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**The Role and Impact of the Environment in Shaping the Decisions of Parents and
Alternative Educators in Early Education**

A Thesis

Presented to the Faculty of the School of Education of the
University of San Francisco

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

Organization and Leadership

By Mia Hopkinson

Spring 2021

This thesis, written by
Mia Hopkinson
University of San Francisco
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and approved by all its members
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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to research parents' and alternative educators' perspectives on the role of the educational environment in early education and how this impacts their pedagogical beliefs. The qualitative study explored the following research questions: What do traditional school parents and outdoor alternative parents seek in their child's early education environment? What shapes parents' decisions on their child's educational and learning experiences? How do alternative educational leaders and educators understand the role of the alternative environment? How does this impact how they think about education? Interviews were conducted with two traditional parents, two alternative parents and four alternative educators. The study found that authentic, experiential, outdoor learning opportunities are sought after by all parents. There are a multitude of factors which shape parents' educational decisions based on unique family and child differences. Alternative educators regard the outdoors as an optimal and liberating space for a child's holistic development and work to shift traditional teaching and learning dynamics.

CHAPTER I

Introduction

Statement of the Problem

When beautiful, bright and curious, six-year-old Jessica failed to produce the ‘above age related’ writing I knew she was capable of, I sensed something was not right. This was the very beginning of an innate spark to create change, which continues to grow today. The continual checklists required six-year-old children to use punctuation correctly, write on the line (and forbid it if it was not cursive), to use at least six conjunctions, prefixes and suffixes, several expanded noun phrases... and the list went on. Jessica was one of many who felt the pressure we were all under: teachers, the administrative team and the whole school. It was the pressure to reach the required ratings from external assessment agencies. I took one look at Jessica’s blank page and then up at the equally blank expression on her face. This was it, the moment I was letting her, my whole class, and myself down. I did not enter the educational world to meet endless inappropriate expectations and become submissive to authority. Yet, here I was, preparing young children for working conditions in a capitalist society, indoctrinating them with the dominant ideology, teaching them how to think, act and feel through the hidden curriculum (Apple, 1980). I decided to take time out to reconsider my options, still holding on to the passion to make a difference in the lives of young children, whilst remaining true to myself. I felt very curious about the types of alternative education available, particularly away from the classroom and how such approaches rearrange traditional teaching and learning dynamics.

The traditional schooling system is outdated and teachers are held accountable for student performance and meeting unrealistic standards (Kumashiro, 2015). Teachers’

responsibility has shifted with an increasing emphasis on testing and performance. As Wolf (2002) states, politicians are becoming more concerned with controlling education in the belief that education performance and test results correlate directly with economic growth. Consequently, it is no surprise that classrooms are being used to prepare children for their place in capitalist society, teaching them the skills required for the workplace (Cuban, 2003). Children require time and space away from the classroom to explore their environment and tune into their feelings to find out their interests, desires and who they are in the world.

Today, schools are running like 20th century factories, in that they are dismissive of independence, risk-taking, and creativity. Bowles and Gintis (1976) coined the term ‘The Hidden Curriculum.’ This curriculum teaches norms and values such as: being punctual to class; what constitutes appropriate clothing and attire; the benefits of working hard; and other expectations, not taught visibly, nor stated in the official state curriculum. Unfortunately, the schools’ passive legitimation of social inequality and the market-driven system demonstrates the power that teachers have in the socialization and structuring of their students. I refer to this as ‘the school game’ (Pope, 2003).

There are many efforts being made to interrupt such fundamental notions of the traditional education system. This research study is intrigued by the critical approaches to teaching and learning which rearrange traditional dynamics with a specific focus on relationships and the environment. Freire (1972) introduces critical pedagogy in which problem-based learning is used to shift traditional power dynamics. Moreover, hooks (1994) builds on such efforts as she encourages authentic connections between students and educators through teaching with love. However, there is a lack of research on how

traditional educators can better make use of the environment, connecting critical pedagogy to place in early education.

This study provides a foundation for transforming new ways of considering what, how, where and why children learn toward holistic growth and well-being. The specific problem I intend to address is the following: traditional educators do not make enough use of the natural environment in their teaching and learning for meaningful connections to occur. Children are rarely given the opportunity to explore their world outside the four walls of the classroom. This study enhances an understanding of the alternative learning environment, providing a foundation for further research on how traditional classrooms can be restructured or rethought to meet a child's holistic needs in all domains of education and fulfillment. Finally, the study explores parents' educational decisions to better understand their tensions and conflicting feelings between their child's academic success and happiness.

This research study is framed around adults' perceptions and experiences of the early-education learning environment. It is critical to know how such views impact and shape the decisions adults make for their children and students, considering how traditional classroom dynamics can be rearranged for authentic liberation, student and educator well-being.

Background and Need for the Study

The study is grounded in a critical pedagogy of place framework. This pedagogy allows for deeper connection with local places, promoting care for our environment and planet, which is a real need in our education system if we are to create a better world for generations of children.

Research indicates several benefits of learning outdoors. Barrable (2019) demonstrates the importance of connectedness to nature, which inevitably leads to an increased sense of happiness and well-being. In addition, place-based learning allows for both facilitators and children to work for the common good of all humanity (Goralnik, Dobson, & Nelson, 2014). This child-led aspect is liberating for all involved in the learning process and allows for organic freedom and thus a deeper love of learning, as children explore their own interests and desires in the natural world (Macdonald, 2019).

Young children are told how to learn and feel through conditioning of the ‘school game.’ There is little room for learning about current issues, such as: caring for our planet, supporting the local community, or fighting climate change in the great outdoors. The issue is that the system continues to indoctrinate children to determine their place within the labor force, without exposing them to real life and meaningful learning in the real world. School, specifically standardized curriculum and testing as an existing practice, is working to recreate the hegemonic structure in our society.

Educators such as Paulo Freire remind us that students are treated as oppressed and subordinated to the teacher. Teachers fill students’ minds with information which they are expected to agree to and understand objectively, otherwise known as the banking method (Freire, 1972). Moreover, there is a lack of opportunity for children to connect with their peers organically within a natural environment, where they would be free to build self-awareness and explore their own interests and desires (Arment, 2019). Noddings (2003) reminds us of this significant connection between education and happiness, suggesting that educational standards and aims should be reconsidered entirely for students’ best interests and overall happiness in life.

There is a need to abolish the system as we know it and instead start measuring young children's success based on how they work collaboratively to solve real life problems for their communities. Furthermore, there is the need for assessing the time and care put into their learning, and most importantly their happiness and holistic well-being. These are the forgotten but vital qualities that the education system continually fails to teach and measure.

This study seeks to explore alternative approaches to teaching and learning. Specifically, it seeks to discover what parents want in their child's educational environment and how they come to such decisions based on their pedagogical beliefs. Moreover, the study determines how alternative educators make use of their natural surroundings and the environment to create meaningful learning opportunities and connections. It appears critical today that traditional educators better understand how to make use of their place and environment to teach and learn in ways which invite authentic learning connections and allow for the students' autonomy and agency in their own learning.

Purpose of the Study

This thesis explores the narratives of several adults who are parents and educators of early elementary school children. The purpose is to give voice to these adults to better understand two main aspects. The first aspect has to do with exploring what parents seek in their child's early education environment and how this shapes the educational decisions they make for their children. The second aspect has to do with exploring alternative educators' understanding of the role that the environment plays in teaching

and learning. More specifically, the idea is to identify how these teachers connect with place and use the natural environment to rearrange traditional classroom dynamics.

This phenomenological study will increase the understanding of what an alternative education environment can offer and the benefits of connecting with the outdoors. It will add to the existing research on the topic and provide insight to educational leaders as to what parents seek and how traditional dynamics can be rearranged to better meet the needs of both parents and their children.

Research Questions

This thesis is guided by the following research questions:

1. What do traditional school parents and outdoor alternative parents seek in their child's early education environment?
2. What shapes parents' decisions on their child's educational and learning experiences?
3. How do alternative educational leaders and educators understand the role of the alternative environment? How does this impact how they think about education?

Theoretical Rationale

This project's foundation is built upon Freire's critical pedagogy, taking it a step further to incorporate place, thus using a 'critical pedagogy of place' theoretical framework. Gruenewald (2003) claims that a critical pedagogy of place raises the awareness of ecological thinking within education, which is fundamental to the well-being of children and our world. This framework, as described in more detail in Chapter Two, will guide the project. It provides the basis for education as liberation through connections between people and the world in which they inhabit.

Moreover, critical pedagogy underlines the importance of dialogue and critical thinking, moving away from the conventional banking method in which children are told how to think, feel and learn (Freire, 1972). Critical pedagogy allows children to exercise autonomy and agency in their learning, empowering students to learn because they are naturally curious and inquisitive beings.

Like Freire, hooks (1994) has contributed to critical pedagogical thinking through her work on rethinking democratic education. She not only advocates for empowering students but encourages educators to think outside the box or, in her words, beyond the four walls of the classroom.

Taken together, these authors provide a theoretical framework for understanding why it is important for educational leaders to consider their place in the world and the natural environment. Furthermore, what is crucial is how rearranging classroom dynamics builds a bridge between human connection, place, and the environment.

Limitations of the Study

I interviewed eight participants and therefore recognize the limitations of the generalizability of the study. I interviewed four educators: one homeschooling, one hybrid outdoor pod leader, one Montessori school leader and one nature-based curriculum leader. I interviewed four parents: two traditional and two alternative parents (outdoor and unschooling). I recognize that generalizations are being made based on my small participant pool, which covers various approaches to education within the alternative schooling bracket. Interviewing a greater number of participants would provide further insight and validity across the findings.

Further research is required to better represent the chosen participant sample. Specifically, there is a need to explore parents' and educators' views on how accessible alternative education actually is for the entire population. Further research to better represent parents across all economic backgrounds would provide an in-depth understanding across the diversity and complexity of families and their educational decisions. Moreover, it would be an additional benefit to research a child's perspective on their educational opportunities, both in traditional and alternative environments, for deeper connection and understanding of their own wants and desires.

Significance of the Study

This study addresses the need for adults to consider the role and impact of the environment in early education and how the use of the environment shapes adults' decisions on teaching and learning. This study is significant as it considers the aspect of place, which is often overlooked in education and policy. It gives rise to the voices of alternative educators who bring an insightful and critical view of education to existing literature. Traditional educators and leaders may welcome these views, as they bring an alternative perspective on classroom dynamics and shift the understanding of power dynamics and relationships between educators and students when the aspect of place is implemented.

Furthermore, this research is significant as it adds to the existing work on a critical pedagogy framework, bringing in the perspective of place to better understand how the environment can serve children and contribute to the creation of peaceful individuals through an awareness and exploration of our natural environment and place in the world.

This study may hold significance for policy makers, as it highlights the importance of learning outdoors and the many benefits of this particular approach, which is explored deeper in Chapter Two. Administrators who are looking to increase the amount of outdoor learning within their school sites may find the study empowering, offer alternative options for students, and encourage the creation of organizational changes within their institutions, in order to build caring, inquisitive and empathetic individuals.

Finally, other researchers interested in exploring this approach to learning may find relevance from the added perspective of this study. The research will develop thinking and conceptualization of meaningful learning in the natural environment from an adults' perspective.

Definition of Terms

Alternative Education includes a number of pedagogical approaches different from traditional education. Within this study we refer to outdoor education, homeschooling/ unschooling, and Montessori as alternative approaches to education.

A *child-led approach* to learning is a term to describe a learning approach in which the children themselves are responsible for what they learn with little to no adult input. The children are viewed as qualified to be given the control over content and process of their learning, ultimately allowing them to explore their own interests.

Unschooling is a type of alternative education. It is a synonym for the child-led approach and is informal in nature, allowing the learners themselves to have choice in their own learning process. Children are free to explore their own interests and desires to drive the path of learning, often involving play as a leading factor in the learning process.

Pedagogy of place, explored further in Chapter Two, combines both challenging the dominant culture in conventional education and a place-based education. This is an education philosophy involving teaching for sustainability, community-based education and environmental learning. The pedagogy emphasises the outdoors as holding deep meaning and high significance. It provides possibilities for re-thinking and enriching outdoor experiences for children.

Montessori is a type of alternative education. This is an organic approach to education for young children. This approach invites children to develop independence and agency over their learning. Educators provide materials and a stimulating environment, which allows for freedom and the natural development of interests and desires.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Introduction

Children require an outdoor education, grounded in a sense of place that is informed by a child-led approach for holistic growth and well-being. The body of scholarship that justifies this claim includes five sets of evidence and demonstrates: (a) the importance of considering happiness in education; (b) alternative forms of education have been ways that incorporated happiness, specifically outdoor education, through connections with nature; (c) a place-based pedagogy promotes a care for our world and those around us, developing globally compassionate citizens; (d) a child-led, natural approach to learning allows for freedom, choice and the scope to follow one's own interests and desires to find out who they are as people in the world; and (e) parents' decision making as a key factor to understanding this process. The critical pedagogy of place theory is used to frame this body of scholarship.

Theoretical Framework: a Critical Pedagogy of Place

The critical pedagogy of place builds on the theoretical framework of critical pedagogy, which provides the foundation for this project. Gruenewald (2003) claims that the critical pedagogy of place raises the awareness about ecological thinking within education, which is fundamental to the well-being of children and our world. This section includes a brief history of critical pedagogy, which includes: (a) Freire (1972), who discusses a 'pedagogy of the oppressed,' by which he articulates the idea that students should play an active role in their own learning through social exchange; (b) hooks' (1994) original scholarship, illustrating education as the practice of freedom; and (c) Gruenewald (2003), who builds on critical pedagogy as he proposes the critical pedagogy

of place framework, describing the importance of making connections to our context and place in the world. This progression of thought is important because it provides the basis for achieving liberation in education through connections between people and the world which they inhabit.

Freire's (1972) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* provides the framework for critical pedagogy. Freire's notion of problem-based learning is one in which students must liberate themselves from oppressive conditions within the four walls of the classroom, co-learn alongside their educator, and engage in critical dialogue. Freire uses the notion of oppressed (student) and oppressor (teacher) to highlight the ways the oppressed can liberate themselves through reflection and action. This theory responds to the problems of educators who believe their role is to share and deposit information into the minds of their students, known as the banking method. Freire's framework is expanded by hooks (1994), who frames an understanding of education as the practice of freedom. Freire's rethinking of relationships between teacher and student provides an understanding of how shifting power dynamics is a step toward education as liberation for everyone involved in the teaching and learning process. This added insight to the field of critical pedagogy provides a framework in which the importance of dialogue, critical thinking and problem-posing education are crucial, empowering students and creating a relationship built upon hope and mutual trust.

The foundational work that defines critical pedagogy includes the analysis of hooks (1994). This idea of the practice of freedom arose from hooks' philosophy of the classroom and rethinking democratic education. As hooks (1994) argues, given the power dynamic between student and teacher, the students are often marginalized in the

classroom and must consider finding freedom through critical thinking, spirituality and liberatory practice. hooks' (1994) encourages educators to move beyond limitations and set boundaries by thinking critically about not only what they are teaching but where and how they are teaching. Her theory is similar to Freire's, since it challenges the banking method, offering a way of teaching in which educators are actively involved and committed to empowering their students intellectually and spiritually. hooks' work is very much based on the critical element of building strong teacher-student relationships, designed for student success and liberation. She emphasizes the notion of knowing students as whole beings, thus understanding what they each need and providing the materials and environment for them to each find themselves and thrive. This original scholarship is important because it encourages educators to think critically about their classrooms, seeing the many possibilities in moving beyond traditional boundaries and arrangements, in order for liberatory practice to occur.

