Encouraging Multicultural Education through Modern Outdoor Sustainable Set-ups for Early Childhood

Simone Restall
Simone.Restall@mcast.edu.mt
Institute of Community Services, MCAST

Abstract: Embracing a multicultural education by addressing effective strategies to benefit young children’s learning through applying an emergent curriculum and encouraging a hands-on discovery pedagogy is the objective of this study. Acknowledging and celebrating diversity through interaction and a play-based learning journey, throughout the Early Years, is the way forward, by providing the correct multicultural oriented learning environment. Exploring diverse cultural approaches for learning through play and encouraging spontaneous child-initiated activities through interaction with the environment aims to enhance experience-based knowledge. Addressing individual learner variability in suitable and stimulating natural environments should encourage children to engage in meaningful, interactive, diverse learning experiences. According to recent research, multicultural learning platforms in the form of an outdoor, sustainable play area would encourage young children to achieve necessary life skills in a more dynamic, hands-on manner. This investigation sets out to explore successful possibilities of improving learning outdoor set-ups in our local schools. Using natural and sustainable materials to set up these outdoor play areas will offer our young children real life experiences while achieving the desired age-appropriate learning milestones.

Keywords: multicultural education, outdoor learning, environmental, sustainable, experiential learning

Towards a More Sustainable and Natural Environment for Learning

Encouraging and promoting a multicultural, conducive, play-based learning environment is essential from the early years to establish an ethos of community in preparation for living and interacting in a globalized society. Investing in setting up indoor and outdoor multisensory play areas will help children from an early age to engage in collaborative, good practice behaviour. Reflecting positive outcomes toward diversity is the idea of this research, which aims to promote improvements in designing and setting up natural and sustainable play environments. The intention is to continue building on recent developments in the field of multicultural methodology, to help implement a hands-on approach through play-based learning in order to embrace a lifelong, holistic, educational process.

Multicultural education centres around a methodology applying a pedagogy promoting diversity and its celebration of cultures. In turn, this aims to enrich the learning experience through play for young children in the Early Years, benefitting children's wellbeing and overall development. Fusing cultures in the learning process and letting young children discover and experience different ways of behaviour, attitudes, and lifestyles promotes an open-minded thinking and hands-on rich learning experience. Promoting diversity through a common class culture is essential to create an atmosphere of not just tolerance, acceptance, and respect, but it is believed, that celebration of the different other and the interest to get to know about diversity and embrace it is essential as the correct pedagogy
we are seeking to bring forward in our local kinder and primary classrooms. Preparing
the future generation of responsible and productive citizens, equipped with the necessary
lifelong learning skills, enabling them to lead productive and meaningful lives, is key for
our present-day society - a smart and professional workforce. Embracing NCF and LOF
principles and objectives within a multicultural context can prove to be beneficial and a
step forward towards achieving a more holistic education for our young learners.

Early Years education in Malta deserves to include a multicultural perspective. A cross
curricular approach integrated officially into the learning programme would stimulate
spontaneous activities, allowing young children to integrate diverse cultures within their
exploratory play. Creating the correct melting pot of culturally diverse play activities would
encourage children to immerse themselves in the common language of play. This will aid
to establish and engage children in making sense and meaning in a multiculturally rich
environment. Discovering different cultural attitudes would help children absorb and adapt
to different ideas and behaviours towards traditions, beliefs, customs, and lifestyles.

In today’s cosmopolitan society, it is essential to equip citizens with the necessary
multicultural skills and aptitudes to be able to interact successfully and be prepared to
accept, tolerate, negotiate, and adapt towards an evolving society. Stephen May argues
that a multicultural education system can foster greater cultural interaction, interchange,
and harmony both in schools and beyond (May 1999). Schools are mini societies preparing
future young citizens to cope with diversity. Students interacting in an ever-changing
and evolving, dynamic environment must be taught to live successfully in an atmosphere
which includes different perspectives and cultures. On the local educational scene,
we are fortunate to include international students within our schools, with a particular
concentration in certain areas, specifically St Paul’s Bay Primary, hosting children of 47
different nationalities, creating a common ground for a school and outer community in
the locality. This real scenario is to be encouraged in all schools in Malta, as students from
migrant families are present in our classrooms and are being catered for their educational
specific needs by professional educators, supported by the Migrant Learner’s Unit MFED.

