directors
Introduction to the Problem

A Growing Crisis in Early Childhood Education...

“The great sadness of early childhood education in twenty-first century America is the collapsing of the curriculum from wholeness to narrowness, from hands, hearts, and head to just the head,” (Sobel, 2016, p. 75).

✓ Concerns about Readiness Gap
✓ Almon (2013): Focus on Academics rather than Whole Child Development, Play, and Creativity
✓ Louv (2008): Nature Deficit Disorder
✓ Nature Preschools = A growing alternative ECE model as an effort to reinstate DAP and combat the readiness gap.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Nature Preschools</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>2014</td>
<td>80</td>
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<tr>
<td>2016</td>
<td>150</td>
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<td>2017</td>
<td>250 in 43 States</td>
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Defining Nature Preschools

- Nature as Integrating Curriculum – at least 50% Outside
- Natural Materials and Indoor Spaces Reflect the Outdoors
- High Quality ECE and EE Standards
- Dual Focus: Whole Child Development and Environmental Literacy
- Small Mixed-Age Groupings in Home-Like Natural Environments
- Active and Risk-Taking Playful Learning and Exploration
- Diverse and Empowered Learners who are Recognized as Capable and Competent
Overview of Literature

Nature preschools offer a variety of benefits for whole child development. ECE professionals recognize the value of nature-based learning and play.

Disconnect: Belief and Practice

Barriers and Concerns
- Logistics and Safety
- Need for Professional Development
- Need for Collaborative Community and Support

Teacher perceptions about agency are central to the overcoming the disconnect between belief and practice.

More research is needed to keep pace with the growth of the nature preschool model.
Purpose of Study

Explore and compare preschool teachers’ and directors’ perceptions about teacher agency in nature preschools; including the professional dispositions and the types of professional development needed to promote and sustain teacher agency.
Central Research Question: How is teacher agency perceived by early childhood educators and directors at self-defined nature preschool organizations in the Midwest?

SQ1: How do nature preschool directors and teachers in the Midwest perceive teacher agency; and why are the specific skills or dispositions selected by directors and teachers necessary to promote teacher agency in self-defined nature preschool settings?

SQ2: How do the perceptions of nature preschool directors and teachers in the Midwest align regarding the necessary skills or dispositions for teacher agency?

SQ3: How do nature preschool directors and teachers in the Midwest perceive professional development and support for teacher agency in self-defined nature preschools settings?

SQ4: How do the perceptions of nature preschool directors and teachers in the Midwest align regarding the importance of professional development or support in nature preschool settings?
Research Design

- Qualitative Study
- Collective Instrumental Case Study

Prior Nature Preschool Research:
- Bailie (2012)
- Powers et al. (2017)
- Phillips (2017)
Case Selection & Participant Sample

- 6 Nature Preschool Organizations in 2 Midwestern States
- Nature Preschool Organization Verification Checklist
- 25 Participants
  - 8 Directors, 4 Director/Teachers, & 13 Teachers
- Participant Qualifications:
  - Full-time, year-round director, director/teacher, or preschool teacher at the organization
  - At least 6 months of experience at the organization
Case 1:
2 Director/Teachers & 2 Teachers

Case 2:
1 Director & 3 Teachers

Case 3:
1 Director & 3 Teachers

Case 4:
1 Director, 1 Director/Teacher, & 1 Teacher

Case 5:
1 Director, 2 Teachers, & Director Group

Case 6:
2 Directors, 1 Director/Teacher, & 2 Teachers
Data Collection Procedures

Pilot Study – February 2019
Case Study - One Phase in Spring 2019
Six Organization Visits Lasted Approximately 1 Week and Included:

✓ Individual Interviews:
  • Typically 1 Director and 2-3 Educators Chosen Purposively
  • Interviews Approximately 1 Hour
  • Semi-structured interviews – Interview Tool, Recording, & Transcription
  • 2 Interview Tools: Professional Dispositions and Professional Development

✓ Site Tour and Observations:
  • Anecdotal Notes
  • Photographic Evidence: Resources, Materials, or Supports
Within-Case Analysis
- Primary Data Source – Transcribed Interviews and Interview Tools
- Direct Interpretation of Emergent Themes – Coding Grids Generated for each Case

Cross-Case Analysis
- Merged Theme Grids:
  - Dispositions: 12 Themes and 40 Sub-Themes
  - Professional Development: 12 Themes and 71 Sub-Themes
- Utility Narrowing Process:
  - (H)igh, (M)iddling, & (L)ow
  - Dispositions: 6 Findings – RSQ 1 & 2
  - Professional Development: 6 Findings – RSQ 3 & 4
Dispositional Findings

**Dispositional Finding 1.** Prior training and experience in early childhood theory and practice is perceived to have high value for the development of teacher agency in nature preschools; specifically, dispositions including knowledge and application of developmentally appropriate practices, whole child development, and play theory which are learned in early childhood training. There is some perceived value to a combination of early childhood and environmental education training or experience. Prior knowledge of scientific processes and nature facts have minimal perceived value; and rather can be learned in place.

**Dispositional Finding 2.** Nature preschool educators with agency are perceived to have strong pedagogical abilities related to teaching and learning outdoors. Specific dispositions that promote these pedagogical abilities include the ability to generate emergent and integrated planning outdoors, pedagogical flexibility and adaptability, the ability to facilitate and anticipate inquiry-based learning, and the ability to create emergent learning opportunities for whole child development.

**Dispositional Finding 3.** Nature preschool educators with agency are perceived to have intuitive interpersonal intelligence and strong abilities to listen to and communicate with children. Educators with agency model a pedagogy of listening or an ability to ask questions, make connections, and observe, recognize, and extend emergent thinking.