An added element in this field of thought is suggested by Gruenewald (2003), who proposes the critical pedagogy of place framework. This concept is related to the work of Freire (1972) because it builds on the idea of human connection and critical thinking. However, it differs from the work of hooks (1994) in that it goes a step further in recognizing the importance of connections, not only between people but to the place which we inhabit. Connection to our place in the world is important because it helps students know where they come from and who they are in the world. The additional outdoor-place element of this framework lends itself to connections between mind, body, and spirit. It challenges educators to reflect upon the relationship between pedagogy and the places we inhabit and leave behind for future generations. This addition to the field of

critical pedagogy is important because, whilst critical pedagogy and pedagogy of place are mutually supportive, it highlights the absence of ecological thinking in earlier writing about critical pedagogy. It recognizes the need to build relationships and human connection in education, closely related to the places we inhabit and the environment in which we live and learn. Such an approach lends itself to raising global, peaceful, and compassionate beings who care about others and their world. Through such a theoretical lens, children are encouraged to naturally find their way and be responsible agents of their learning and caring for the wider world. Finally, the outdoor-place element lends itself to never ending real life learning opportunities, as children make meaningful connections to the world around them.

In summary, the critical pedagogy of place illustrates education as the practice of freedom through ecological thinking and connections between people and place. This framework embraces the experience of connection between humans and their world.

Related to this theoretical framework are bodies of research that demonstrate the practical application of a critical pedagogy of place and that articulate the significance of outdoor education and the many benefits that come with following a child-led approach. The following sections describe this research and justify the claim that children require an outdoor education, grounded in a sense of place and following a child-led approach for holistic growth and general well-being.

Social and Emotional Happiness in Education

Recent scholarship explores the importance of finding happiness and joy in education as an increasingly significant component to a child's ultimate well-being. This section reviews how we can help children understand happiness as an aim of education

and proposes the concept of sustainable happiness, defined as: “happiness that contributes to individual, community and/or global well-being without exploiting other people, the environment or future generations” (O’ Brien, 2010). Furthermore, the section explores the impact of mindfulness and spiritual education for both students’ and adults’ social-emotional well-being. It is hard to imagine a time when schools and teachers were not held accountable for performance and competition not recognized to be of importance. Happiness scholarship provides a clear response to our society's obsession with testing and standards and suggests a solution to the continual stress many students and educators hold. The pedagogy of place aspect is a natural approach which welcomes social and emotional learning and happiness.

To begin, scholarship illustrates that happiness has shifted from being a fad to a legitimate concept within the educational world. Educators have a role and responsibility to create the space for students to flourish and thrive within an inclusive learning environment. Moreover, scholars articulate that happiness should be viewed as a significant aim in education.

Evidence of this can be found in Palmer (1998), who claims education aimed specifically at happiness cannot be achieved by teaching happiness. According to him, educators have a role in cultivating spaces in which children feel happy, safe and content whilst learning. He demonstrates that happiness can be created through three essential dimensions: openness, boundaries, and hospitality. Openness refers to the clearing away of the clutter, including the pressure to get on with the daily “work,” as well as intrusive feelings and meaningless words. The boundaries provide the structure for learning, with less focus on outcomes and more focus on the journey toward the learning destination.

Hospitality refers to receiving each other, connecting, and adopting a sense of community. This aligns with the literature throughout this review, suggesting that a sense of connectedness with other human beings is vital to a child's educational success and happiness in education.

Furthermore, in her research, Noddings (2003) proposes that some of the best places for us to flourish and thrive are indeed 'happy places.' The author claims that if children are to be happy in schools, their educators should be also. The desire for happiness is universal across all humanity, yet it fails to appear among the aims of education within Western society. Noddings (2003) suggests that as educators, we should deeply question our aims and consider why we are promoting certain goals in schools but tend to neglect education for personal life and happiness.

Similarly, Gibbons (2013) argues that whilst one particular aim of education is increasing the performance measurements of children, one outcome as a result appears to be unhappiness. It is suggested that the talk of aims and the "why" behind what is being taught is a permanently open discussion. Gibbons adds that happiness should also be a topic of discussion, as educators continue to define happiness and what it means for young children today.

Related to this, research investigating education for sustainable development articulates that authentic happiness has very little to do with material wealth or objective outcomes. Sustainable development in education looks specifically at caring for our planet and environmental studies such as climate change, energy conservation, recycling, cultural diversity and human rights. In order to foster sustainable lifestyles, the concept of

sustainable happiness has been derived as a potential to contribute to sustainable development in education, weaving the two concepts as one.

Evidence of this can be found in O'Brien (2010), who claims the challenge is to move sustainable education beyond raising individual awareness and toward collectively fostering sustainable behaviors. The author notes that whilst definitions of happiness may vary, happiness can be incorporated into many areas of the curriculum. The term sustainable happiness, coined by O'Brien (2005), draws attention to how individuals, groups of people and communities pursue happiness. Sustainable happiness is an approach to guide actions on a daily basis reinforcing the need to consider social, environmental and economic indicators of overall well-being. Our natural desire for happiness can become the entry point for discovering that our well-being is inextricably linked to the well-being of others and the natural environment. Thus, sustainable happiness is a superb approach for introducing sustainability to teachers, motivating them to become models of sustainability and exciting them to integrate sustainable happiness into their teaching practice.

Similarly, Kyte (2016) studies sustainable happiness but with a slightly alternate lens, focusing on mindful meditation and hatha yoga as a means to determine if such practices contribute to an improved well-being amongst educators. The research articulates that teaching is a stressful profession in which burnout, exhaustion and reduced personal accomplishment are apparent. Sustainable happiness begins with self and the overreaching effects of mindfulness transcends not only into the classrooms but the wider community, providing opportunities for transformation, sustainable happiness and well-being. Evidently, across the literature, there is a need to shift from the

superficial learning skills to the implementation of transformational practice. Kyte (2016) indicates that teacher and student must become learning partners and use imagination and creativity to change the educational space, expanding new, mindful pedagogies rooted in sustainable happiness.

A final body of research, explores the impact of mindfulness and spiritual education for both students' and adults' social-emotional well-being. Dr. Ron Seigel, a Harvard Medical School clinical psychologist, has defined mindfulness as "a particular attitude toward experience, a way of relating to life, that holds both the promise of alleviating our suffering and making our lives rich and meaningful" (Lumpkin and Seigel, 2010, p.5). Kyte (2016) provides evidence of the benefits of mindful practices within the field of education. His work illustrates that not only students will benefit from mindful practices, but teachers will too. The author proposes a new 'mindfulness pedagogy' which could contribute to the sustainable self/ happiness as reviewed above. In alignment with the work above, Kyte (2016) highlights how teachers today continue to work with fewer resources and higher student needs. This environment is unhealthy and has led to an increase in mistrust and teacher drop out rates. Moreover, extensive research suggests that children's learning is highly dependent on the teacher's approach as well as the environment in which they learn and engage. Mindfulness studies can transform such deficits seen far too often today. Kyte uses narrative story telling of teachers' experiences to explore the benefits of mindful practices, including hatha yoga and meditation. His findings not only suggest an improvement in serenity, peace, awareness and well-being, but indicate that frequent mindful practices for both students and teachers encourage a sustainable self and sustainable happiness.

Similarly, in her book 'Teaching Community,' hooks (2003) discusses the significance of spirituality in the classroom. She proposes that spirituality is concerned with qualities of the human spirit, including "love, compassion, patience, tolerance, forgiveness, contentment, a sense of responsibility, a sense of harmony- which bring happiness to self and others."

Additionally, her work draws on the knowledge of Parker Palmer in his essay "The Grace of Great Things" which urges teachers to transform education to honor the needs of the spirit, away from the competition, intellectual combat, figures, rankings and credentials. hooks (2003) suggests that there is an assumption that 'real' brilliance is revealed by the will to disconnect, in fear of being whole, an assumption that if "the heart is closed, the mind will open even wider" (p. 181). Educators must be seen as healers who trust in life and people. They must have the courage to educate people to heal this world, as this is education as the practice of freedom: "... the classroom continues to be a place where paradise can be realized, a place of passion and possibility, a place where spirit matters, where all that we learn and knows leads us into greater connection, into greater understanding of life lived in the community" (p. 183).

Leland (2015) conducted a research review of mindfulness in education and found that this approach was useful in a few particular ways, including minimizing the impact of bullying, as well as helping students with learning disabilities. In alignment with the literature reviewed in this area, the authors suggest that there is a place for mindfulness in the curriculum for both academic benefits as well as for student emotional well-being. The research shows benefits for students of all ages, from elementary age up to college

students. Mindfulness may be an effective tool to assist students in becoming better learners and to turn educational institutions into better learning communities.

In sum, these authors articulate that running education within a market-driven system with a focus on economic growth can significantly cause unhappiness among young children. If educators are to embrace happiness and take into consideration the importance of children flourishing and thriving as individuals, there must be some changes in terms of our educational aims in the way we understand and organize the educational system.

The benefits of sustainable happiness practices are highlighted through connecting mindfulness with environmental studies. In our consumer society, the education system typically reinforces lifestyles and behaviours which are unsustainable and less likely to lead to authentic happiness and well-being. An education built on the idea of sustainability and, more specifically, sustainable happiness may just be the answer so many children need today. Such an approach will invite a wealth of new possibilities and opportunities for teachers and students to enhance their quality of life as well as contribute to community and global well-being. Evidently, it is important that educators find happiness and joy and make this a significant component in education for a child's holistic well-being. This body of research justifies the claim that children require an outdoor education, grounded in a sense of place, following a child-led approach for holistic growth and well-being.

Alternative, Outdoor Education

Research demonstrates that students who learn and engage with peers in the outdoor environment receive many benefits, including improved happiness and sense of

well-being. This alternative form of education is ultimately achieved through collaborative play and making sense of our world, building connections through dialogue, and connecting with the natural environment. This form of alternative education naturally promotes curiosity, risk-taking, child empowerment, and a sense of agency. Evidence includes: (a) research illustrating that a play-based pedagogy adopted in the outdoors provides a platform for engagement with learning, which excites children and nurtures a love for learning; (b) research that articulates children's interpretations and perspectives of nature and the outdoors, which often challenge adults' assumptions about children's understanding; (c) research arguing that nature connectedness and environmental studies, particularly in early childhood education, are essential for ultimate well-being. This wealth of research suggests outdoor education is a necessity which is often overlooked by educators.

To begin, research demonstrates that play is an important element of a child's learning and development. Play is a tool in which children connect and make sense of their world, following their natural curiosity and imagination. Evidence of this is found in Coates and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) who highlight the rise in forest school programs in the United Kingdom. These outdoor forest schools are underpinned by play-based pedagogy, as well as the values of forest schools. The values include: inclusivity, child-led learning, and providing opportunities to play, which fosters development beyond simply academic skills. As Coates and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) highlight throughout, when educators offer opportunities to play within an outdoor environment, children begin to take control over their learning and to face risks. The research suggests that through imaginative, creative and problem-posing play, children recognize and engage in their own learning journeys.

Children's perspectives of the forest schools indicate positive experiences around outdoor learning which spark feelings of excitement. As the research suggests, the main benefits to a play-based pedagogy within an outdoor environment include: improved creative and cognitive abilities, increased autonomous and collaborative abilities, increased physical activity, negotiation of the environment, and building better connections with peers through conflict management.

Similarly, Blanchet-Cohen and Elliot (2011) demonstrate through their research children's natural affiliation with nature. Their findings indicate that learning through outdoor play stimulates children's imaginations and understanding of experiences. Natural play spaces are the building blocks to creating environmental citizens among young children. Blanchet- Cohen and Elliott (2011) urge educators to exchange ideas and share possibilities on the potential of natural play spaces. When educators look beyond the four walls of the classroom, they will begin to recognize the potential of natural play spaces in which children discover who they are in relation to their natural environment, using education as liberation.

Related to this approach, research investigating children's perspectives articulates the need for educators to become facilitators and encourage children to express their own points of view, away from adult guidance or a specific framework. Evidence of this can be found in White (2015), whose analysis claims children theorize about their world way beyond the scope of an adult's imagination when given opportunities to explore within their natural environment. The author states that a problem children face today is that they are seldom asked to provide their ideas or viewpoints away from specific standards or criteria. The research conducted uses dialogue and conversation to investigate what

children see within their natural environment, using photography as a medium. Findings report that young children have a remarkable capacity to theorize about their world using a range of strategies, some of which lie beyond the interpretive eye of an adult. This article is a clear demonstration of critical pedagogy at its best, as educators become talk partners and facilitators rather than a dominating figure for ultimate enjoyment of learning, offering freedom of speech.

Similarly, Lloyd, Gray, and Truong (2018) investigate ways in which outdoor educators can actively promote an authentic voice and increase the educators' understanding of the childrens' world interpretations well beyond the researchers' gaze. A place-based outdoor learning case study conducted in Australia used cameras attached to the chests of children to research their interactions and engagement with others in their natural environment. Various other documents and methods were used to validate results, allowing for researchers to review the video footage at a later date and for child participants to continue with self-discovery within their outdoor environment. Findings concluded that the curriculum stimulated by outdoor learning promotes vocabulary development, motivation for learning, engagement to tasks, scientific skills, proficiency using geography fieldwork tools, a transfer of knowledge to written work, fine and gross motor skill development, and creativity completing artworks, among other positives. In addition, children's overall well-being also benefited, including their positive relationships, self-regulation, independence, responsibility, and resilience. Fundamentally, these findings suggest that making connections to past experiences and the environment increased the connections between child and place. This study supports the claim that an outdoor education grounded in a sense of place is effective for

connecting children to others and to their environment, stimulating academic learning, as well as overall happiness and well-being.

Merewether and Fleet (2018) add to the existing research, exploring the various ways in which educators can listen to children in order to understand their perspectives, particularly when words are not a child's primary means of communication. The research suggests that nothing exists in isolation and learning is never a linear path. A child's insights to understanding in an outdoor environment can be documented using a range of pedagogical approaches. Included are photographs, field notes, and telling and sharing stories, which all offer new ways of listening and hearing a child's authentic voice. Whilst pedagogical documentation can be used to capture multiple perspectives and insights, the research stresses the importance of asking critical questions, which challenge the status quo and move beyond the preconceived assumptions about what children can and cannot achieve based on set standards and targets. Accordingly, Merewether & Fleet (2018) conclude that, more often than not, children's scope of real-life understanding, particularly of their natural world, is way beyond what is perceived by educators.

A final body of research claims nature connectedness should be a distinct goal in early education. Evidence of this can be found in Barrable (2019), who emphasizes that time spent in nature correlates with nature connectedness, underlining the need for children to spend more time outdoors. From his review of literature, it is suggested that, when given autonomy in natural settings, the children's overall sense of well-being improves. In addition, the review explores more recent studies which analyze the pathways between nature connectedness and positive emotions. This confirms his claim that connecting with nature improves a child's sense of well-being.