Promoting a Multicultural Outdoor Platform for Learning

The increasing and substantial number of international students in our local schools prompts
the immediate necessity of taking our curriculum planning and LOFs implementation a
notch higher. The need to create multicultural spaces, especially outdoors to encourage
diverse spontaneous play activities to emerge, is a priority which needs to be addressed.
Children engage in solitary, parallel and cooperative play unconsciously integrating
behaviours, paralanguage, gestures, and body language to create a common and universal
language of play by children of different origins.

Using play as a medium in order to promote a multicultural education is the essence of this
research study. Equipping young children to be able to express their diverse play routines
in a democratic way is to be fostered and encouraged by educators and administrators
responsible for their learning programme. Embracing a holistic education and giving
autonomy to schools to identify the potential and multicultural educational goals to be
achieved is the scope of this investigation. Through the planning and implementation of
play-based learning, we embark to address the best pedagogy to trigger off the executive
functioning skills for young learners. Flexibility to develop smart thinking skills in a diverse
and challenging environment, which should be both stimulating, creative and imaginative
intends to encourage brain development. With the sustainable development goals in
mind, this project embarks to materialize and develop nurturing and fertile grounds for a
multicultural learning platform within all local schools. To give Early Childhood Education a
higher dimension a multicultural pedagogy through play must be encouraged. In a context
of a celebration of diversity, children should be exposed to a melting pot of cultures and create a common one for the citizens of tomorrow.

The aim of this study is to improve outdoor play areas in kinder and primary local schools using sustainable materials and designing and constructing fertile ground, where a multicultural play interaction can happen, encouraging early childhood educational goals to be reached. The main stakeholders for the children’s lifelong education should be consulted and involved for this philosophy to work, where ownership of the experiential and interactive methodology can be successfully implemented. Teachers, KGAs, LSEs, parents, guardians, and administration should all be involved in the design and selection of sustainable and natural materials, as well as the setup of these multicultural play spaces, to be able to nurture creativity and imagination for tomorrow’s multicultural society. A society which is involved in the education of its future citizens and creates the correct learning practices based on an atmosphere of harmony and co-living, embracing a Reggio Emilia philosophy, would be investing in a successful future community promoting professionality and productivity (Edwards, Forman, and Gandini 2012). Knowledgeable adults should foster a climate of commitment toward creating an exemplary multicultural lifestyle, to role model an even better one for its younger generation, advocating for a multicultural society which embraces diversity and celebrates it.

Outdoor Learning for Lifelong Life Skills

Outdoor learning and education have been considered a valuable lifelong experience. The interaction by individuals in harmony with the outdoors has proven beneficial in many ways mentally, physically, and educationally. The purpose of this research intends to improve upon existing outdoor play area settings. Curating multicultural platforms where the language of play in the exploratory space provided hopefully engages children to interact without boundaries, embrace diverse cultures and learn from each other’s differences. Takano (2019) believes that the human-nature relationship is the core of environmental and outdoor education, and culture informs how people relate to the natural world. This concept embraces the similar vision Loris Malaguzzi (Edwards, Forman, & Gandini 2012) had of the environment being considered as the ‘Third Teacher,’ strongly believing that a hands-on discovery approach of the natural surroundings provided by educators helps provide the children from an early age the correct exposure to skills necessary for lifelong learning. Interacting with other children pertaining to diverse cultures widens opportunities for varied learning human dynamics. The Reggio Emilia approach to teaching provides the opportunity to adapt and adjust as well as reach out and learn from other children of various cultures who think differently and approach the environment in their own way.