**Dispositional Finding 4.** Co-teaching skills, such as the ability to collaborate, listen, and learn from colleagues are perceived to have high value for the development of teacher agency in nature preschools.

**Dispositional Finding 5.** Mindset is critical in relation to teacher agency in nature preschool settings. This mindset includes dispositions of high value including enthusiasm and passion for nature and teaching in place, perseverance and adaptability, and a sense of wonder or a commitment to lifelong growth.

**Dispositional Finding 6.** Comfort and familiarity with the logistics of teaching and learning in a specific outdoor place is vital to the development of teacher agency in nature preschools. Dispositions of specific value include confidence with inherent risk or logistics of teaching outdoors, increased place-based community or logistical knowledge, and adaptability in relation to student needs, weather, timing, or the dynamics of place.
**Professional Development Findings**

**Professional Development Finding 1:** Participants internal and external layers of communication and collaboration to have high value. These layers included groups such as educators, directors, support staff, families, community members, stakeholders, and external support networks such as leaders and faculty at nearby nature preschools or regional nature-based education organizations. Internally, participants felt that these layers of collaboration should be sustained by strong leadership and connected through advocacy of the mission and vision of the organization. Participants described family engagement as especially important. Externally, participants valued regional collaboration with other nature preschool educators and organizations.

**Professional Development Finding 2:** The participants felt that formal teacher preparation has less value than other forms of professional development, such as in-service opportunities with application, dedicated collaboration, and ongoing mentorship. Two characteristics that made formal preparation have increased value include: innovative pathways that combine EC and EE and flexible and personalized professional development in perceived areas of weakness.

**Professional Development Finding 3:** Participants found value in several types of professional development, both onsite and offsite, such as national or regional conferences, trainings and workshops in both early childhood education and environmental education, visits to other nature preschools, and guest naturalist trainings at the organization. Regardless of the professional development strategy, participants stressed that there must be dedicated time to apply new skills or to collaborate about inspiring ideas gained from trainings in place. Participants described three levels of application to place including: personal time to appreciate nature, time to become familiar with the logistics of place, and an exploration of place with students.

**Professional Development Finding 4:** Participants overwhelmingly perceived immersive and ongoing mentoring, in place, as a critical professional development strategy. While all participants felt that immersive, ongoing, and authentic mentorship had significant value, there was some debate whether it was better to create mentorship partners, in which peers mentored each other; or if shadowing a master educator or leader was more impactful. By comparison, participants found very little value in formal supervisor observations and annual evaluations. In fact, several participants felt that formal observation could impact teacher agency in a negative way.

**Professional Development Finding 5:** Collaborative teaching teams were considered a form of professional development and have significant value. Educators in intentional, balanced, and collaborative co-teaching partnerships develop agency by learning from each other in areas of weakness; and by motivating and mentoring each other in professional areas of strength.

**Professional Development Finding 6:** Beyond co-teaching partnerships, participants described further cross-pollination of ideas and mentorship amongst the whole staff as an important type of professional development. For maximum impact, scheduled meetings need to have dedicated conversations where all voices are heard, authentic collaboration and application of ideas in place, and opportunities for the development of camaraderie.
Analytic Assertion 1. The unique mindset of the nature preschool professional.

Analytic Assertion 2. Teacher preparation and continuing education pathways.

Analytic Assertion 3. Intuitive interpersonal intelligence and Pedagogical Skills.

Analytic Assertion 4. Mentorship versus structured observations.

Analytic Assertion 5. Layers of communication and collaboration.

Analytic Assertion 6. The Story of Place.

Professional Development Finding 1

Professional Development Finding 2

Professional Development Finding 3

Professional Development Finding 4

Professional Development Finding 5

Professional Development Finding 6

Analytic Assertions & Relevant Findings
The Unique Mindset of the Nature Preschool Professional

Agentic nature preschool educators are perceived to have a unique mindset. The nature preschool educator mindset includes dispositions that are intrinsic, but can also be further developed in place.
Formal teacher preparation has less perceived value than in-service professional development opportunities for the promotion of teacher agency in nature preschools. Teacher preparation requires a unique pathway that emphasizes both early childhood education and environmental education. Formal continuing education should be flexible and allow for personalized professional development in perceived areas of weakness.
Intuitive Interpersonal Intelligence and Pedagogical Skills

Nature preschool educators with agency have a strong intuitive interpersonal intelligence, model a pedagogy of listening, and display pedagogical abilities related to teaching emergent, child-centered curriculum in nature.
Mentorship versus Structured Observations

Immersive and ongoing mentoring opportunities are critical for the development of teacher agency in nature preschools. Conversely, structured observations and feedback from supervisors have little perceived value.
Layers of communication, collaboration, and support, both internal and external to the organization, are perceived as highly valuable. Dedicated opportunities for collaboration and balanced, intentional co-teaching teams promote the development of teacher agency in nature preschools.
Teacher agency in nature preschools develops from experiences in place and an increased knowledge of place. Professional development opportunities must have direct application to place.
Implications for Future Research

- Replicative Studies: Regions, Locations, and Curriculum Models
- Novel Preparation Pathways that Combine EC and EE
- The Impact of Mentorship Models
- Professional Development for Established Nature Preschool Organizations
- Family Engagement and Collaboration
- Diversity and Equity in Nature Preschools
- Quality and Integrity of Best Practices in Nature-Based Education
“Believe me if you can, I’ve finally come back to the house at Pooh Corner by one. What do you know, there’s so much to be done? Count all the bees in the hive, chase all the clouds from the sky, back to the days of Christopher Robin and Pooh,” (Loggins, 1994).