Similarly, MacDonald and Breunig (2018) claim that learning happens naturally in an outdoor environment, as children develop curiosity and interest in their natural world. As the authors suggest, learning becomes an interactive process, given that children construct new ideas from their engagement with others and their environment.

In agreement with current literature, Braun and Dierkes (2017) demonstrate through their outdoor educational program research that reconnecting students to their natural environment is more important than ever. Braun and Dierkes (2017) imply that a child's surrounding environment can restructure connections with nature. The findings confirm the positive impact of learning experiences carried out in natural environments in comparison to a classroom setting. Childhood is the crucial life period in which children should be provided opportunities to connect with nature. Through outdoor education, these opportunities can be achieved.

When taken together, this research suggests that nature connectedness should become an early educational goal. Children learn naturally in an organic environment in which they feel free to explore, become curious and connect with their environment. In summary, research demonstrates that students who learn and engage with peers in the outdoor environment receive many benefits, including improved happiness. A play-based pedagogy adopted in the outdoors provides a platform for engagement with learning in ways leading children to feel excited and adopt a love for learning. Outdoor education leads children to deepen their interpretations and perspectives of nature and the environment. Nature connectedness and environmental studies, particularly in early childhood education, are essential for ultimate well-being. This body of research supports the claim that children require an outdoor education, grounded in a sense of

place and based on a child-led approach for holistic growth and well-being. Related to this is a body of scholarship that demonstrates the importance of following a place-based pedagogy.

Place-Based Pedagogy

Similar to the literature on the benefits of an outdoor education, scholars have demonstrated that places have a significant role in teaching and learning experiences. Place-based pedagogy illustrates education as the practice of freedom through making meaningful connections with the natural world. Supporting scholarship includes: (a) research that claims connecting with the places in which we teach and learn is essential in order to continually respond to our ever-changing world; (b) research that articulates place-based education is critical to help reframe and ground today's standards to be more culturally-responsive and relevant; and (c) research that demonstrates the importance of place-based learning in promoting civic engagement, democratic education, and a care for others and the environment. The work in these areas is important because it grounds the foundation of my field project and articulates the need for new ways of considering what, how and where children learn for holistic growth and well-being, representing a transformation of our education system that so many long for.

The following articles highlight the value in connecting pedagogy of place with learning content, not only for student benefit but for educators professional development. Research suggests that there is a relationship between pedagogy of place and educator professionalization, in that such a process enables educators to be reflexive and make deeper connections with the learning content for student success. To begin, in their recent research, Wattachow and Brown (2020) explore current outdoor education theory and use

the term 'pedagogy of place' to refer to an alternative vision for outdoor education practice. Their findings, as well as their own reflection upon personal experiences, indicate that places have a significant role in teaching and learning experiences. Studying 'place' creates a narrative of regional and local politics, which in turn educates citizens on the well-being of the social and ecological places in which they live. The authors argue for outdoor learning, claiming this allows children to keep up with the rapidly-changing social and ecological modifications within our world and adopt care and appreciation of our environment.

In alignment, Sheppard, Kortecamp, Jencks, Flack and Wood (2019) research teachers' professional development using place-based learning and reflective practice. Successful professional development allows teachers to reflect on how they teach, with the aim of improving student learning. Teachers in this research study were given the opportunity to visit historic sites in order to enhance their history knowledge. From this experience, the teachers not only gained further historical knowledge, but they were able to consider new pedagogies grounded in a sense of place for transformational practice. Through engaging teachers in meaningful professional development, they successfully cultivated connections. As the study suggests, place-based learning is crucial if educators wish for their students to make deep connections with the learning content.

Related to this, Gruenewald (2003) highlights the need for education to be individualized and authentic to meet every student's needs. He argues for a critical pedagogy of place framework in which today's educational standards become more relevant and culturally responsive. An example of this can be found in Dawson and Beattie (2018), whose work tells the story of an educator and her students at an outdoor

preschool. The research highlights that in order to understand pedagogy of place, educators must consider themselves as learners, which subverts the dominant structure of educator as teacher. The work conveys several valuable “magical moments” within outdoor education and suggests that in order to achieve magical moments, educators should provide sensory opportunities in which students become spiritually attuned to their place.

Similarly, Nicol and Sangster (2019) claim that place-based education provides opportunities for educators to develop responsive practices in local community areas. Findings from semi-structured interviews suggest solo outdoor experiences have a profound effect on all students. Ontological shifts caused a change from students being passive receptors of knowledge to more active participants in their learning, making sense of real life stimuli. In total, this research illustrates the power of culturally-responsive practices connecting to place.

A final body of research explores place-based education (PBE) and how such a pedagogy provides young children with a sense of agency, where they can act collaboratively to co-construct their own learning and make sense of their world, at a time when teachers' work is being controlled through external processes, high stakes testing, and accountability measures. McInerney, Smyth, and Down (2011) claim that place-based education invites refreshing change and invests young children with a sense of agency in their learning. This learning approach allows for democratic practices, community-engaged learning and opportunities to consider and reflect upon real-life social and environmental problems. A critical perspective in place-based education allows young people to connect community and local issues to global environmental

issues, such as climate change. The authors argue that PBE invites students and teachers to question the dominant order and work for the common good of all humanity, rather than self-interest.

Similarly, Goralnik, Dobson and Nelson (2014) argue for a thoughtful and intentional pedagogy through environmental studies, which educates students to care for the planet and create empathetic relationships. The authors draw on ecofeminism, environmental ethics, environmental education and place-based learning, embracing connections and care for our planet.

In summary, research demonstrates that place-based education reorients educators in how and what they teach as well as their relationships with young people. The research expresses the importance of connecting with 'our place' in the world through community projects and hands-on learning in an outdoor environment for the well-being of a child. This includes research which illustrates that connecting with the places in which we teach and learn is essential in order to continually respond to our ever-changing world. Furthermore, this style of research articulates children's interpretations and perspectives of nature and the outdoors, often challenges adults' assumptions about children's understanding, and claims the importance of place-based learning in promoting civic engagement, democratic education, a care for others and the environment. This body of research justifies the claim that children require an outdoor education, grounded in a sense of place, following a child-led approach for holistic growth and well-being. Related to this is a body of scholarship that demonstrates the benefits that come with following an organic, child-led approach to learning within a critical pedagogy of place framework.

Unschooling & Child-Led Learning

Similar to the literature on an outdoor education grounded in a sense of place, research demonstrates the benefits to following an unschooling, child-led, approach. The term unschooling means different things for different individuals or groups of people, depending on numerous factors including content and process. Within this review, I refer to unschooling as a child-led, inquiry-based approach which in turn encourages the child to learn through finding and exploring their own interests and desires in natural but meaningful ways. This section reviews the spectrum of unschooling in terms of different families' and educators' content and process, describes research that explores the organic freedom and autonomy that an unschooling approach brings and examines research that explores the school- to- prison pipeline and use of unschooling as healing from playing the "school game." This aspect is important because my research will explore what a child-led approach offers, in which educators naturally become learners alongside their students. This in turn encourages children to take agency and organically pursue their interests and desires, free from classroom constraints or adult restrictions and rigid structure.

To begin, research illustrates a broad spectrum of unschooling, including what is taught (content) and why (process). The literature claims that content and process within an unschooling approach differs depending on each family's individual needs and choices. That is, there is no one 'right' unschooling approach. Evidence of this can be found in research conducted by Gray and Riley (2013), who claim that unschooling very much varies in form and technique. Through a participatory action research method, the

authors analyze the survey results of 255 self-identified unschooling families across the globe, the majority located across the United States. Findings indicate that reasons for unschooling as well as the approaches taken vary widely depending on numerous factors. For some families, unschooling is a form of relaxed homeschooling, for others it is completely unstructured and child-led. For many, unschooling became an option when they experienced negative effects with traditional schooling, while some chose to unschool after more traditional homeschooling methods. Interestingly, although many felt socially criticized for living an unschooled lifestyle as well as an innate culturally ingrained voice of schooling expectations, these families experienced many benefits. Such benefits include improved learning and attitudes about learning, improved social and emotional well-being, as well as greater closeness within the family. The study concludes that if parents' main concern is to raise healthy, happy, responsible and intrinsically motivated children, following an unschooled or child-led approach is the best option.

Similarly, Guterman and Neuman (2017) demonstrate, through their hermeneutic-phenomenological research in which 30 Israeli mothers were interviewed, that every family has their own approach and structure to unschooling. In alignment with Gray and Riley (2013), authors propose two axes in terms of content and process. Their findings demonstrate a broad spectrum across the axis in which various factors influence the unschooling approach, including ideologies, culture and family traditions.

In sum, the research that explores the content and process choice of unschooling families which findings articulate a variety of reasons for unschooling. Ultimately, it can

be concluded that unschooling is an approach to education which gives families freedom and choice and provides children with a sense of agency over their learning.

Related to this, research analyzes unschooling in terms of giving parents an option to provide their children with a truly democratic education, necessary to overcome the neoliberal education system of our time, offering an abundance of freedom and autonomy. Evidence of this can be found in Petrovic and Rolstad (2016), who explore the development of autonomy in the unschooling approach through reviewing the work of Rousseau and Freire. The authors highlight the various definitions many scholars give for autonomy, building upon the “Socratic ideal of the examined life” (p. 818). The authors claim that a flourishing life must be lived from the inside, which means living life as every individual desires, without external interference or constraint. The authors suggest traditional schooling is the opposite of freedom. They draw on the work of Rousseau who claims that “our souls have been corrupted in proportion to the advancement of our sciences and arts towards perfection” (Rousseau, 1964, p. 39).

Petrovic and Rolstad (2016) continue by referring to society as a herd in which all ‘men’ will do the same unless driven by stronger motives which deter them from doing so, such as the motive emphasized in unschooling. Learning must be restricted only by natural capacities and guided by interest, self-driven discovery and real-life meaningful experiences, all concepts which unschooling allows. The authors conclude that there is a possibility for unschooling to exist in schools, but it will only become possible if teachers let go of the need to control their students' thoughts and activities. There should be no set curriculum, particularly in elementary schools. The authors recommend eliminating fixed grade levels, given the understanding that interest in subjects increases when

opportunities are given for children to engage with intriguing subject material and activities.

The literature above reiterates that teachers are responsible for providing a rich, engaging learning environment to encourage children to naturally flourish and thrive within a positive space. Authors suggest children should be free to explore and pursue the things which spark their interest, forming the capacity for autonomy and choosing their own life plan, free from external constraints. This is what the unschooling approach offers and encourages among all children; freedom and autonomy to take learning into their own hands, within an engaging and supportive environment, created by educators whose role becomes a facilitator, rather than dominating adults.

In total, the research illustrates that children develop and are engaged when given freedom and agency over their learning content. The unschooling approach allows for freedom, independence, the creation of play-filled spaces and ultimately the opportunity to reclaim and embrace childhood, free from external restrictions and regulations.

A final body of research claims childhood is not what it used to be, reviewing the evidence that mass schooling fuels a school- to- prison pipeline and perpetuates inequality. Evidence of this can be found in MacDonald (2019), who claims that the environment of today's schooling emphasizes control, order and conformity, rather than offering freedom, place and opportunities to explore interests and desires. Child psychologist Anaulati explores why kindergartners are often mistaken for being ADHD, bipolar or on the autism spectrum and explains that when confronted with academic expectations as well as social expectations well above their capacity, they become flagged. Certain behaviors, which could be viewed as disruptive, are seen as problematic,

when in reality the abnormal learning environment is the cause of such behaviors that are not actually developmentally inappropriate. MacDonald's research suggests that children become conditioned to play the "school game" in an inorganic environment. Children learn that their own ideas, interests and freedom are insignificant and as a result they gradually lose their natural learning tendencies and become a player in the game.

Michaud (2019) supports Macdonald's (2019) unschooling research through her own personal experience, as a parent with a child unable to cope in the mainstream school system. The author began the move to home learning with homeschooling but found even this approach was restricting. Her evidence suggests that when following a strict homeschooling schedule, she felt too controlling, projecting how a young child in her care should think and feel. She was quick to learn that the negative reactions her child expressed were due to domination and oppression. The author felt she was replicating school in a home environment. She switched to unschooling and found hope and healing, suggesting it protected her child from early trauma. Michaud draws on the work of Freire's (1972), "problem- posing education, as a humanist and liberating praxis and posits a fundamental that people subjected to domination must fight for their emancipation" (p. 85). Freire's problem posing method allowed the child's rights and liberties to be respected and, as a result, the child began to show respect and kindness towards other members of his community.

In summary, research demonstrates the many benefits of following an unschooling, child- led approach. This includes: research reviewing the spectrum of unschooling in terms of different families' and educators' content and process; research that explores the organic freedom and autonomy that an unschooling approach offers,

which results in a deeper love of learning in comparison to traditional schooling; and research which explores the use of unschooling as healing from being conditioned to playing the school game. This body of research justifies children requiring an outdoor education, grounded in a sense of place following a child-led approach for holistic growth and well-being.

Parental Choices and Perceptions of their Child's Learning Environment

Over the past three decades, a wealth of educational options have been made available for families, in addition to traditional public schooling. A competitive marketplace exists in which all schools are competing for families, who act as the consumers in this case. Depending on the educational goals and needs of each family, they increasingly have greater choice to make decisions suitable for their individual child's needs. Parents' reasons for choosing one educational option over another have been under-examined to date (Hiles, 2015).

Recent research on this topic increasingly explores alternative parents' views on the educational environment and the factors that shape their choices. With the rise in alternative education options, this section explores families' choices with an emphasis on how the alternative environment plays a role in shaping these decisions. This section is important for my research in giving background and insight to parental voice and their perspectives of the role of the environment in education. However, it is important to note that today, alternative education options are more accessible to middle- class and wealthy parents. Whilst the current literature on this topic speaks mainly to alternative parents' decisions, it is recognized that they do have economic capital and therefore, more educational freedom to make such choices for their children.

To begin, it is important to note that scholarship suggests that parents decision-making is multifaceted and the factors which influence parents' choice vary for every family (Hiles, 2015). The literature suggests that in general, parents consider a multitude of factors including but not limited to: community, location, social and emotional growth opportunities, religious/moral beliefs and structure in preparation for the working world. It goes without saying, every child is unique and their learning needs and styles vary. It is up to parents to know what drives and motivates their child and choose the appropriate learning environment for them in which their values align. Evidence of this is apparent in the work of Bauch (1992), who examined the relationship between school choice and parent involvement between different ethnic groups. In her work, Bauch (1992) highlights how both community and location were determining factors in parents' educational choices. The findings indicate that educational choices cannot be limited to intellectual aims but also incorporate the holistic development of the child, including social, environmental and personal aspects of growth.

To ascertain traditional parental decisions, a large survey conducted in Arizona explores families' experiences on educational choice (Catt & Cheng, 2019). It is interesting to consider the patterns across traditional public, charter and private school parents perspectives. The study reports that whilst charter and private school parents gave the most favorable rating of their schools, the parents tended to place greater value on instilling religious and moral beliefs, whilst traditional parents indicated more value on job preparation. In alignment with the literature within this area, the study suggests that choice varies widely depending on each family and individual child's needs.

In addition to the more general research around parental choice and decisions in education, research specifically elevates the voices of parents who send their children to alternative schools. The articles examined suggest that alternative parents seek social and emotional learning opportunities, taught skills that can be applied throughout life such as self- management and social awareness, outdoor learning opportunities, child- led learning to encourage independence, religious studies, and commitments to environmental sustainability.