The outdoor areas intended to be set up in local settings aim to embrace this approach as they would offer opportunity for young children to interact with nature and play with sustainable and recycled materials. Takano (2019) states that understandings of teaching and learning outdoors need to consider cultural dimensions especially when dealing with multicultural participants and groups. Our local Maltese schools host a great number of foreign children and should therefore prepare rich learning platforms in line with modern teaching methodologies, which encourage discovery and exploratory learning of an interesting environment, attracting investigative hands-on young scientists to learn from it. Culture is inseparable from outdoor learning and broadens the significance of what the land teaches the learner Takano (2019).

The word culture needs to be redefined to be kept into perspective by the children as learners from their immediate environment. It is a concept learnt and lived through diverse customs, beliefs, values, and understandings of a particular group of people’s manners,
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behaviour, reactions to their environment including that of the different other. When teaching and learning occur within a mixed environment, certain universal values and attitudes should be expected to ensure harmony, tolerance and ideally a celebration of diversity at its best, encouraging a fusion in the melting pot of cultures. The aim of blending elements of diverse origins together is to create ONE and the same culture, common to all, including everyone's backgrounds and traditions where the term diversity takes on a new meaning and shifts to accommodate a universal culture of inclusion. Embracing diverse needs, levels of attainment, aptitudes, genders and approaches to learning will expose early years children to a modern-day reality and simulate a globalized world in their mini society and local settings. Educators should be equipped with the necessary training and skills to, in turn, educate our young environmental explorers to interact with each other and the great outdoors teacher. “Culture informs how people relate to the natural world, and the human-nature relationship is a core of environmental and outdoor education” (Takano 2019). Multiculture has an important role to play while playing outdoors, as it sets about creating a fertile ground for creativity, diversity, and imagination to take place as learning milestones in the development of early childhood.

What children “learn and do for the environment is simultaneously for themselves. They learn and live ‘with’ the environment rather than ‘for’” (Takano 2019). Outdoor play and learning have been an essential element embedded in the Maltese culture from post-war times, where playing safely in the traffic free streets and alleys gave rise to hands-on and gross motor skills play, making use of basic materials like wooden boxes, metal wheels, stones and ropes. This environmental non-technological type of play needs to have a comeback in school outdoor play areas and educators and parents should install natural and recycled materials, paving the way for outdoor adventures, encouraging a more meaningful learning interaction in a sustainable way with the immediate environment and relate to local traditional play, connected to our culture and tangible heritage. People relate differently with their environment and express themselves in a variety of ways, therefore approaches to teaching and learning outdoors become related to diverse cultures, traditions, and habits. Cultural dimensions especially towards multicultural participants, in this case young children, should be considered and inclusion in local environmentally related play should be encouraged.

Inclusion and social justice in outdoor and environmental play should be considered, planned, and catered for.

Creating Outdoor Learning Spaces - an International Perspective

Having visited Early Years education settings abroad namely in The Netherlands, Scotland, Italy, and Sicily, one cannot help but note the emphasis given to outdoor learning spaces with great care and planning, to provide maximum interaction for young children with their outdoor natural environment. Young children are encouraged to interact with natural elements like water, rain, mud, soil, leaves, stones, trees, plants, bushes, flowers, insects, birds, animals and play with natural artefacts like wooden toys and furniture, to get the feel of establishing a harmony with their surroundings and explore and discover their benefits as part of their hands-on learning. Getting wet in the rain, soiled in the mud, falling and rolling on the grass, climbing a tree or rocks, sliding down a trunk or wooden slide, swinging or hanging from branches, jumping and balancing over steppingstones, are all lifelong learning experiences which give the opportunity to master the Early Years milestones and the stages of development in a sustainable way. These carefully planned outdoor learning areas for multisensory discovery and hands-on play, also encouraged by the late Sir Ken Robinson (2016), are essential as part of the intellectual and manipulative growth of young children as they explore natural elements in their spontaneous play in the “big outdoors” (ibid.).
Outdoor fieldwork pedagogy encourages involvement in environmental awareness and interaction with nature as observations and discovery learning take place. Experimenting with diverse flora and fauna pertaining to a particular region or indigenous surroundings, is essential as an Early Childhood integrated cross-curricular pedagogy, encouraging a multicultural setting for inclusion and social interaction, within and outside the school. Such a combination of outdoor artefacts plus natural elements pertaining to the outdoor environment is the real experiential learning opportunity we are aiming to set up in our local Maltese schools, with particular focus for early childhood outdoor interactive spaces for free play in a multicultural setting.

