

Seeing What's Already There: Rethinking Outdoor Learning Through Observation

Starting Where Most of Us Begin

When I think about outdoor learning, I have to be honest about where I started. For a long time, I saw outdoor activities as nothing more than a change in venue. It felt like hitting a reset button. The moment I announced we were going outside, the energy in the room shifted. It was a necessary break for my students, and it was something I needed as well.

In my mind, outdoor time was about giving students a moment of fun. It allowed them to process their learning and take a break from structure. I treated it as a protected time where they could relax. My students could step away from expectations, and I could step away from constant instruction.

It was necessary, but I did not consider it part of their learning.



The Change

Over time, my thinking began to shift. As I gained more experience, I became more confident and started to recognize the unique benefits outdoor spaces could offer. I still do not believe there is a single right way to approach outdoor STEM. It depends on your environment, your materials, and your comfort level.

However, I began to notice patterns that made me question my original assumptions. Instead of seeing outdoor time as separate from learning, I started to see it as an extension of it.

What I Noticed About Students

At first, I noticed that my students behaved differently outside. The environment required a different approach. Indoors, I relied on tables, seating, and structured routines. Outside, I had to think about space, movement, noise, and how to give directions without a central gathering point.

The change in behavior made sense because the conditions had changed. What stood out more was the intensity of participation. Students moved differently. They talked more. They appeared more willing to try new things. They were not always more “on task,” but they were often more engaged.

That increase in engagement made learning feel less forced and more natural.



How Did the Outdoors Affect Learning?

The most noticeable changes showed up in risk-taking, movement, and ownership of learning. Students seemed more willing to take risks. Outdoor spaces provided a sense of openness, not just physically, but socially. In a classroom, every action feels visible. Outside, there is a sense of space that makes it easier for students to try something without feeling watched.

This led to more experimentation. Students tested ideas without waiting for instructions. They were more willing to try something that might not work.

Movement also changed the way learning looked. Indoors, movement is often controlled and limited. Outside, it becomes part of the process. Students walk while they talk. They interact physically with materials. They do not need to stop one action to begin another. For some students, especially those who struggle to sit still, this made a significant difference. Movement was no longer a distraction. It became a way to stay engaged.

What Changed My Thinking?

As I paid closer attention, I began to notice something I had not expected. Some of the learning experiences I worked hardest to create indoors were already happening outside.

I saw it in small moments. Students built in the sand and adjusted their designs. They carried materials together without being asked. They had conversations that sounded like problem-solving. There was no formal lesson, yet there was clear evidence of learning.

That realization caused me to pause. It shifted my role. Instead of trying to create every experience, I began to recognize what was already happening and think about how to support it.

Outdoor learning no longer felt like an extra activity. It became a natural extension of what we were already doing.



What Did This Look Like in Practice?

Once I began to notice these shifts, I saw them appear in different ways across my teaching.

- Garden spaces became more than quiet areas. Students planted seeds, tracked growth, compared indoor and outdoor plants, and observed insects and soil conditions. Some activities extended into writing, graphing, and discussion.
- Simple setups created meaningful engagement. A paleontology dig using chalk “bones” in packed sand encouraged curiosity and conversation.
- Mathematics became more active. During a 100-day activity, students predicted how far 100 steps would take them. They measured, tested, and discussed accuracy outdoors.

Sometimes the experience was as simple as using journals and magnifying glasses to observe and draw. None of these required a perfect setup. Each one created an opportunity for thinking.

What Did I Have to Learn?

I did not begin with confidence. One of my biggest concerns was how outdoor learning would look. Open exploration can feel unpredictable. There are logistical challenges, safety concerns, and the pressure of not having every answer. Looking back, many of my concerns were connected to how others might interpret what they saw. That led me to rely more heavily on structure because it felt safer.

Over time, I realized that the issue was not structure itself, but the type of structure I was using. I had equated structure with control. I believed it meant planning every step and keeping everything orderly.

Outdoor learning challenged that idea. It introduced movement, variability, and unpredictability. I had to adjust my expectations. Learning did not always look quiet or organized. It often involved movement, conversation, and repeated attempts. There were moments of uncertainty, but there was also clear evidence of thinking.

Instead of trying to control everything, I began to focus on what mattered most. I paid attention to how students used materials, how they worked together, and how they responded when something did not go as planned.

That shift changed how I approached structure.



Where Should You Start?

If you are thinking about using outdoor spaces more intentionally, start with observation.

Notice what students are naturally drawn to. Pay attention to how they interact with materials. Listen to their conversations and the questions they ask. These observations provide valuable insight into their interests and thinking.

For example, I once brought out a rock cleaning kit during a STEM Game Time session. My initial goal was for students to test different ways of cleaning rocks. Instead, I noticed that many students were more interested in pouring and mixing the liquids. That observation shifted my thinking. It led me to consider how those same materials could be used to explore basic chemistry concepts.

Moments like this provide direction. From there, the process becomes one of small adjustments. Observation leads to insight, and insight leads to more intentional choices.

Looking Ahead

In the rest of this month's resources, we will take a closer look at how to build on these ideas.

This includes using everyday materials more intentionally, understanding how games can shift into problem-solving experiences, and finding ways to manage outdoor learning in realistic and sustainable ways.

It all begins with noticing.

Find the rest of this series at:
<https://www.dottysplace.org/outdoor-stem>