Close (2012) examined parents' perceptions and experiences with outdoor forest schools through the methodology of interviews. This research study indicates that parents felt outdoor forest schools contributed to the development of the child's creativity, critical thinking skills, self- confidence, discovery skills, experiential learning, well- being, health, physical abilities, communication skills, environmental knowledge and awareness (Kahriman-Pamuk, 2020). The responses from parents indicate that nature to them is a school in itself and they highly value the outdoors as a learning environment. Recently, children have limited opportunities to spend quality time exploring their natural environment away from the classroom, but it is apparent that parents appreciate and value the nature-based approach, which naturally invites children to explore and be curious about the world around them (Ernest and Theimer, 2011). Forest school parents tend to prioritize their child's holistic well- being, particularly valuing the social and emotional aspect of learning over academic success. There is a further research opportunity here, exploring how educators and leaders can rethink traditional schools and incorporate the outdoor environment as an opportunity to practice an alternative approach, blending and balancing the two.

Furthermore, Hiles (2015) studied parents' reasons for sending their children to an alternative school environment, specifically Montessori schools. Through her qualitative research, the author's findings suggest that parents appreciated the child-led, self-directed learning process this alternative approach brings. Parents suggested that this approach helps children to become self-motivated and self-managed learners in the real world. Parents believed that this approach would enhance their child's opportunities for success in later life. Moreover, the time spent learning outside attracted parents to this particular learning style and philosophy. Evidence demonstrates a common theme across the literature: often, alternative parents seek holistic development, prioritizing the social aspect of learning and highly valuing outdoor opportunities (Hiles, 2015).

Adding to this body of literature, a recent qualitative study explored parents' views on educational nature-based summer camps that their children attended (Cheeseman and Wright, 2020). The findings demonstrate that parents perceived the outdoor camp as a positive learning experience for their child. Parents described a number of potential learning opportunities for their children, including: increase in social networks, developing new skills, learning about nature and enhancing commitments to environmental sustainability. Parents highlighted a change in their child's attitudes towards the environment after the summer camp and reinforced a pro-environmental attitude and awareness.

Efford (2017) and her research on the homeschooling environment offers insights on homeschooling parents and their educational choices. Efford (2017) found that parents' motivations for homeschooling are varied, ranging from beliefs that education should be student-centered and organic to pursuing religious purposes. Interestingly, her

findings discuss the relationship dynamics between child and parent as both parent and educator. She claims that the roles “are more fluid and shift seemingly without effort... parents grab teachable moments and encourage their child’s individuality” (p. 62). This quote demonstrates that alternative parents see learning as a constant and use the environment for teachable real-life moments. Most significant from the research are the findings which suggest the goal of parents is to simply choose what is best for their child. If educators are to support this journey, an environment must be created which naturally allows children to use their innate desire to learn and the freedom to follow their own path, finding out who they truly are (Efford, 2017).

In summary, research demonstrates the importance of considering parents' views on the educational environment and how this shapes their pedagogical beliefs and the choices they make for their child. Whilst recognizing that alternative parents do have more educational liberty, this includes research illustrating that alternative parents seek a holistic and child- led approach to learning whilst traditional parents do have some concern with academic success and job preparation. There is an opportunity to further research rethinking traditional schools, exploring how educational leaders can combine two approaches for ultimate success and well-being of students. This body of research justifies the claim that children require an outdoor education, grounded in a sense of place, following a child-led approach for holistic growth and well-being.

Summary

This literature review claims children require an outdoor education, grounded in a sense of place, following a child-led approach for holistic growth and well-being. Evidence that supports this claim includes social and emotional happiness should be a

priority in education, alternative outdoor education and connections with nature has a positive impact on a child's well-being and happiness. A place based pedagogy promotes care of our world and those around us. A child- led, unschooled approach allows for freedom, choice and the scope to follow one's own interests and desires and finally, insights on the factors parents seek in their child's education environment shapes the decisions they make when these alternative options are accessible. The critical pedagogy of place theory is used to frame this body of scholarship. This claim and body of evidence provides a foundation for rethinking and rearranging traditional school dynamics in ways which give educators and children agency over learning by creating more opportunities for being educated in the great outdoors.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The researcher conducted eight interviews. Four of these were conducted with parents: two traditional school parents and two alternative learning parents. One of the alternative parents, was a homeschooling mother and the other an outdoor, nature- based curriculum school parent. The other four interviews were with alternative educators. Participants were asked a series of open- ended questions in order to gather their perceptions and experiences of the early education environment, specifically what shaped their decisions and how the role of the alternative environment is understood by educators.

The purpose of this qualitative study is to better understand the role of the environment in early elementary education, exploring how place informs teaching and learning dynamics. The study gives voice to traditional school parents, alternative school parents, as well as alternative educators, by capturing their perspectives on the role of the educational environment to better understand how this impacts their own thinking about education. The study seeks to explore the conflicting tensions between happiness and academic performance in education, as well as the potential dilemmas parents have in making educational decisions for their child. The pedagogy of place framework is shaped around adults' perspectives.

The aspect of place in education is often overlooked and children are rarely given the opportunity to explore beyond the four walls of the classroom. This study can provide a basis for organizations and educators as they reconsider how their educational environment and place in the world can impact teaching and learning. The study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What do traditional school parents and outdoor homeschooling parents seek in their child's early education environment?
2. What shapes parents' decisions on their child's educational and learning experiences?
3. How do alternative educational leaders and educators understand the role of the alternative environment and how does this impact how they think about education?

Research Design

The study is conducted using a qualitative research approach. One- on- one, semi-structured, phenomenological interviews are used to gain an in-depth understanding of participants' perceptions of the educational environment and how this may impact beliefs about teaching and learning. According to Creswell (2009), a phenomenological study describes the meaning for individuals of their lived experiences of a particular phenomenon. The approach is intended to elicit detailed descriptions of experiences to fully grasp the understanding and feelings of participants about the phenomena of interest.

In the case of this study, phenomenological interviews seemed most appropriate to gain detailed insights and experiences of the role of the environment in shaping educational decisions across three different groups of participants: traditional school parents, alternative school parents, and alternative educators. The objective of this is to learn how each group interprets and understands the role of the educational environment and to find commonalities and differences as to how this shapes the way adults think about education for their child or students.

The semi-structured interviews varied for each participant group and were created strategically using open-ended questions, probes and follow-up questions.

Participants and Setting

The sample consisted of eight participants chosen through purposive sampling (Creswell, 2009). Two were alternative school parents (homeschooling and outdoor, nature- based education), two were traditional school parents and four were alternative, outdoor educators, one of which, also a homeschooling parent. Seven of the eight participants were female and one was male. The participants have been given pseudonyms for confidentiality purposes (Table 1).

Table 1: Participant Pseudonyms and Corresponding Role

Participant Pseudonym	Role Group
Gill	Traditional parent
Tom	Traditional parent
Elle	Alternative, outdoor- nature based parent
Alex	Alternative, homeschooling parent
Julie	Homeschooling leader and parent
Willow	Alternative, Montessori educator
Cam	Alternative, outdoor- nature based educator
Lily	Alternative, outdoor pod leader

The study was conducted in Mill Valley, California, a predominately white, affluent community, during the time of COVID- 19. All participants are residents of Marin County, California.

Instrumentation

Three different interview protocols were created for each of the participant groups. Alternative school parents, traditional school parents and alternative educators were asked slightly varying questions depending on their positionality and context.

As the main instrument, the creator and conductor of interviews, as well as an educator with my own views and assumptions on the topic, I recognize the concern this type of methodology brings. Creswell (2009) states the challenges of qualitative research in general, highlighting the importance of bracketing. I recognize that I hold strong biases and assumptions on the subject of study which could cause concern. I respect the significance of neutrality and bracketing my own beliefs and experiences during the interview procedure for valid and reliable data.

The interview questions were designed in a way to elicit a wealth of information from participants. Questions are open-ended and allow for a high-quality, flowing conversation, including the use of probes. Rubin and Rubin (2012) suggest that probes worded in a formulaic manner, help manage the conversation and keep the interview on target.

The interview questions for traditional school parents, alternative learning parents and alternative educators is on Appendix A.

Data Collection

Through my experience of facilitating an outdoor alternative learning pod, I was able to find and secure parent participants with ease. Parents put me into contact with acquaintances, as well as with previous or known alternative outdoor educators, which formed my full set of participants. Although I reached out to other outdoor alternative

learning organizations for further insight, few were not willing to participate for personal reasons, including the educational changes since the COVID- 19 pandemic.

Participants were given a consent form to read and sign prior to the interview and given the right to withdraw information at any time. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted via a video Zoom call and were on average one hour in length. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

Data Analysis

The interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. I annotated and coded each transcription to highlight the emerging themes and patterns from participant responses. I indexed three of the interviews, one for each of the groups: traditional parents, alternative parents and alternative educators.

First, I wrote a broad analytic memo on initial insights, both confirming and highlighting data that stood out. From this process, I could gradually observe the emerging themes and patterns across all of the interviews. Next, I created a more nuanced and specific analytic memo, which highlighted and uncovered deeper implications of participant responses. This was based on indexing across three participant interviews and searching for keywords and themes across the other participants, both within and beyond their groups.

Researcher's Background

I, the researcher, am a British citizen who identifies as White and Black Caribbean, residing on the South East coast of England. I pursued my BA at The University of Brighton, England and taught lower elementary at a village school for two years before moving to the States. I have lived in the States for four years, where I have

taken on the role of an au pair in New York and California. Most recently, I have volunteered as a backyard learning facilitator in Mill Valley, California, which has provided a foundation and a case for this study.

As a newly qualified teacher, I felt my teacher training did not fully prepare me for 'real-life' practice. As a teacher of a Year 2 class, I was responsible for ensuring the children met the expected standard at the end of their Key Stage One statutory attainment tests. I felt stuck in a cycle, continually experiencing an inner conflict between my own values as an educator as well as acting a performance, playing a person able to maximize performance and put individual beliefs aside under the regime of performativity. My freedom and autonomy were slowly diminishing. I decided to take time out of the profession as I wanted to give my students something more, whilst remaining integral to them and myself. This led me to The University of San Francisco, pursuing an MA in Organization and Leadership.

I have hope that using this study as a case to explore adults' perceptions of the role of the environment in education and how this impacts their view of education, the research will offer organizations, educators and families, ways to embrace and use their natural surroundings as learning opportunities. I hope that adults will encourage children to explore their world beyond the four walls of the classroom, recognizing learning as a constant and valuing the importance of making connections to our real world.

My experience of moving away from home to a new country and working with families with children of all ages has given me the opportunity to first-hand witness the vast differences between families' educational desires and needs. Parents evidently play the biggest role in shaping their child's views and outlooks on the world. Educators have

the task of meeting these varying needs within a small space, bounded by walls whilst attempting to obtain often meaningless standards. In this study, I look to explore how alternative educators rearrange classroom dynamics to create an education rich in exploration of the natural environment, and give children the opportunity to become autonomous agents over their own learning.

This study can provide a basis for organizations and educators, as they reconsider how their educational environments and place in the world impacts teaching and learning. Through this study's parent-oriented framework and perspective, I hope to spark discussion between educators and organizational leaders, as they consider what shapes parents' decisions and recreate dynamics to consider the environment in their planning and preparation.

My journey has led me to this place and I have hope that this study contributes to the abundance of work that is being completed on education reform. More professionals within the field of education recognize that the outdated system no longer works for our generation of children and their families. I hope this study sparks change and new ways of thinking about what really matters in young children's education for our future generations.

Human Subjects Approval

The University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), has approved the study, protocol number 1438. The purpose of this protocol is to protect the participants during the research process. The consent form which participants signed prior to participation is on Appendix B.

Names of participants are replaced with pseudonyms and audio recordings will be accessible only by the researcher. Upon completion of the study the recordings will be destroyed.

Chapter IV

Results

The findings in this study reflect the experiences of traditional school parents, alternative parents and alternative educators, providing their insights to the optimal educational environment and how this impacts their pedagogical beliefs. The major findings in the study claim, all parents seek outdoor learning opportunities for their children. The decisions parents make are shaped by a multitude of factors including socialization, parents own desires, as well as unique child and family differences. Educators value the natural environment as a stimulating and grounding ‘classroom,’ using the abundance of sensory stimulation for teachable moments. The child- led approach is evidently valued and practiced by all alternative educators.

Findings

What do traditional school parents and outdoor/ homeschooling parents seek in their child’s early education environment?

The first research question addressed parents desires and explored what they seek in their child’s learning environment. Within my participant sample, I found that traditional school and alternative parents have similar wants and desires for their child’s education. There are not too many differences detected between the two sets of parents’ learning and educational environment desires. In fact, surprisingly, there were a number of commonalities that came up across the two groups and their answers revealed that there is a general belief amongst all parents that an outdoor environment is best for young children’s holistic development. Their answers revealed that an alternative, specifically outdoor learning environment is sought after by parents and evidently is a lived reality for existing alternative parents and a desire for traditional school parents. The specific factors

which shape or inhabit families' educational choices which will be discussed under RQ2.

Outdoor-Nature Based Environment

There was one commonality between all parents' answers suggesting that parents seek and value opportunities for their children to learn in an outdoor environment. The data suggests, all parents want outdoor opportunities for their children but different groups of parents emphasize different features. I wanted to know exactly what it was about the outdoors that was appealing to both sets of parent participants and why. From their answers, I detect three distinct themes: 1) flexibility, 2) space for endless learning opportunities and 3) the whole child in the outdoor environment.

Flexibility. Parents, specifically alternative parents tend to seek a learning environment that offers flexibility in terms of the learning day structure and process. Alternative parents value the opportunity to adapt throughout the course of the day based on the child's individual wants and needs. In connection to this, alternative parents said they value the uncertainty and spontaneity of the outdoor environment as it instills a sense of flexibility in children who become open and curious about the ongoing changes that occur in the natural environment through seasonal changes, as one example.

Both alternative learning mothers see flexibility as a positive aspect to instill early on as it prepares their children for independence and responsibility in later life. They recognize that life is constantly changing and want for their children to be able to embrace changes that may be encountered, whether comfortable or uncomfortable. They see the outdoor environment as a space, which invites children to express their natural curiosity and wonder about the world.

Alternative parent, Elle expressed:

I feel being out in nature, where nothing is consistent it is filled with change and possibilities for children to just be inspired and have questions about something new. It actually instills the ability to adapt, change and stay curious... the flexibility [of the outdoor environment] is always for the children's benefit.

Elle has a high regard for the outdoors as a space for learning as it brings this feeling of uncertainty. She acknowledges that in an outdoor setting, children have to embrace the endless changes that occur within the environment such as seasonal and weather change, observing and becoming curious about our ever- changing natural world.

Alternative parent and homeschooling mother, Alex, spoke of flexibility in terms of being able to adapt to her children's needs and provide them with agency over their own learning process with no external pressure. She believes that this gives children full responsibility over their learning and "makes the children feel like it's their own education." Similarly to Elle, she feels that following such an approach, will instill a sense of independence, agency and responsibility, benefitting children in later life. In her own experience of homeschooling her three children, she highlights her value in flexibility to tailor learning to the child's pace and own agenda, essentially allowing them to take the lead. Moreover, she highly values the flexibility in the structure of each day, cutting it short or prolonging when applicable, "during a bad day, we can choose to just do something different, like play instruments or take a hike which is still learning for them." Whilst these two mothers share different examples of their value in flexibility, they share a commonality that this element of the alternative learning approach, develops child independence and responsibility.