An outdoor hands-on pedagogy can be defined as “the purposeful use of an outdoor environment to achieve educational objectives” (Munge et al. 2018 pp. 39-53). Organizing outdoor activities entails much more than taking classes outdoors. It provides opportunities to teach differently, using engaging learning strategies appropriate to the setting, in order to pique student interests and promote learning. Munge argues that the critical role of the environment to the achievement of the intended learning outcomes is what distinguishes outdoor learning. Outdoor experiential learning includes embedded life skills for the real-world context. It offers children opportunities to build discipline-specific skills and knowledge and multidisciplinary skills such as teamwork, communication and problem solving. Teachers and children play and share experiences while interacting meaningfully through collaborative methods of learning. This allows young children to build skills and knowledge while exploring and learning in natural environments more independently. Through this methodology teachers could become co-constructors of learning with their children.

Experiential learning empowers children to become young scientists and discoverers of new knowledge and concepts, making “learning more immediately meaningful to the learner” (Seaman 2019 p. 4). It encourages social interaction as a consequence, leading to a multiculturally presumed innocence, as children approach others and engage in social relationships and communication through play, without inhibitions or judgement. The emphasis by practitioners and researchers should be on designing and studying environments which support learning and promote social play spaces in order to prepare children better to live in a global society. The greater success and impact on one’s joy of learning new concepts, has a more effective imprint on lifelong learning skills as it is based on the excitement of discovery and exploration. Schema of understanding and approaching new knowledge outdoors have a greater ability to be stored and reproduced later in life, especially in the later years where childhood memories are relived and treasured. Precious moments of playing by the seaside, running freely in the fields, climbing or swinging from that special tree in the forest, swimming in the little lake, splashing in the mud pools, chasing those butterflies in that garden, rolling down grassy hills and sliding down snowy slopes, riding a bike in that park, will be lifelong experiences one capably and easily would relive, reviving the feeling of that particular unforgettable learning experience. The feeling is what made the learning meaningful, and which made sense then and now. “It is therefore ironic that through most of human history, the majority of learning has occurred outside the classroom and even now, continues informally alongside formal education systems” (Nicol & Waite 2020).

**Suggesting Improvements in Designing and Setting up Outdoor Learning Spaces in Educational Settings Locally**

“We suggest there is an urgent need to cross the threshold of schools and locate more learning outdoors, in order to radically re-evaluate teaching methods and to promote learning that links with children’s broader experience and engages them with their
communities and the wonders of the natural world” (Nicol & Waite 2020 p. 2). This line of thought strongly contributes to multicultural education as a spontaneous happening, following natural learning among children as they share adventures in the big outdoors and the joy, excitement and thrills of experiencing nature and the elements. The strong interest of playing to enjoy the freedom and carefree involvement in harmony with the outdoor surroundings confirms Loris Malaguzzi's title to the Environment as the Third Teacher. “Outdoor free play, a significant element of Early Years pedagogy, is characterized by child-initiated discovery learning and contingent teaching that responds to and extends the child’s own interests. Outdoor learning offers a means to connect children's schooling with their home lives, the wider community, and the natural environment” (Nicol & Waite 2020 p. 3). This incentive instigates children's self-confidence as they discover their capabilities in expressing their gross motor skills building on their own strengths to discover new skills and push themselves to strive to achieve further.

