Blending Play and Learning in a Forest Classroom

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New Covid “Normal”

- No matter what the grade,
  - No tables, desks 6 ft apart (priority)
  - No small groups
  - Masks on at all times except when they are at their desks
  - Masks on if I am speaking with them 1:1
  - Stay in seats MOST if not ALL the time (or in desk space...use other tools)
  - Scheduled Hand Washing Time

- Unknown:
  - Social emotional wellness of each student
  - Fear of not meeting the needs of my students
Gilmanton School

Outdoor Learning:

- Naturalist in the Classroom (NIC) (1-2 days per week for the past 15+ years)
- Nature Trail
- Cogswell Conservation Area
  - Outdoor Classroom in the courtyard (year 3 of project)
- Grass Spaces
- Masks on but can be closer than 6 ft. for short times
Challenges to Play and Learning Outdoors

- "No Touch" Rule:
  - Pool Noodles! The New Multi-Use Play Tool (they can hit each other with them all day and they don't hurt).

- Safe Spacing:
  - Ropes with handles (or different colored tape) pre-measured to be 6 feet apart
Challenges cont.

- Outdoor Classroom Reservations online
- Seating: yoga mats (cut into \( \frac{1}{3} \)),
  
  stadium seats (with backs for older kids)

3-ft. Walking sticks for quick measuring
Last summer, I took a course for K-2 teachers on Learner’s Edge called *Moving Bodies, Thinking Minds* and it used the text *A Moving Body is a Learning Body* (it is on the resource page) that I thought was very valuable. Some of the things that I learned were:

- The value in not saying "NO"
- The purposeful act of not having an agenda for outside
- The importance of allowing “risks”... which the current play yard does NOT allow, which in turns sparks CONFIDENCE
- Free play allows students some "control" during these uncertain times and supports their emotional well-being.

From *Outdoor Play and Learning* (OPAL):
The benefits of free play are wide-ranging. When children have the opportunity for free play, they have better physical and mental health. It significantly decrease their stress levels and importantly, it facilitates learning.

As a result, I started instituting extra play time each day after snack. Some days it was with board games and card games inside (so students can practice learning to lose) and some days it was out on the nature trail. My students seemed to thrive in this environment and what I loved more than anything was the problem solving and teamwork that naturally came out like getting “stuffy caught in a tree” where they had to get it down.
Blending Learning and Outdoors

Blending Learning and the Outdoors has been Awesome!

- The NIC program along with our incredibly supportive staff, admin and community has allowed us to grow our culture for using the outdoors over the years.
- The modeling approach where Naturalists can model for classroom teachers takes the pressure off and allows the teacher to take more responsibility for these activities as time goes on.

A big focus of our learning in the outdoors has been on science which was pretty easy to find outdoor connections too, but we have also expanded to quests about the life of the Wampanoag, our middle school reading teacher does a large survivor unit connecting a book series and building fire and shelters, snowshoeing and tracking, grammar quests (grade 5) as well as bringing in natural resource professionals to teach us about their jobs in the forest.
Blending Play and Learning Outdoors Grade 2: Our Forest Classroom

BEFORE SCHOOL

1. Find a space that is accessible and safe from natural hazards
2. Spaces to share ideas
   - Whiteboards/easel
3. Storage
4. Space for seating
Forest Classroom cont.: Kids’ Input

1. Practice attention getting signal(s)
2. Start with a hike or two or three
3. First Visit to the Forest Classroom
   ○ Have vs. Need
   ○ Safe Seating Problem Solving
Our First **Forest Friday**
(~9:00-11:30AM)

My free play time I decided to call it “Explore Time” and started off the time that way because they were so excited to be there AND I needed to set some things up.

We did our typical Morning Meeting routine (responsive classroom style)

- For our share and activity, I had them find a sit spot and they sat for 5 minutes and had to bring back an object that they discovered there to share
- We then used my yoga mat and 2-foot sticks to map out our sit spots by placing our objects in the locations they were in based on our meeting spot in the middle.
  - They did REALLY good with this!
  - It also gave us an idea of where some resources were for our activity later
Writing Prompt… What do you want to learn about or do in our Forest Classroom?

They sat and wrote SILENTLY for 10 minutes. I asked them for at least 2 sentences and a picture to go with it...after 10 minutes their sentences were done and they took 5 more minutes to complete their pictures.

No reluctant writers!!

I used sand timers for those that need the visual time to plan.

It was some of the best sentences as far as spacing, stretching out sounds and compete thoughts that I have gotten during the first week of school.

I will use their suggestions in my future planning of our time on Fridays.
Hand Washing Station

Detergent jugs cleaned out- students filled them the night before

- Teacher holds sout for kids to wash
- Used biodegradable hand soap
- Micro-fiber clothes from Lowe’s for hand towels
- Each student has a clothes pin on a line to hang their towel to in case they need it again
- Clean Up consisted of teacher gathering hand towels to wash at home
Other fun treasures that we are curious about...
What I’ve Learned So Far…

During Explore Time: EYE OPENING!

- Lots of heavy lifting
- Lots of banging tree parts
- Bouncing on Logs
- No value in dead tree parts

My class handled being outdoors for learning well.

Bathroom breaks were not an issue.

Students were positive about being there.

Leave time for classroom break down!

They can do all of the lugging of supplies!
...and My Hopes and Dreams

- To use explore time as a time to also meet with small groups for guided reading
- Incorporate throwing and lifting into activities like fact practice, and spelling patterns (pinned to a tree)
- To teach my math measurement unit each day on Fridays
- To use a tarp to create a slip and slide on a rainy day, that leads to our forest classroom
- To problem solve hanging a tarp for rainy day protection.
- To build their respect for nature
- To extend our classroom boundaries as they build trust and respect for the space
- And So Much More...
Helpful Resources:

Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL):

https://outdoorplayandlearning.org.uk/play-in-a-time-of-lock-down/

Learning Through Landscapes

https://www.ltl.org.uk/free-resources/?s=woof=1&pa_age=5-9