Julie, homeschooling advocate, educational leader as well as homeschooling parent speaks to the idea of flexibility in terms of having the freedom to do what she feels

right as a parent. Similar to Alex, Julie values the autonomy she has over her children's learning process and daily structure, as she is able to provide them the individualized learning they each require:

[In a traditional setting] you don't have the flexibility or autonomy to be able to do what you want or what you think might be best for this kid versus that kid, which is why homeschooling can be so amazing, because you can really tailor homeschooling specifically to each child let alone your whole family.

Julie appreciates the structural aspect of flexibility that the homeschooling day lends itself too and feels she has control to make her children's educational decisions that speak best to their needs. Evidently, she also values the time spent together as a family, claiming: "a lot of homeschooling classes do not begin until eleven am because those in the homeschooling community know we like to enjoy our slow mornings together." The flexibility to have family time and build close relationships are of high importance to both homeschooling families.

Freedom, choice and autonomy over the learning day structure, as well as the value of choice when it comes to learning content is a sought after element, particularly by alternative parents. They seek flexibility in their child's education as it encourages their children to fully embrace change and become adaptive to new experiences as they grow.

Space for Endless Learning Opportunities. Parent responses indicate a value in the outdoor environment, as the space lends itself to endless learning opportunities and gives their children the space and freedom to explore the environment at their own pace and will. Parents seek vast amounts of physical space for their child to tune into their individual needs. Participants' answers suggest that outdoor space gives children the tools

to find their own interests and desires away from external constraints.

When asked about the optimal learning environment for their child, all parents spoke highly of the outdoors based on what the space lends itself to and the abundance of learning opportunities. I wanted to know exactly what it was about these opportunities that parents look for.

All parents spoke of the natural world providing sensory stimulation to become creative and inspired simply by observing and being a part of nature. Parents spoke to outdoor experiences as providing their children with purpose and meaningful opportunities, happening in real time.

Alternative parent, Elle speaks to the real time aspect that the outdoor environment allows for. She illustrates her appreciation of being outside of the classroom as a way to be immersed in real- world learning experiences that children are not necessarily exposed to within conventional teaching approaches: “when outdoors, children just learn the things that every human should just know in everyday real life.”

Alternative participant, Alex, similarly speaks to the real- world experiences that the outdoor environment lends itself to by becoming exposed to a wealth of natural resources. She regards the outdoor environment as a rich context for spontaneous and real- world learning. She comments that outdoors, children are exposed to a: “bounty of inspiration from the outdoor environment.” Alex feels that an outdoor environment teaches real- world skills and sparks a sense of creativity way beyond a traditional curriculum. She shares an example of the type of learning that she values and her appreciation of the physical outdoor space in providing her child with such hands- on learning opportunities:

They [outdoor, nature- based school] link nature and the environment with their learning content. She's [child] like Mom if we ever get stuck outside without a home, I can build a shelter. You gotta start with the big sticks and you gotta stack them and find the right kind of bark.

Another example of an offering of the outdoor environment comes from traditional parent Gill, who speaks of the outdoor environment as a way to open children up and expose them to new ways of being and playing:

I think kids are on screens and inside way too much. Whenever possible, we get outside and I do think that there's a lot to learn from just being in nature. When we camp, we don't have wifi or access to screens and I think it's great to see the kids open up and start to learn. It's great for kids to be a little bored and then be challenged in that way, they start to find new ways to play and it exposes them to new things that they just cannot get in the classroom.

Gill also seeks, "more opportunities for learning beyond the four walls of the classroom." She would like to see more field trips and opportunities to learn through real life scenarios such as solving community environmental problems which the outdoor environment lends itself too. These ideas suggest that parents see a strong correlation between the physical outdoor environment and the learning experiences that can occur within this space. Being outdoors challenges children to open up their minds and become inquisitive about the world, the things they are not necessarily able to reach within a classroom setting.

Moreover, now a traditional parent, Tom spoke of his child's experience at a Montessori pre- school setting. He claimed his son enjoyed learning in nature and commented on how meaningful it was for him as a parent to observe his child learn real-life, project- based skills as opposed to rote memorization. His shared experiences, demonstrating his own perceptions of the learning that occurs within the two distinct

environments. As an example, within the outdoor setting, he enjoyed “watching his child investigate the natural forests and cultivate a garden.” Such an example demonstrates real- life learning in which the child was fully exposed and experienced hands- on, authentic creation within a real context for a purpose.

Homeschooling mother, Alex, spoke to the vast amount of exposure her children have to their natural world and the connections they continually make across the learning content. She speaks of the real- world learning opportunities given to them from the outdoor environment. Within this example, she specifically speaks about something very real, the life and death of living things:

We are learning about the life cycle, because we see dead birds crash into windows, we observe them eat and compare different species. We get curious as to when they are going to lay eggs and then discuss which one is male and which one is female... one day my eldest found two roly polys and we created punnett squares and linked life cycles to probability, discussing whether they would birth boys or girls... the list is endless, there are so many opportunities everywhere.

Another commonality across the two groups of parents suggests an appreciation of project- based, experiential learning, applicable to everyday life as opposed to being “told information from teachers and expected to learn by rote memorization.” Parents seek experiential learning opportunities for their children in which they can investigate and explore learning materials themselves. This connects to the real- world learning aspect as it requires authenticity, collaboration, communication and exposure to physical materials.

The data also signals that parents seek and value opportunities for their children to learn in an outdoor space, as they naturally become investigators and explorers of their own learning and understanding of the world in which they inhabit.

All parents value project- based learning in which their children are actively involved and able to manipulate physical resources themselves, thus becoming the creators of their own understanding. It is a common desire across both parent groups for their children to actively participate in solving purposeful real world problems such as: “planning, designing and growing a garden for the community.” Alternative parents highly value this aspect within their current approach and it seems traditional parents would like to see more of these opportunities within traditional settings.

Traditional mother, Gill, spoke of her decision in choosing a preschool for her child. For her, sensory learning was paramount and she was able to quickly identify which environment lended itself to hands- on, sensory stimulation. This connects to the idea of real- world as she sought an environment in which the learning was by doing and creating, planting seeds of habit in the child’s mind that would be useful and applicable in multiple contexts outside of the classroom.

I shied away from preschools if the children were all really clean and pristine. When I would tour a school, I saw this as a bad sign. I wanted to see dirt on their clothes and glue in their hair... I wanted to see them playing in the sand. Kids don’t mind about getting dirty, it’s we adults that care... I knew seeing this she would get more access to all forms of sensory learning... she would have gardening days and dig up worms and they would do projects with glitter and glue... it is every parent's nightmare but that’s what I was looking for.

Moreover, Gill shares her desire for her child to have access beyond the four walls of the classroom. She seeks opportunities for learning in the real outdoors, enabling her child to experience authentic learning such as exploration of the oceanic ecosystem:

I think about the spontaneity that could happen when you’re exposed to nature. Going to the beach and exploring the ocean life right in the moment and digging in the sand. There is so much to offer. Children should be exposed to nature as

much as possible.

Similarly, traditional parent, Tom shared his desire for more learning opportunities within an authentic context, in order to make a real impact to the lives of those in the community:

I would like to see him outside more... I'd like to see him do more work that was project based and hands on like planting a garden, deciding what to plant, planning it and actually doing it... more project- based than curriculum based.

Project- based learning within the outdoor environment provides an optimal space for children to become creative and engage in meaningful education as they are given a purpose and are encouraged to create an impact for a real audience, being members of the community in this example.

Alternative parent, Elle, shares her appreciation of tactile learning in the outdoor environment that her child is currently receiving. This again, connects to the aspect of real- world learning as her child explores authentic environments such as the beach, lakes, forests and woods. She learns through inquiry and has vast opportunities to build critical thinking skills that can be used throughout her lifetime:

They use dried up leaves or things they find on a walk as physical pieces to do math. They can use anything and experience the touching and seeing and they [the children] are able to move it themselves which is lovely... just being in the outdoors I think is a lovely way to experience seasons and talk about science... observing the flowers blooming and oh look there is a honeybee, let's talk about pollination. [Outdoors] there is always a chance to be inspired and it doesn't have to always be academic.

This parent beautifully describes the type of learning her child receives at her outdoor, nature- based private school. The constantly changing outdoor environment provides endless opportunities for children to learn, ask questions and become immersed

in real- world and authentic experiences.

The Whole Child in the Outdoor Environment. Most of the participants spoke of the importance of mind, body and spirit connections they seek within education. Three out of four parents believe that the outdoor environment naturally lends itself to holistic connections. These parents view the natural environment as a nurturing and calming space where children can tune into their feelings and have the access to open space to fully be themselves. Parents' answers revealed that they feel it is healthier both physically and mentally for their children to learn in an outdoor environment. Alternative parent, Alex claims: “a lot of times in education, we think about the body as something that carries around the head. It is simply not the case.” The outdoor space provides her children with the tools required to tune into their bodies and check in with themselves as necessary.

Alex shares a very interesting perspective on this topic: “In Western society there is this real push for children to deal with physical discomfort in order to deal with coworkers and survive a nine to five.” She shares her belief that this is a very outdated version of the world and feels we as a society are “still married to the idea that children are going to be a part of some kind of factory chain production.” She sought a space for her children to just be and feel themselves, helping them to navigate all feelings which she feels are missed in traditional schools. This speaks to a larger shared issue among participants that traditional schools have a tendency to prioritize academics over social and emotional learning. Parents' responses suggest that the expectations for children in traditional settings are more concerned with cognitive intelligence and disregard opportunities to tune into feelings and make mind- body- spirit connections for ultimate

well- being.

Traditional parent, Tom shares more of a health concern that children do not spend enough time outdoors: “we are born to be outside, be in the sun, to be in nature and move around not be sitting around at desks all day.” Participants generally believe that traditional settings hinder mind- body- spirit connections due to lack of space to move bodies or exposure to sunlight and fresh air which each bring their own benefits to physical and mental health and wellness.

Alternative parent Elle, confirms that the outdoor environment has allowed her child to connect mind, body and spirit and has observed her child mature, become more grounded and is seemingly a lot calmer since enrollment at the outdoor school. She shares her appreciation of the outdoors in letting her child feel and have the space to tune into her own feelings:

It’s having the adequate space for kids to just grab a pillow and relax, to sit, to climb a tree, a hill. It’s so important that children are able to tune into their feelings and the outdoor space is perfect for this.

This participant shares how strange it is that “American kindergartens sit at desks all day and the expectations traditional teachers have of children to sit and listen to information, as young as they are.”

Parents' answers spoke to the outdoor environment being sought after as it provides physical space and a nurturing ambiance for children to feel grounded and tune into their own feelings. Children are seemingly more calm and centered when learning outdoors. The outdoor environment is viewed as a holistic and healthy place to connect mind, body and spirit, freeing children to act on their emotional needs and move their bodies as desired. Learning outdoors is evidently most healthy for a child’s growth and

development.

What shapes parents' decisions on their child's educational and learning experiences?

Socialization

For all of the parent participants, socialization plays an important role in shaping educational decisions for their children. However, when considering how the child is socialized, it shapes parents' decisions in slightly different ways. The data suggests that not only do these decisions differ between the two groups of parents, but also between parents within the same group. It is evident however, that all parents seek exposure to others from an early age to help their children learn the necessary social skills required to navigate successfully throughout their lives.

For alternative parent Elle, she desires multiple connections for her child with peers from diverse backgrounds. As a parent of an only child, she feels it very important for her child to have friends from a vast range of different cultures, exposing her to different ways of living and being in the world. She feels making friends with as many different children as possible from a young age, will assist her child in growing into an open- minded, culturally aware and proficient human being, never phased by our unique human differences:

Unless you are brought into somebody's home or get to talk with someone everyday who has a different ethnicity than you, it is this mysterious thing that you don't know how to even make sense of... by becoming friends with diverse people, there's an understanding and an ease around different people... exposure to ethnicities is huge for me, it normalizes everything.

Elle expressed that her communities' dominant demographic is white and predominantly made up of mid- upper class families. This primarily led to her enrollment

at a diverse outdoor school, to spark her child's curiosity and wonder about human differences and expose her to both human and natural world diversity.

Homeschooling advocate and alternative parent, Julie expressed her appreciation for being able to find "your own people as opposed to who you are placed in a class with." Julie went on to share her value for connecting with community members and other families, claiming that this was the ultimate highlight of the homeschooling approach for her family. She expresses admiration for her and her children in having a choice in who they socialize with. Similarly to Elle, Julie shares her value in seeing her children connecting with others from diverse backgrounds:

With homeschooling you go to a park day and it's thinking about who you gravitate to [rather than who you are placed in a class with]. And there's people from all over... you travel far so you have to make an effort to meet new people. There were a range of people from a range of economic backgrounds and various ethnicities so we were able to make a lot of connections which is the best thing about it all.

Most parents spoke of their appreciation for mixed- age group learning as opposed to learning alongside peers of the same age. Parents feel mixing with different ages invites children to practice skills they are not exposed to when learning alongside peers of the same age. Alternative parent Elle claims that mixed age learning is "something I always appreciate." Mixed age learning gives older children a sense of agency and leadership and younger children a role model to look up to and learn from.

Homeschooling parent Alex values socialization between family members and siblings as opposed to those her children are placed in class with. Her responses indicate that family time and learning alongside siblings was of most importance. Due to her eldest child being bullied and her feelings of lack around parent inclusivity at the public

school, she pulled her children out of the public education system primarily based on her children's own happiness and desires. She values the mixed ages of her three children, seeing how they build upon and support one another's learning. This parent feels that the mixed ages of her three daughters brings greater learning opportunities:

They do a lot of learning to teach and teaching to learn because there's three of them at different ages at different levels. I think this is a really important social skill and putting all kids the same age together doesn't make sense... you want to have a mixture [of ages] because you can see those differences which ultimately results in greater learning as it teaches you about compassion and there's less of that competitiveness... it actually improves their social growth.

Evidently, Alex highly values and prioritizes family relationships. She feels when her children are in a classroom they have their different friend groups and "siblings become less of a priority." Moreover, she views the traditional classroom, a competitive environment, with same aged children competing to be "better than one another, both academically and socially." This was regarded as a negative aspect of traditional schooling.

Interestingly there is a commonality here with traditional parent Tom. Whilst he values the social aspect of schooling and the opportunities given to build friendships provided in a traditional setting as it allows his children to "make good friends and have fun with them" he, similarly to Alex, feels the same age competitiveness can cause anxiety among children:

I would also prefer less anxiety around friendships and having to be friends with certain children... being in the traditional classroom environment, there is this unwritten social hierarchy between the children and it creates this competitiveness I do not like.

It is also important to note here that traditional parents' responses indicate an

appreciation for school in instilling the unwritten set of rules and an understanding of being a “working human in the world.” Both of the traditional parents implicitly spoke of the hidden curriculum. It is clear that traditional parent Gill certainly appreciates this aspect of the traditional approach, claiming that: “as kids get older, they have to learn to sit in a structured environment... they are going to need it for college and later on in the work world.” Her response suggests that as children grow with age, they should be exposed to more structure and socialized to ways of being in preparation for the working world.