Evidence has shown, summarized by Waite, that “outdoor learning promotes a happy body and mind, a sociable and confident person, a self-directed and confident person, an effective contributor and an active global citizen. Increased physical activity and less sedentary behaviour promotes additional mental health benefits gained from greater exposure to green areas” (Malone & Waite 2016 p. 22). This experiment carried out last year with two kinder classes at Figura Primary, involving my Early Childhood education students, organizing hands-on creative play activities outdoors in the school yard and the same activities conducted outdoors at Buskett Forest, in a natural environment on the grass under the trees, proved to be more enjoyable and effective, addressing the children's learning milestones and helping to reach them in a more enjoyable and natural and healthier way. Such lifelong learning experiences register forever, as childhood memories in the young children's minds and the yearning for such meaningful outdoor beneficial experiences will remain throughout their education and later in life. This will in turn encourage more environmentally responsible awareness as well as more sustainable lifestyles and planet conservation values throughout their adulthood.

Promoting Environmental Responsibility and Citizenship

Relationship between teachers and pupils will also improve and take a different dimension, where the teacher is seen to be more of a participant in the learning “encouraging more facilitative rather than teacher instructional media” (Nicol & Waite 2020), bringing on pedagogical methodology changes for the better. A multicultural atmosphere addressing the children’s diverse needs as they interact while they play is the correct natural learning platform we strive to establish through this research and study in our local schools.

“Citizenship qualities, community and environmental awareness and pro-environmental behaviour appear particularly stimulated by project-based work that is rooted in local communities, such as place-based education. Clearly these diverse identified benefits construct a powerful case for embedding progressive outdoor learning within school curricula, as a valued method within a repertoire of pedagogies, to address broader aspirations for children's educational current and future lives. From a psychological and sociocultural perspective, enjoyment widely reported as associated with learning outdoors leads to greater engagement with learning and stronger memories” (Nicol & Waite 2020). This is a different way of teaching and learning from classroom-based learning. Re-imagining curriculum subjects taught in local green spaces aims to achieve improvements in children's enjoyment and engagement with learning in harmony with nature for their own health and wellbeing.
A More Innovative Outdoor-Based, Natural Curriculum for Children’s Wellbeing

“Since the beginning of time, nature has been imperative for human wellbeing. Early humans knew this and lived in relation with nature, as part of nature, with no distinction or conception of nature as different or separate from humanity” (Brymer et al. 2019). “The results of co-evolution, seen in many relationships in nature, tie human wellbeing to the health of the natural environment” (Mitten & Brymer 2020). The advantage of health benefits derived from exposure to natural environments are precious in a child’s developmental stages, as well as offer different opportunities to master physical and multisensory skills related to outdoor sports and activities. The overall benefit is that children are drawn to becoming part of their natural environment. Physical exercise usually occurs incidentally when children play outdoors and embeds socialization and appreciation of nature. This encourages a love for the outside and strengthens students’ relationships with nature and their desire to spend more time in the outdoors. “Teachers using outdoor environmental education help develop or strengthen these outdoor and relational skills, which can result in positive contributions to participants’ wellbeing and them contributing to short- and long-term sustainability or the wellbeing of the planet” (Mitten & Brymer 2020). Innovative curricula can promote transformative experiences of immersion in nature. Such environmental experiences can help people form relationships based on care, curiosity and mutual respect and promote larger community wellbeing.

For outdoor education, curriculum content is based much more on the hands-on experiential aspect. Learning for life involving a discovery and interactive experience with direct contact with nature is what we are aiming to achieve as providing a Third teacher, following Malaguzzi’s philosophy for our young children in educational settings and outside. Well planned sustainable and natural play areas outside in Early Years settings can be the fertile ground necessary for promoting imagination and creativity from a young age to encourage future learning concerned with free expression and artistic outcomes. The activities or provocations, as Loris Malaguzzi calls them, outdoors are considered as outdoor adventure education, which may include environmental awareness.

“The premise is that experiences in natural environments, often but not necessarily, through activities that may be described as adventurous such as camping, hiking, and canoeing, will deepen connections with self, others and environment. This may take the form of place-based pedagogy, based in an ethical framework of care for self, others, and the environment. Such knowledge and experience will promote ecological understanding and ultimately conservation” (Lugg & Quay 2020).