So while all parents use socialization to shape the educational decisions for their children, it is clear from the data that this looks seemingly different for all families. Alternative parents value the choice and freedom they have in who they do or do not connect with, often prioritizing family relationships and connections across diverse backgrounds. Traditional parents appreciate the vast social aspect of traditional school but dislike the social competitiveness and hierarchy that naturally occurs within same-aged group classrooms. They also value the balance in learning environments, teaching children rules of being in the world in prep work life within a consistent and structured environment. Mixed age learning opportunities are sought after by all parents.

Child and Family Differences

Participant responses suggest every family and child is unique and the choices they make are multifaceted depending on their own family circumstances. There is a general understanding among all parents of the expense of alternative education. All parents commented on the tuition costs of this type of education and how it leads to alternative education becoming elitist and accessible to those only with the financial

resources. This general understanding within participants' responses, led me to believe that all parents would opt for alternative educational styles if it were more accessible to all.

Traditional parent Gill, feels she does not have a choice in her child's education and in "a dream world" would enroll her child at an outdoor, nature- based private school. However, she also observed her child responding very well to more of a structured, routine and consistent approach so it appears a tension exists between her own desires and the child's learning needs.

Similarly, homeschooling mother Alex commented on the cost of alternative private school claiming that it was just not feasible with three children. It is also important to note here that she feels traditional school is not built for all children and there is a certain mold children are expected to fit into. She feels children are treated differently at a traditional school based on their background and needs:

Race is a really big issue and there is an implicit message that you don't belong here. You are not smart or you're not doing well. That message brings children down and if you look at studies of homeschoolers, they show that their children will outperform.

In making such an observation, she feels her homeschooling approach is accessible to all families and is an approach designed with every child in mind. She values the freedom her children have to fully be themselves with no set of rules, telling them how to think, feel and behave in the world. Alex is reflecting on her understanding of minority groups and feelings toward traditional school as an oppressive system that does not represent all children. She feels the homeschooling approach to education is more equitable as adaptations can be made for every individual child.

Every parent spoke to the notion of “simply knowing your child” and understanding how they learn best. Parents expressed their educational environment choices being a case of trial and error. Traditional parent Gill, shares the vast differences between her two children which led her to better understand that there should not be just one approach to teaching and learning:

You cannot take a cookie cutter approach to any child. I think they are all different and unique... looking at the uniqueness of every child, the one size fits all approach does not work. There needs to be different options.

Evidently, parents play a critical role in the decision making process for their child’s learning needs. All parents recognize that their approach to learning and educational environment choices may not be fitting to another child. It appears to be a case of trial and error, knowing your child and finding a learning environment most suited to their style of learning. All parents recognize the expense of alternative education and lack of accessibility to all families.

Parents Wants and Dreams

The data signals that parents' own desires for how they want their children to be in the world shape the way they think about the different types of education as well as shape the decisions they make for their children. For all of the parent participants, their own wants and desires for their child’s education were conveyed within their responses. Parent participants seem to be saying they want a high- quality learning environment, opportunities to learn outdoors as the space allows their child to explore their own interests, desires and develop a sense of who they are in the world.

All parents seek a wealth of learning opportunities which allow their children to discover who they are in the world and grow into independent and responsible beings.

For Elle, her responses suggest she wants for her child to become a culturally aware and mindful citizen in the world. Her choice in enrolling her child at the outdoor school, suggests she sees the outdoor environment as a space which exposes you to many diverse things and ways of being to know and understand yourself better:

They [the school] focus on being bilingual and lots of music. They really put an emphasis on making sure the child learns who they are. Finding out what their interests are, what are the real things they consider high- quality and that speaks very much to me... if you are not confident in who you are, it's easy to lose focus on the important things.

Elle describes her take of what the outdoor environment lends itself to and how she came to her decision of enrolling her child in an outdoor school. She opted for an environment which was conducive to learning for her in the following way:

The outdoor school offers more opportunities for kids to lead the learning. Meaning you observe something in nature and ask the question which then becomes a group conversation which is then investigated together finding the resources to really get into it. The child becomes more responsible in the sense that their curiosity drives the learning.

For traditional parent Gill, it appears she too desires an environment where there are opportunities to explore the outdoors which allows “children to just be children.” She seeks a real balance in structure and experiences for her child throughout the year to ensure she is exposed to many different things:

I look for experiences that compliment what they are not getting during the year. They're getting so much Math and Reading, sitting and doing worksheets that I do not want that for them during the summer. I noticed my child became more independent and confident from the summer camps. They can pretend to be witches and wizards, cast spells on each other and hang out in the park all day. I think these experiences are awesome.

For traditional parent Tom, his responses suggests he too wants his child to know who he is in the world and to be provided with a number of opportunities to reach his full potential:

For me the most important thing is that my child develops his potential in a way that challenges him and does not restrict him, particularly by slow learners or traditional spaces that do not allow children to think for themselves.

For homeschooling parent Alex, whilst she too expressed her desire for her children knowing who they are in the world, she tended to speak of her child's wants and needs as opposed to her own. For her, it is important that her children are responsible for their own decisions and prioritizes their happiness:

You know, happy people do good work, so you know when you're doing something you're interested in then you're going to naturally spend more time doing it and will be something you retain... they learn better when they are doing something they choose and equally enjoy.

Interestingly however, it appears that where there is no baseline to compare children to academically, homeschooling parents do seek some sort of comfort in knowing their children are thriving or at least where they "should be" academically. Alex states: "... honestly, I am really happy knowing they are academically staying on top of things but we also do a lot of music which is important to us..." Whilst Alex shares that her child is "very academically interested and does not mind taking academic tests," a tension exists between the educational decisions regarding her children's happiness with academic achievement for her own peace of mind.

How do alternative educational leaders and educators understand the role of the alternative environment? How does this impact how they think about education?

This section explores educators perspectives and experiences teaching and learning in the outdoor environment. I interviewed four alternative educators to explore how their positionality as an educator influences how they perceive education in general. All four participants' answers revealed common experiences and views on how children learn best and what the alternative, specifically outdoor environment brings to education. Their answers suggest that opportunities for learning in the natural world are crucial for a child's development and holistic well-being. Participants' answers reveal commonalities across two main themes of what alternative forms of education offer. One is that children become agents of their own learning through the wonder and curiosity they express about the natural world. Second, participants' answers suggest that the authentic opportunities that arise from being outdoors, lend themselves to feelings of connection and emotional awareness.

Child- Led Learning

All four alternative educators spoke of the natural world as a gift which instills a sense of curiosity and wonder in the minds of young children. Participants share a common belief that the outdoors as a learning environment invites children to take the lead and control their own learning through exploration and inquiry. Educators value following the natural rhythms of children and believe it sets them up to become self-sufficient and responsible human beings in the world. Their answers to how children learn best revealed a mutual understanding that every child is unique and learns in a different way. This is why opportunities for child- led learning is paramount to the

development of each child and helps them “tune into themselves” so they each understand themselves and can find what they need to grow and thrive.

Alternative, outdoor leader, Cam shares an example of how the outdoor environment lends itself to child- led learning and instills a sense of wonder:

We provide a structure because we know kids' brains respond well to that predictable routine and within that there are main components we want the kids to understand such as empathy. What happens within that will often change based on the interests of the kids and what they see in the environment so whilst there might be a whole plan on building together with the sticks and mud, the kids may discover a stream and find it's really fun to throw rocks in it and notice how they plunk in there, trying out different size rocks and suddenly that becomes the lesson.

Cam's quote portrays the constant changes that occur in the outdoors and how it is the educator's role to facilitate and welcome such changes for the best interests of the children, allowing them to take the lead. She also highlights the importance of alternative educators being flexible in their approach, knowing when to step back and adapt for the sake of the children.

On this same idea, Montessori leader and alternative educator, Willow said:

Being outdoors gives children the space to explore and to express the things that their natural instincts are. You know, whether they need to run or climb or just sit and be, they can tune into what they need and become grounded. They can tune into themselves and lead their own way.

The connection between outdoor space and child- led learning was consistently shared, highlighting educators' appreciation of the outdoors as a learning experience in itself.

There is this shared idea around educators “stepping back” and letting children

find their own interests and desires. All alternative educators interviewed believe that in order for children to learn, they must be able to make sense of the learning themselves which requires less adult input. Educators must learn to let go of the need to control and share the power equally between all involved in the learning process. Alternative educator Lily said: "... there is no question about it. Children are most intrinsically motivated to learn around subjects that are self- directed or have their own personal interests, they discover it themselves, it is self- directed."

Educator Willow shares her understanding of her role as a Montessori leader, expressing her idea of what children need:

Young children need to be recognized as whole and complete and really they need very little from us which is funny to say about a young child because they need so much, but they really need very little from us, they need us to stand back and let them go. And really our job is to keep them safe and to observe how they are developing and what will continue that forward momentum... the idea that you could sit down and teach another person must be really examined... exposing them to the materials, they will naturally want to explore, learn and ask questions.

Willow's passion around "letting go" reflects a more recent development in education, transforming the traditional power dynamics as they are known. She expresses a real desire to let children be their own person: thinking, feeling, acting and behaving as their natural instincts see fit.

Participant Cam builds on this further as she talks about changing traditional language and labels as a way to empower children in their own learning:

Children become explorers rather than students because yes whilst they are learning, they are not there to absorb information but to drive their own learning... teachers become leaders or facilitators because they are not there as an authority figure. It's not that it takes the power out of the relationships, but gives

everyone the power and everyone has an important role.

Cam's recognition of sharing the power reflects the impact of the alternative environment in the way that it reshapes and structures relationships that lend themselves to deep connections and mutual respect between all. Evidently, the alternative, outdoor environment provides a space for children to fully learn who they are in the world. It is seemingly important that alternative educators understand the role of letting go, knowing when appropriate to step back to instill a natural curiosity and love of learning in the minds and hearts of their children.

Physical, Social and Emotional Connectedness

Participants' responses suggest that the outdoor environment provides the physical space for children to tune into their feelings and acknowledge their needs. All of the educators expressed a value in nature lending itself to basic social and emotional skills such as "empathy" or "kindness" through interacting within a calming and sensory rich space. One educator described the outdoors as: "a magical space" which both "stimulates the child's imagination whilst providing opportunities for self-regulation and grounding." Children are free to play and move at their own will with little interruptions and educators believe this is paramount to children finding an inner sense of peace and calm.

Participant Lily shares her observations of children feeling and tuning into their emotions when outdoors, learning how to navigate their uncomfortable feelings. She values the beauty of nature in providing the "physical space and fresh, open air" as this allows children to take a breath, have a break or run free to regroup themselves when appropriate.

The outdoor environment provides the space for all to become emotionally in tune

to their needs. Participant Willow acknowledges the beauty and space of her Montessori school location and natural surroundings. She highlights her use of teaching and learning through natural consequence which children take and apply to all contexts: "... when the children are outside, you can see they have this general respect for the outdoor environment which is taken from the social and emotional learning we do indoors... the children have a lot of time and space to deal with their emotions naturally themselves." She shares her deep gratitude and love for the outdoors in that it creates a space for children to, "tune into themselves, spurs on the imagination and express all the things they naturally are."

The child- led, outdoor environment instills a sense of responsibility and encourages children to take agency of their own behavior and actions. Two of the participants discussed how their use of natural consequence and emphasis on feelings brings a sense of connectedness and care for the natural environment. Participant Cam shares:

Nature has an impact on us, there are so many ways we humans can benefit from nature and learning outdoors children understand that we are stewards of our and we all have an important job to care for our living classroom Being in nature, builds this culture built around care, connection and respect.

Educator Willow stated the importance of exposing young children to nature to build a sense of love for our world:

Children who spend time outside tend to have a broader global view and become more peaceful individuals... it's a supercritical age to have a healthy connection to nature...they will become better stewards of the earth and feel a sense of responsibility... we have to let them be in nature and have uninterrupted time exploring.

The idea that the outdoors lends itself to human and nature connections is shared

across all of the participants. Moreover, they view the outdoor environment as a holistic place as it invites children to use all of their senses which instills a sense of wonder.

Participant, Cam claims:

Outdoors the goal is less about a fact they are supposed to memorize and more about how they get there... nature is an incredibly sensory stimulating environment and there are endless things to be able to touch, smell and hear and it's constantly changing... the outdoors has a really interesting dynamic or duality where it's both really stimulating and calming.

This idea of embracing the wonder of a child's mind and following their curiosity appears an essential component of alternative education. The outdoor space lends itself to this approach due to the wealth of sensory opportunities and stimulating space. All participants value the magic of nature and the outdoors in inviting children to connect with themselves, their peers and the natural world, in turn growing as independent and responsible agents of change.

Summary

The interviews with parents were able to provide a general overview of what they seek within their child's learning environment. Parents' answers revealed their educational values and the factors that influence the decisions they make for their children's education. Traditional and alternative parents value opportunities for their children to learn in the outdoor environment as it offers a wealth of learning opportunities that the traditional classroom simply cannot offer.

All parents value experiential education which invites their children to work collaboratively to solve problems and engage in real- world learning experiences, being meaningful and applicable to their everyday lives. Whilst alternative parents highly value the uncertainty and spontaneity that the outdoor environment lends itself to, traditional

parents seek more structure and balance between the two environments, to ensure their children are well prepared for college and the wider working world.

Another finding that emerged was the shared understanding of child individuality and uniqueness. All parents shared the importance of knowing their child and where they thrive. Finding the right educational environment was a case of trial and error but all agreed that a stimulating outdoor environment was in the child's benefit. Moreover, family differences were too a finding, in terms of economic means and alternative education accessibility. Outdoor education is a reality for alternative parents and sought after by traditional parents.

Parents' own wants and desires were very much a factor that shaped the decisions they made for their child's education. Every parent spoke of their varying desires including: diverse cultural exposure, children leading their own learning, a non-restrictive space, opportunities for challenges and the chance for children to take agency and become independent and responsible beings in the world. The homeschooling mother spoke less of her own wants and focused more on her children's desires. Interestingly, this mother did share her fear of her children falling behind academically, highlighting a tension between her children's happiness and her own desire for her child's academic success.

The interviews with alternative educators conveyed a shared understanding of the optimal learning environment. Educators value and use the physical outdoor environment as a holistic learning experience in itself. The open space lends itself to experiential and inquiry- based learning, providing sensory stimulation through continual natural change. All educators spoke of shifting traditional power dynamics, stepping back and allowing

children to lead their own learning. The outdoors is regarded as a “magical place” in the sense that it is both stimulating and grounding. Alternative educators prioritize social and emotional skills, and value the soft skills that are often overlooked in traditional settings. Educators mutually agree that the outdoor space encourages children to look within, tune into their feelings, thus become more connected to themselves and their natural world. Children become more peaceful, global citizens and grow into stewards of the planet.

Chapter IV Discussion, Conclusion and Recommendations

Discussion

The voices shared in this study confirm the broader scholarship of parents and educators perceptions of alternative learning approaches, specifically outdoor education. The findings and themes highlighted in this study adds to the existing body of evidence which reveals that the outdoors is a sought after environment and cherished space for teaching and learning. This study adds depth and insight to the literature that was previously overlooked, specifically focused on the number of commonalities between both traditional and alternative parents pedagogical beliefs and seekings in their child's educational environment.