Environmental outdoor education can start at school from the school yard, garden and outdoor spaces and reach outside to the public gardens, woods, forests, and seaside. This pedagogical approach of learning from the outside broadens the scope of the outdoor education curriculum from traditional conceptualizations to outdoor adventure education. Hands-on experiences outdoors, give an insight to the child of lifelong knowledge and skills as they interact with nature and explore textures, consistencies and elements for their personal development and outdoor education for sustainability. The potential for developing an outdoor education curriculum oriented toward sustainable living practices, through a holistic pedagogy, aims to include an applied approach that connects learners directly with natural, social, and cultural systems. Sustainable education through outdoor education pedagogy requires the setting up of new greener spaces for innovative learning practices. Involvement by the young scientists themselves, as main stakeholders, of the actual setup of an interactive outdoor play area, aims to instil ownership and citizen values of responsibility and care and protection of their surroundings. Values and a sense of citizenship aims to catch on the future multicultural generation interacting in an ecological society.
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Environmental Sustainability and Multicultural Education

The advantage of children playing side by side in an outdoor green environment or by the seaside aspires to promote a harmonious togetherness, celebrating each other’s knowledge of how to handle elements of the environment and creating imaginative and creative play routines. The environment can provide uninhibited spaces for children of different cultures and needs to follow and participate in others’ play styles and games which are new or different to their own traditional play. Celebrating diversity through outdoor play is the aim and propose of this study. Suggesting and designing greener and more sustainable outside areas in our local educational settings involving parents, guardians, teachers, LSAs, administration and staff, as well as the children themselves as main stakeholders, gives the notion that all the children pertaining to that particular setting and all others of that particular locality, are the responsibility of the wider community as a whole and as a consequence their education becomes a main concern. Investing an interest and a hands-on roping in of resources and materials as well as the actual design, construction and set up, possibly of a mini forest, wood, garden, building and construction site, rock pools, exciting reading corners, music sounds and theatre stages, messy play areas and artistic corners supported by an atelier, are the Reggio Emilia philosophy style of education envisaged by Loris Malaguzzi (Edwards, Forman & Gandini 2012). This pedagogy setting would be the ideal setting we seek to achieve and promote in our local school settings to always offer our children with their diverse needs a better stimulating learning environment and fertile ground for a successful multicultural teaching and learning methodology to thrive.

“Outdoor environmental and sustainable education (OESE) focuses on outdoor approaches appropriate to developing environmental knowledge and understanding and relevant in addressing associated complex and contested values. It is this emphasis on the significance of an intimate relationship with the world and the development of appropriate values that has led to educational conceptualizations of education for sustainable development and learning for sustainability” (Higgins & Christie 2020).

In Scotland, it is the educational intention to develop a relationship between the learner and the natural world and its process is a key element with global citizenship and outdoor learning, to form an integrated holistic concept for lifelong education. The experience of the natural world enables learners to build and strengthen respectful relationships and emotional attachment with their natural environment, encouraging respect and responsibility towards their surroundings.

“The impact of nature and the outdoors on a child’s development begins within the first year of life. By the time children are ready to begin regular early childhood education, such as day-care at kindergarten, they have become highly adept in receiving information from their environment through their senses” (Barford, Stevenson & Bensten 2020). It is of utmost importance to create occasions for learning to take place naturally outdoors. In touch with nature as the primary experiential teacher, providing opportunities to interact and explore the real world is essential to build a healthy immune system from a young age. Children can appreciate the benefits of fresh air, exercise, movement and play with natural elements such as mud, twigs, stones, shells, nuts, fruits, vegetables to give them knowledge and insight about living sustainably and including nature in their daily lives.