What do traditional school parents and outdoor/ homeschooling parents seek in their child's early education environment?

All of the parent participants seek similar opportunities for their children to learn in the greater outdoors. Extensive research exists on the benefits of learning in the outdoor environment for the child's well- being and set up for a healthy, positive future (Blanchet- Cohen and Elliott, 2011). However, research lacks parents' perceptions and insights of what the outdoor environment brings for them. More specifically, traditional parents' insights are overlooked, with research mainly elevating the voices of alternative parents. One study suggests that traditional parents indicate more value on job preparation and cognitive academics (Catt and Cheng, 2019). Traditional parent Gill, explicitly disconfirms such evidence, seeking more alternative opportunities for "learning beyond the four walls of the classroom." She also perceived how the outdoors lends itself to real- life learning in the sense that it is meaningful and gives children an authentic goal

and purpose. With the rise in alternative education, it appears the case that more traditional parents are lending themselves to these more recent approaches to teaching and learning.

My findings suggest all parents seek learning environments which invite their children to develop a sense of agency and responsibility over their own learning and actions. They value an environment that welcomes critical thinking as well as enhancement of life skills such as self- management, independence and being adaptive to new situations. Alternative parent participants particularly appreciated the flexibility that their approach to education allows for. They highly value and express a love for nature and the outdoors, describing it as a constantly changing space in which children are encouraged to embrace the uncertainty and spontaneity.

Homeschooling parent Alex, spoke more to flexibility in terms of structure. She seeks freedom and agency in being able to adapt the learning process as necessary based on her children's needs, cutting the day short or switching up activities as necessary. I see this notion of flexibility that is spoken of by parents as liberating from oppressive systems. Alternative parents see education as liberation in that they have the freedom to truly follow their children as individuals away from the one size fits all approach. Evidently, the outdoor environment brings a sense of freedom, free from power and structural constraints. Hiles (2015) found that alternative parents seek flexibility as it encourages children to become self- motivated and self- managed learners in the real world. The findings report that parents value the outdoors as an environment which instils crucial life skills. The interviews affirmed this study but it is important to reflect on traditional parents' responses to this finding.

Whilst alternative parents express their appreciation for the uncertainty and flexibility in their approach, traditional parents spoke of finding more of a balance between learning in the outdoor environment and classroom. Although interviews suggest traditional parents certainly seek more learning opportunities outside, they share their appreciation for the classroom in terms of the consistent structure and routine children are faced with daily.

Traditional parent Gill, feels the classroom is necessary to prepare children for college and the working world when they will be expected to sit at a desk all day. Gill's responses reflect a desire for finding a balance between the two environments which explains her choice in enrolling her children at summer camps to balance out the experiences they are not exposed to during the school year. Cheeseman and Wright (2020) researched parents perceptions of summer camps and findings indicate an appreciation for all the same reasons that alternative parents value in their educational learning approach. Parents described a number of learning opportunities including developing their environmental sustainability and care for the planet. It would be interesting to further explore these participants' schooling choices and assess their pedagogical beliefs in comparison to their outdoor summer camp choices. There is a future research possibility in combining the two approaches, exploring how traditional schools incorporate outdoor learning approaches for students' well-being and environmental commitments to solve parent's conflicting views. This study affirms the themes in the literature based on the benefits of an outdoor, alternative learning experience and gives voice to traditional parents in terms of what they seek more of but equally appreciate about their existing approach.

All parents seek authentic and meaningful project- based learning in order for their children to learn real- life, soft skills required to successfully navigate through their lives. Parents see the outdoor space and its ever- changing nature as a way to instill flexibility, autonomy and responsibility in their children. Traditional parent Tom shares his belief that children should be learning outdoors as much as possible due to the health benefits as well as opportunities to be exposed to real- world learning such as growing a garden for the community. There are a number of studies which explore outdoor learning from parents' experiences. Kahriman-Pamuk (2020), found that parents of outdoor forest schools, valued the skills that being in nature enhances such as: creativity, critical thinking skills, self- confidence, discovery skills, experiential learning, well- being, health, physical abilities, communication skills, environmental knowledge and awareness. The interviews not only affirmed such findings but build on the evidence as traditional parents shared their same appreciation and value in outdoor learning experiences.

Most parents reported that they seek learning experiences that enhance holistic well- being including mind- body and spirit connections. For example, alternative parent Elle shared her observations of her child maturing, becoming more in tune to her feelings and generally a lot calmer since she began at the outdoor, nature based school. Elle values the physical space of the outdoors, which invites children to move around, run, climb and move at their free will and own pace for body awareness. Close (2012), conducted interviews with alternative forest school parents and too found that they prioritize their child's holistic development with a significant emphasis on social and emotional skills. The study confirms such evidence, whilst adding traditional parents mutual feelings and perspectives on the importance of social and emotional growth in early education.

What shapes parents' decisions on their child's educational and learning experiences?

Every parent participant described their own expectations of socialization and it appears this shapes the decisions they make in different ways. It is clear that parents' decisions are influenced by the relationships and connections their children create through their education experiences. Whilst alternative parent Elle, spoke explicitly of immersing her child to as much diversity as possible, including the opportunity to make connections with children from diverse ethnicities, traditional parent Gill, similarly but more generally expressed her dependency on schooling for relationship building. Gill expressed a few times during the interview, as a full time working Mom, she relied on school to provide all of the experiences and exposure she did not have the time for such as “play-dates and all kinds of fun and exciting things with other children.” Traditional parent, Tom also relied on the school to provide the socialization aspect of his child's development.

What was most surprising was homeschooling parent, Alex's preference of sibling connection and family relationship over connections with other children that “you just happen to be placed in a class with.” The study found that neither Alex nor her children felt a sense of belonging within a traditional school. She commented on not only parent inclusivity but her eldest child's lack of connection and negative experiences with bullying. She felt that if children do not fit “the schools' mold in every way” children become outliers and achieve much better if homeschooled, in a safe and comfortable space. The lack of support from traditional school, both in terms of the bullying experience as well as lack in gifted academic resources, led to her decision to

homeschool. In a recent study, Michaud (2019), reported that switching to homeschooling led to hope and healing and protected children from any past trauma. The interview with Alex affirms this study, using homeschooling as a safe sanctuary and space to be at one with who you are, away from any external pressures.

Moreover, in terms of family dynamics, it appears homeschoolers deeply value connections within their own family unit. In a participatory action research study, Gray and Riley (2013) found that whilst reasons for unschooling varied across families, one of the benefits many parents spoke to, was the improved closeness within the family unit. Alex shares when her eldest child was attending traditional school, she had no awareness of the relationship with her children. Since making the decision to homeschool, she values extensive amounts of family time, opportunities to repair bad experiences and develop closer bonds.

Whilst those families who attend a schooling institution, be it traditional or outdoor, nature- based, value connections and rely on the school to provide social stimulation and development, the study confirms that homeschoolers prefer the relationship dynamic within their family unit. Homeschooling parents avoid the constraints of conventional classrooms and feel the standardized curriculum lacks and ignores the history of cultures. Homeschooling families value the choice they have in who their children connect with as opposed to school placement influences, embracing their own educational liberty.

Hiles (2015) found that parents' reasons for choosing one educational decision over another is under examined. The decisions parents make for their child's educational experiences are hugely dependent on every family and child's individual needs. Knowing

your child and the space in which they thrive is paramount to shaping parental decisions and a case of trial and error until best fit is found. However, today more than ever there is increasingly greater educational choice, particularly alternative approaches for families to make the ‘right’ decision. Traditional parent, Gill shared how there is simply no cookie cutter approach to a child’s education. She used the example of her two children and shared their vast differences in learning styles.

Gill shared how her youngest child likes to be challenged and appreciates having a variety of ways to learn, “not always just rote memorization or sitting down, but project- based and non traditional approaches.” Ideally, this mother would like for her child to be enrolled at an outdoor, nature- based alternative school but commented on the economic expense of alternative approaches to education. She shared how alternative education is not accessible to all and as a result often becomes elitist. So whilst this general understanding of knowing your child and how they best learn is shared across all participants, the choice in the optimal educational environment is not always available to all families.

However, contrary to the literature, traditional parent Tom feels that there is currently no alternative approach to education that fully meets his child’s needs. He shared his envision for the future of education with hopes that there will be a movement to fund students not systems, giving freedom to teachers to leave the system and run outdoor pods of mixed- aged learners of like- minded families in backyards. He would like for his child to interact with a smaller group of children at similar academic levels, receiving appropriate challenges, whilst being in close proximity to his child. Research will often focus on existing alternative approaches to education but this study suggests

there is space for something new and what exists may not be meeting the needs of all families. The realities of the 21st century may inspire educators to develop more flexible ways of learning that is evidently sought after today.

Interestingly, homeschooling parent, and full time working mother, Alex shared her view that homeschooling is an approach that is accessible to all. On the other hand, both traditional parents in the study shared that due to time constraints, they felt homeschooling was not accessible for their family. Bauch (1992) conducted a study on school choice and parental involvement. The findings indicate that educational choice is not solely based on one factor but is multifaceted and parents have varying beliefs on what works based on their circumstances. This study affirms the findings, concluding that individual families will have their own reasons for choosing an approach to education which is most suited to their needs and their children based on intellectual, social, ecological, contextual and personal factors.

There is a lack of research existing on parents' wants and desires for their children as opposed to their child's desires. Parents' own wants and desires for their children influenced their school choice, evident from participant responses. This study demonstrates the range of desires parents have and how these influenced their schooling choices for their children.

Alternative parent Elle used a trial and error approach when making the decision to enrol her child at an outdoor, nature- based school knowing that her child needed the space to move around in an outdoor environment. However, it was clear from her responses that she too desired exposure to diversity and wanted her child to “make friends with children from different backgrounds” to enhance opportunities in later life.

The outdoor schools demographics represented children from diverse ethnicities which was a factor that very much influenced her choice.

For the two traditional parents, they spoke of their desire in seeing their children challenged in all domains of education, with more opportunities to apply their learning to an outdoor, real- world context. They expressed a lack in project- based learning within a traditional environment often diminishing opportunities for their children to develop a sense of curiosity and wonder. It is interesting to consider these desires, suggesting that the traditional system does not necessarily meet parents' wants for their children but lack of alternative options and accessibility to these approaches can leave parents with little to no choice.

Homeschooling parent, Alex speaks more to her children's happiness and desires over her own. Her children made their own decision to be homeschooled. She values giving her children full responsibility to follow their own paths and make their own choices. In a recent study, Efford (2017) found that whilst parents' decisions to homeschool widely varied, all of the parents ultimately wanted what was best for their children to assist them in finding out who they truly are. Homeschooling allows families to create a more personalized, child- centered approach than is possible through the dominant, compulsory traditional system. This study confirms the findings that traditional schools often lack flexibility and fail to meet the needs of many families.

How do alternative educational leaders and educators understand the role of the alternative environment? How does this impact how they think about education?

Learning outside and exploring in nature is an approach which lends itself to child- initiated learning, empowering the student and shifting traditional power dynamics.

All educator participants felt that the outdoors was the optimal learning environment for students holistic development. For example, educator Cam shared that the outdoor environment provides a wealth of sensory stimulation and invites children to become explorers, inquisitive, ask questions and naturally develop feelings of awe and care for their natural environment. In a study on autonomy in unschooling, it was clear that learning must be self- driven and guided by own interests for ultimate success instilling a lifelong love for learning (Petrovic and Rolstad 2016). This idea goes against the banking method, completely shifting power dynamics in teacher/ student relationships from a traditional relationship. Alternative educators mutually understand that children are not the keeper of information but must themselves become intrinsically motivated to think critically about the world or learning stimulus. The alternative approach is less about the learning content and information itself and more on preparing children to think critically about the information. This study not only confirms the finding but adds the element of the outdoors being the optimal space to guide this alternative dynamic.

Children exploring their natural environment instills a sense of independence and helps children to understand who they are in the world. Participants share their very simple but critical role of “stepping back” and allowing children to take control of their learning with very little to no adult intervention. Participants tend to use a “natural consequences” approach, allowing children to learn via trial and error based on their actions and behaviours. Educators feel that this approach develops autonomy and self-management, skills required to navigate throughout their lives. It is interesting to consider how little young children require of their adults, particularly within an outdoor context where children are free to follow their natural instincts. White (2015) confirms these

findings as she found in an outdoor learning study, that young children have a capacity to theorize about their world, often way beyond the scope of an adult's ability. When educators give children joint power in the relationship, they give them a voice, free from constraints and perceived expectations, evidently a key ingredient to a successful educational experience.

The outdoor environment is the optimal place to learn and discover as it provides an open space for endless learning opportunities through sensory stimulation. All educator participants reported on the importance of experiential, inquiry- based learning. They use the physical outdoor objects as learning experiences themselves as they invite children to become active participants in their learning and create their own understanding. Children are exposed to a wealth of materials such as: “sticks and mud, trees, streams, rocks...” the list is endless. Educators believe that children will see advancements in using their senses as it develops deeper connections with self and the environment.

Participants shared the holistic aspect of their approach to learning. Educators reported their value in mind- body- spirit connections that the outside environment lends itself to. Such soft skills including: kindness, empathy, collaboration and self- awareness, were highly regarded as lifelong skills that children demonstrate and practice in an outdoor environment. Participant Lily shares how such life skills are “overlooked and disregarded” in a traditional setting. The physical space itself was valued by all, in that children have the scope to “run wild, sit and be, climb a hill” or whatever it is that they need to tune into themselves and self- regulate.

Moreover, participants reported that being in nature led their children to connect

with their natural world. Educator and leader Willow shared: “When we let them be in nature they become natural stewards of the earth and develop this sense of responsibility and care.” To better serve our planet, educators feel we must provide these outdoor, nature- based opportunities to raise healthy, aware and mindful beings. In a study on sustainable happiness, O’ Brian (2005) found that human well- being is inextricably linked to the well- being of others and the natural environment. The reports from educator participants in the study confirm the importance of holistic growth and development not only for ourselves and human connections but for our planet.

Finally, this study found that alternative educators perceive education as liberation. The outdoors is free from constraints, quite literally beyond the four walls of the classroom. The outdoors as a learning environment is moved away from a traditional one size fits all approach that is viewed by all participants as very outdated and in real need of reconsideration for the future of our children.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to explore the role of the environment in shaping parents and alternative educators decisions in early childhood education. The study explored the sought after elements of the environment, specifically the outdoors in shaping decisions and pedagogical beliefs. The study was based on four parent participants: two traditional school parents and two alternative parents as well as four alternative educators who shared their perceptions and experiences through phenomenological interviews.

The study found several themes and commonalities across participant interviews confirming and adding to existing literature within this field of expertise. The study

concludes that all parents seek a wealth of outdoor educational experiences for their children and value the time their children spend away from the traditional classroom. Alternative parents in particular valued the “flexibility and unknowns” of their educational approach as the natural world requires flexibility in terms of responding to adaptations in the environment through the seasonal changes as well as in the content and process depending on the child's needs. All parents found the outdoor learning environment’s offerings “magical” in terms of the endless real- world opportunities for inspiration and curiosity.