“The strengthening of neural circuitry during these early stages will lay the foundation that ultimately determines how well children function at school, how they interact with peers and ultimately what they can achieve in life. This means the early stages of a child’s life, including the type of ECE they receive, should be of primary importance to optimize their unique and individual path for growth and development” (Barford, Stevenson & Bensten 2020).
The unlimited benefits of a child’s direct contact with nature are priceless as certain concepts related to the properties of nature are essential to be experienced and cannot be grasped or understood otherwise. Inviting a child to remove footwear and feel the grass with bare feet, mud texture, rough stony ground or a sandy beach and ocean, hearing leaves rustle and feeling rain droplets, is an experiential discovery, addressing stages of age-appropriate development which will be cherished for life and repeated at later stages spontaneously. Applying schema already learnt and always improving outdoor skills, like balance and environmental management, will be key to producing a responsible and productive adult society. Holding a worm, a snail, a handful of earth, freshly cut grass, sinking into hay, climbing trees, hiding behind bushes, floating in a lake or river, collecting shells on a beach or pinecones from a forest are all hands-on experiences which cannot be explained or learnt from pictures or books, or role played and simulated in class. “Regular exposure to these outdoor conditions offers opportunities for children to build resilience towards unpredictability of natural outdoor environments as well as strengthen their immune system. At first this type of natural learning may be overwhelming but constant opportunities to interact with natural environments and play outdoors will ultimately benefit their overall development and readiness for school” (Barford, Stevenson & Bensten 2020).

Beyond the benefits of the specific pedagogy used in the outdoor environments, it is an opportunity to be immersed in natural environments suitable for sensory stimulation attributed to early years education. As children play together uninhibited by judgement or preference of playmates, they work together to problem solve, share, and engage in collaborative play naturally, as a spontaneous demonstration of exploration and understanding of their immediate surroundings. The teacher’s role in this scenario changes from the orchestrator of planned play experiences to that of assistant to the children’s creative and imaginative play expressions, as they eagerly want to touch, feel, and explore different textures and natural forms and discover their properties as they play spontaneously like rolling on the grass or splashing in a mud pool. “The teacher’s role shifts so they no longer solely promote experiences but rather act as a filter between the children and nature, utilizing the outdoors as a learning area” (Barford, Stevenson & Bensten 2020). The schoolyard could also be this kind of encouraging and adventurous area, properly set up to offer such precious lifelong educational skills for 0-5 young children, in preparation for the big outdoors and their surroundings outside the school setting. Being in nature during school time is not only for recess and social development, but can directly positively affect social relationships, where informal conversations and interactions can take place between the children themselves as well as with their teachers. Such expected outcomes can promote a more holistic development of the child and a multicultural learning platform for universal and global values of equity and celebration of diversity. Moreover, letting children play and work together encourages an inquiry-based pedagogy, eliciting curiosity to work and discover multiple possible solutions together, by thinking and reacting autonomously to open-ended tasks and activities.

This type of democratic multicultural approach to learning and teaching in sustainable outdoor environments, offering a more holistic education for a more dynamic and successful future lifestyle, is the aim and objective of this study. Children are encouraged to accept and celebrate differences to enrich their cultural knowledge through interacting with different others in a rich natural environment. Outdoor education can supplement and enrich the everyday school lives of children.
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A Local Perspective for the Implication for the Maltese Context of Outdoor Play Benefits for Young Children’s Education.

The outdoor play area in our local Early Years settings has always been available as a secure and confined outdoor environment, which is controlled and supervised by adult educators. Free and structured play usually happen during break time, physical education activities or organised events. The play areas currently available in our schools, although most are adequate, are large open yards, which need to offer a better quality experience of the outdoors as a dynamic learning opportunity and need to be equipped with the necessary stimulating resources and natural environment to offer meaningful lifelong learning opportunities by interaction and experience. It should be encouraged that life-enhancing skills should be learnt through first-hand experience, at a young age, and that young children should freely want to engage in exploring the immediate environment, one which caters for all areas of development to be addressed. The outdoor area should be a complete learning environment, catering for all children’s needs – creative, cognitive, linguistic, logical, physical, social, artistic, and intellectual. The Environment as the third teacher, following Malaguzzi’s (ibid.) philosophy, is what we aim to achieve in our young children’s education as they build their own life experiences and will hopefully extend them and apply them in their future lives.