The study provides insight to parents' understanding of how children learn best. All participants seek hands- on, sensory stimulation for their child’s growth. This finding highlights the necessity for traditional schools to reconsider their teaching and learning approaches away from the outdated, one size fits all model that all participants express a huge disinterest in. Project- based, experiential learning in which children can practice life skills such as: collaboration, critical thinking, responsible decision- making, self and social awareness within an authentic context for a real audience is sought after by all. Moreover, parents reflect on the holistic teachings within the outdoor environment in providing their children with opportunities to tune into their feelings and needs as necessary. The literal physical outdoor space was regarded as a healthy approach in which education occurs, both physically, mentally and emotionally.

Despite the vast differences between families' circumstances, needs as well as the uniqueness of every child, parents felt that socialization played an important role in shaping their educational decisions but in different ways. Social development and the exposure of diverse interactions shaped participants' decisions. However, the

homeschooling parent expressed value in having choice in these interactions, prioritizing family connections and bonding due to her lack of trust and inclusivity from the traditional school teachers and parents.

Traditional parents shared their reasoning behind their child not attending an alternative, outdoor school despite this being sought after. The reasons included the financial expense and lack of alternative options that suited the families needs. Parents' own wants and desires were expressed and led to the decisions they made for their children despite whether or not this was something their child necessarily expressed desire for.

Today we know that alternative educational options are rising, providing more of a child- centered learning approach. Findings show that the outdoor environment welcomes a shift in power dynamics, empowering children to take control and become agents of their own learning. Educator participants believed that the outdoor environment teaches children to become independent and self- sufficient, adopting a care for others and their planet as the space is both “stimulating and grounding” for such skill development.

It is evident that there is a sense of pride and love between all educator participants for the outdoor learning environment. Educators observed not only their children becoming more attuned to their needs through social and emotional awareness but also adopting a sense of responsibility and care for the environment. It highlights educators' awareness of climate change and the need to educate children on environmental sustainability for the future. Evidently this can be achieved, simply by exposing young children to the outside world, letting them explore, use their imaginations

and connect with natural resources.

This study is significant to the future of education in not only affirming the importance of outdoor learning opportunities but adding to this, confirming this is too what parents want and desire for the future of their children's education. The use of place and the outdoors, stimulates a child's curiosity and provides opportunities to practice important life skills in a way that a traditional classroom simply cannot. Children are trapped inside four walls of the classroom when the beauty of our planet and real- world is constantly available to spark interest and desire. This study confirms that there is so much more to learning beyond academics and rote memorization for the sheer purpose of test results and school reputation. The outdoor environment supports all of the values that are recognized as most important to the future of our children's ultimate development and well- being. Whilst it is exciting that parents are increasingly exposed to more educational choice, the accessibility to alternative education is an equitable factor that should be considered in the near future.

Recommendations

In better understanding the role and the impact of the outdoor environment in early education and the multitude of benefits for a child's holistic development, educators, administrators and policymakers should expand outdoor learning opportunities for optimal development and educational freedom.

We now better understand parents' perspectives of the educational environment and the elements they seek in their children's learning experiences. Traditional schools in particular must listen to the voices of parents' and work collaboratively to develop an outdoor pedagogical mindset, grounding their culture and vision on outdoor learning.

Alternative educators evidently understand the role of the outdoor environment and the extensive impact it can have on building and growing self- sufficient, independent, caring and curious stewards of the land. Training and professional development for educators in understanding their role in the outdoor environment may be required for traditional schools moving forward. We want more educators to “step back” and empower their children to take control of their own learning.

Not only do we recognize a need for traditional schools to incorporate new ways of teaching and learning, but see space for new equitable, alternative outdoor education options. As alternative educator and leader Willow highlighted, alternative education is not accessible for all families. It is paramount that new approaches to outdoor learning are created to better support low income families through scholarships or tuition on a sliding scale. Funding students rather than institutions is another potential solution to this economic issue. As this study proves, the current system leaves many families powerless, unseen and unheard, evidently why many choose to leave the system altogether and homeschool.

Based on the results of this study, further research should expand the findings by reaching a larger and more diverse pool of participants. The extended data could be used to create new, alternative outdoor education options to expand educational liberty and meet all families needs. I see a space for the development of a tool to connect like-minded families based on their educational needs and philosophy. I envision backyard, outdoor, nature- based learning as the optimal future of education, particularly if we are to meet the needs of parents and children in today’s ever changing world. As alternative educator Cam suggested, we must shift traditional power dynamics and give voice to all

parties involved, children and parents included.

Further research should explore the rethinking of educational spaces, providing insight and guidance for schools making such shifts to incorporate the aspect of place in education. Educators should be aware that outdoor education requires a whole new way of teaching and learning that is very much grounded in connections to people and the places we inhabit. Future research should give voice to children to better understand what they seek in their educational experiences and environments, for their own success and well-being.

I also acknowledge that discourse of parents and educators must go beyond those privileged, living in a predominately white, affluent community. The voices of parents and educators from a range of backgrounds and cultures is critical within future research, knowing how we can support these families, will help provide educational choice and liberty for all.

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Appendix A: Measurement Instruments

- Traditional parent interview protocol
- Alternative parent interview protocol
- Alternative educator interview protocol

Traditional Parent Interview Protocol

- 1) Could you tell me a little about your child? What motivates them and lights them up?
- 2) I'd like to hear about where your child grew up? Can you tell me a little about your child's environment including neighbourhood and community?
- 3) Which pre- school did your child attend?
 - 3a) Who did you talk to or what resources did you use to make that decision?
 - 3b) Why did you ultimately choose that school?
 - 3c) What aspects of the experience were you happy with? What did you wish to see more of?
- 4) Which elementary school does your child attend?
 - 4a) Who did you talk to or what resources did you use to make that decision?
 - 4b) Why did you ultimately choose that school?
 - 4c) What aspects of the experience were you happy with? What did you wish to see more of?
- 5) How would you describe your child's relationship with his or her recent teacher?
 - 5a) How would you describe your relationship with your child's teacher and school?
- 6) What is **most important** to you about the kind of education your child receives?
 - 6a) What is **most important** to you about the environment in which your child learns?
- 7) How often do you discuss your child's day at school?
 - 7a) *Probe*- What is typically spoken of during these conversations?
- 8) Your child now attends ____ school, am I correct? Can you tell me about a time where you were happy with the learning experience that the school is giving your child?
 - 8a) *Probe*- what aspect of this experience did **you** find beneficial as well as the impact it had on your child?
- 9) Can you tell me about a time where you were frustrated or unhappy with the learning experience that the school is offering your child?
 - 9a) *Probe*- what was the school doing wrong? How were they not meeting your child's needs?
- 10) What do you seek more of in your child's overall learning experience?
- 11) What do you wish the school would stop doing or do less of?
- 12) Have you enrolled your child in educational programs or experiences outside of school? i.e. summer camps?
 - 12a) What were you hoping that your child got out of that experience?
 - 12b) How did it fulfill or not fulfill your expectations?
 - 12c) How, if at all, do you think your child benefitted from that experience?
- 13) Have you considered or looked for other types of schooling for your child?

- 14) Have you considered homeschooling or outdoor education for your child?
 - 14a) What is attractive to you about such programs?
 - 14b) What concerns do you have?
- 15) What do you think is important for me to know about what kind of learning experience that parents want for their kids that we haven't gone over yet?

Alternative Parent Interview Protocol

- 1) Could you tell me a little about your child? What motivates them and lights them up?
- 2) I'd like to hear about where your child grew up? Can you tell me a little about your child's environment including neighbourhood and community?
- 3) Which pre- school did your child attend?
 - 3a) Who did you talk to or what resources did you use to make that decision?
 - 3b) Why did you ultimately choose that school?
 - 3c) What aspects of the experience were you happy with? What did you wish to see more of?
- 4) Which elementary school does your child attend?
 - 4a) Who did you talk to or what resources did you use to make that decision?
 - 4b) Why did you ultimately choose that school?
 - 4c) What aspects of the experience were you happy with? What did you wish to see more of?
- 5) How would you describe your child's relationship with his or her recent teacher?
 - 5a) How would you describe your relationship with your child's teacher and school?
- 6) What is **most important** to you about the kind of education your child receives?
 - 6a) What is **most important** to you about the environment in which your child learns?
- 7) How often do you discuss your child's day at school/ learning experiences?
 - 7a) *Probe*- What is typically spoken of during these conversations?
- 8) Your child now attends ____ school/ homeschooled, am I correct? Can you tell me about a time where you were happy with this learning experience?
 - 8a) *Probe*- what aspect of this experience did you find beneficial as well as the impact it had on your child?
- 9) Can you tell me about a time where you were frustrated or unhappy with this learning experience?
 - 9a) *Probe*- what was going wrong? How did this not meet your child's needs?
- 10) How did you come to the decision of outdoor learning/ homeschooling? Who did you talk to or what resources did you use?
 - 10a) What did you have to consider in making that decision?
 - 10b) What was helpful in making that decision? What do you wish you had additional resources for?
- 11) Why did you ultimately choose (outdoor learning/ homeschooling) for your child over traditional school? What was it about this approach that spoke to you as a parent?
- 12) Can you tell me about a time where you were really happy about the type of learning your child was doing through outdoor learning or homeschooling?

- 13) Can you tell me about a time you were frustrated with outdoor learning/ homeschooling and the kind of education that was being offered for your child?
- 14) What do you think your approach to learning does well in terms of providing a good learning experience for your child? What are its challenges?
- 15) What kind of community support do you access for outdoor learning/ homeschooling? How are they useful? What would you like to see more of?
- 16) Suppose you had a friend interested in (outdoor learning/ homeschooling) but feeling skeptical, what would your advice be?
- 17) What is something important about (outdoor learning/homeschooling) that is important for me to understand that has not yet been covered?

Alternative Educator Interview Protocol

- 1) I'd like to hear about your background and how you got into your current position. What influenced this choice?
- 2) What has been a real highlight within your current role?
- 3) How do you believe children learn best?
 - 3a) *Probe*- what role does the environment or natural surroundings play in children's learning?
- 4) What's one life-giving element of your learning environment?
- 5) Can you tell me about a time in your outdoor learning/ homeschooling experience that demonstrates the best of what this alternative learning environment can offer?
- 6) Can you tell me about a time that demonstrates some of the challenges of teaching in this type of learning environment?
- 7) For you, what's the difference in what or how students learn in this environment versus a traditional school?
- 8) How do you measure student development and achievement within your educational approach? What do you measure?
- 9) What typically happens in your alternative educational environment if a child does not cooperate or listen? I.e. how do you deal with potential behavioural issues?
- 10) What do you feel are the biggest pressures or challenges faced in running this type of organization?
- 11) How do you and your team work to overcome challenges?
- 12) How does your organization differ from other alternative educational organizations?
- 13) Say I was a parent considering homeschooling/ outdoor learning for my child but I had concerns that my child would fall behind from peers enrolled in traditional school. What would your response to this be?
- 14) How does your work rearrange traditional education dynamics? or How do you teach and learn that is distinct from traditional school? (i.e. power dynamics/ relationships/ environment).
 - 14a) *Probe*- How do you consider the environment in these decisions?
- 15) How do you envision the future of education for young children? What do you believe needs to change and why?
 - 15a) *Probe*- How can educators work to create this change?
- 16) What do you think is important for me to know about this type of education that we haven't gone over yet?

Appendix B: Consent Form

- Participant consent form

Participant Consent Form



CHANGE THE WORLD FROM HERE

Consent Form for Adults

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Below is a description of the research procedures and an explanation of your rights as a research participant. You should read this information carefully. If you agree to participate, you will sign in the space provided to indicate that you have read and understand the information on this consent form. You are entitled to and will receive a copy of this form.

You have been asked to participate in a research study on outdoor, child- led education conducted by Mia Hopkinson, a Masters student in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco. This faculty supervisor for this study is Professor Seenae Chong, a professor in the Department of Leadership Studies at the University of San Francisco.

WHAT THE STUDY IS ABOUT:

The purpose of this study is to investigate outdoor, child- led learning as an approach to early education. This includes the benefits of play- based learning, connecting with the natural world as well as providing children opportunities to pursue their own interests and desires away from the traditional classroom. I want to better understand what such an environment fulfills, including any potential challenges. I am interested in the choices parents make based on their child's early education as well as educators' values and choice on the environment in which they practice. Since the COVID-19 outbreak, I believe many parents are considering alternative approaches to learning away from traditional school.

WHAT WE WILL ASK YOU TO DO:

During this study, the following will happen. With your permission I will record on audiotape and take notes during our interview. The recording is to accurately record the information you provide and will be used for transcription purposes only. If you choose not to be audiotaped, we will take notes instead. If you agree to being audiotaped but feel uncomfortable at any time during the interview, we can turn off the recorder at your request. Or if you don't wish to continue, you can stop the interview at any time.

DURATION AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY:

Your participation in this study will involve one session that lasts up to one hour. The interview will take place over Zoom (videocall).

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS:

The risks and benefits associated with this study are a loss of your time and the risks associated with regular activities. The benefit of the study is that it may add to the research on the field of education and international/multicultural issues. This information, once collected, might be read by policymakers, educational experts, educators and scholars and could affect the educational practice. If you do not want to participate in the study, you will not be mentioned in any documents of the study, and your decision to not participate will not be told to anyone. You may choose to withdraw your consent and discontinue your participation at any time during the study without penalty. If you are upset by any of the questions asked, the researcher will refer you to counseling services available publicly or at the university if you are a member of the academic community (student, staff or professor).

BENEFITS:

You may not receive any direct benefit from your participation in this study; however, the possible benefits to others may include a new approach to learning in response to both parents and educators needs and education preferences for their child. This style of learning is about individualized education, freeing children to learn at their own pace, an approach many families may find fitting to their community and culture.

PRIVACY/CONFIDENTIALITY:

Any data you provide in this study will be kept confidential unless disclosure is required by law. In any report published, no information will be included that will make it possible to identify you or any individual participant. To minimize the risks to confidentiality, real names will be replaced by pseudonyms on all interview and observation transcripts, and all audio files, observation notes, or other documents that contain personal identifiers will be stored in a password-protected computer or hard-drive that we will keep in a locked file cabinet until the research has been completed. Original audio-files will be destroyed at the completion of the study. Specifically, all information will be stored on a password-protected computer and any printouts in a locked file cabinet. Consent forms and any other identifiable data will be destroyed in 3 years from the date of data collection.

COMPENSATION/PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION:

There is no payment or other form of compensation for your participation in this study.

VOLUNTARY NATURE OF THE STUDY:

Your participation is voluntary and you may refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits. Furthermore, you may skip any questions or tasks that make you uncomfortable and may discontinue your participation at any time without penalty or loss of benefits. In addition, the researcher has the right to withdraw you from participation in the study at any time.

OFFER TO ANSWER QUESTIONS:

Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you should contact the principal investigator: Mia Hopkinson at 628-245-6612 or mjhopkinson@dons.usfca.edu or the faculty supervisor, Seenae Chong at (408) 421-2085 or srchong@usfca.edu. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a participant in this study, you may contact the University of San Francisco Institutional Review Board at IRBPHS@usfca.edu.

I HAVE READ THE ABOVE INFORMATION. ANY QUESTIONS I HAVE ASKED HAVE BEEN ANSWERED. I AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS RESEARCH PROJECT AND I WILL RECEIVE A COPY OF THIS CONSENT FORM.

PARTICIPANT'S SIGNATURE

DATE