As the research suggests (Bilton 2010), children are naturally drawn to run outside and play no matter the weather conditions and this is what we need to give attention to and focus on: this instinctive and natural urge of young children to interact, explore and learn from their immediate environment, as it proves to be exciting, intriguing, and tempting to get to know. This idea is definitely a plus for us local educators to invest in. This quest for knowledge should be an incentive to develop outdoor play spaces in schools, offering the correct teaching and learning resources considering it fertile ground for the outdoor classroom and the Third Teacher (Edwards, Forman & Gandini 2012) making it fun for teachers and students to work in. Teaching could be more fun and planning outcomes to help our little ones reach their desired milestones in a more natural way, so the outdoor classroom benefits all for a more fruitful teaching and learning experience. Locally, we need to reconsider certain myths which discourage outdoor learning, such as fear of danger, injuries, getting messy, getting scruffy and dirty, getting a cold, the trouble of providing and organizing the necessary attire and setting up resources every time outside play is scheduled. If schools could set up sustainable fixed outdoor play stations where the tools and equipment stay outside, it would be more encouraging to engage in a whole day play learning experience without structuring the school day for our young learners. Building a mud-kitchen area, a pool or pond area, a gardening station, a storytelling/reading area and a creative arts and music corner, as well as a stage for role play and home corner, calls for children and their educators to look forward to spending the day there, going through all the fun learning experiences addressing all six areas of development through an unstructured spontaneous all-day play experience. Children will change their idea of going out to play as a break from the structured school day, to considering the outside as a haven for fun learning, that provides enough stimulation for learning and enjoyment.

Even designing and setting up such outdoor play spaces should be a team effort by all stakeholders concerned and should be an exciting time coming together with parents, staff and outer community members who could contribute donating recycled and sustainable materials to build the natural classroom outdoors. Ideas and the inventiveness of those involved should be pooled, discussed and best practice derived. It is of utmost importance that main team players concerned, namely the educators, are consulted and involved in the project as this ensures all factors are considered for efficient planning and effective results, being the ones who know the area and its potential and diverse scenarios. It was a general complaint on the part of educators in favour of such projects within their schools,
who expressed disappointment about lack of involvement or referral on their part, when decisions for designing and construction were being taken by those responsible for the whole building plans and the installation of services. When discussing the possibility of building better and more equipped outdoor play spaces in the schoolyards with heads of schools and staff, the disappointment of them not being taken on board as decision makers and suggesting practical choice and installation of materials and services was evident. The right professionals should be the ones to decide and plan the set-up of play areas with child friendly specifications, and as knowledgeable persons of the place and the children’s needs.

It is hoped that at the beginning of the coming scholastic year 21/22, a pilot study involving a local school setting up an outdoor learning conducive stimulating environment will contribute towards improving in the learning processes of children in the early years (ref Figure 1, P 14). This experiment is intended to be launched on a national level in all early childhood educational settings locally, aiming at achieving more successful lifelong learning skills through play, exploration and discovery learning for life.

The flowchart shown in Figure 1, describes the path taken towards implementing a pilot project in a local school setting, with the intent of expanding the field of application using the results of this project as a base. Using the knowledge and experience garnered in the literature review and visits to best practice setting abroad, a project was initiated at the St Paul’s Bay Primary School. The set up of the project involves all stakeholders and multiple resources, with the aim of establishing an outdoor area offering the sustainable, multisensory experience to the Early Years children, themselves already part of a widely multicultural setting present in the particular school. It is expected that, barring any issues related to prevailing Covid regulations, results of its use and effectiveness, for improved learning standards, will be further investigated.

**Figure 1:** Flowchart of sustainable outdoor play areas research project
“Directions for future research”

It is intended to continue researching about promoting best practice for outdoor learning through setting up sustainable and interactive natural outdoor play areas in schools locally. A documented report is planned to be produced, as the project unfolds at the school chosen and observe the difference in the quality of teaching and learning from the classroom to that in the outdoor creative play areas (ref Figure 1, P 14). This will lead to my second research study publication in the form of an action research paper.

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