

THE SPACES IN-BETWEEN



Nature-based Early Childhood Fellowship Case Study

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Chicago Botanic Garden: Nature Preschool Seeds Three-year-olds Class, Tu/Th

If you were to observe the Seeds Nature Preschool class, chances are you'll find a good number of students interacting and immersing themselves in the wonderful world of soil. The children are continuously drawn to their mud kitchen in the outdoor classroom; they love to dig in and create with the soil. Because of this, digging spoons and mud kitchen supplies are always packed in the take-along backpack, ready to for the days' adventures.

On days that we would take an on-site field trip to a bonafide garden, traditional tools i.e. binoculars were being used, but not the digging spoons. These were only used in the spaces in-between the gardens.



The gardens are beautiful and luxurious but come with many more rules that dictates tool usage and play. The spaces in-between the gardens are a quiet place for students to call their own, where they are shielded from the public eye and can play freely, use tools, and connect to the Earth and one another. The in-between spaces afford children the opportunity to be immersed in authentic nature experiences. These are the spaces where children are allowed dig in the soil, climb trees, splash in puddles, pick flowers, step off the path, play with sticks and be lost in wonderment and awe of the natural world.

Connections to the Illinois Early Learning Standards

Science

11.A.ECa Express wonder and curiosity about their world by asking questions, solving problems, and designing things.

12.A.ECa Observe, investigate, describe, and categorize living things.

12.B.ECa Use nonstandard and standard scientific tools for investigation.

Example: Interacting with the flowers and seeds, using tongs and collection cups.



Social/Emotional

30.C.ECa,c,d Exhibit eagerness and curiosity as a learner. Show some initiative, self-direction, and independence in actions. Demonstrate engagement and sustained attention in activities.

31.A.ECc,e Interact easily with familiar adults. Develop positive relationships with peers.

31. B.ECa,b Interact verbally and nonverbally with other children. Engage in cooperative group play.

Example: Sharing language and discoveries with one another, gathering tools.

So how does one go about finding the spaces in-between? Look for places that allow students the freedom to dig in the soil, where materials are bountiful, and there is space to spread out and explore, or come together and dig. Places where children can alter and shape their learning environment(s) and in return, are directly shaped by their learning experiences.



Space that is suitable for digging at the Botanic Garden is often rich in other experiential learning opportunities as well. The space shown here is not indicated on a Garden tour map. Instead, it is tucked in-between two locations, the Family Cove and Learning Campus. Here, while one group works hard digging in the soil, another group explores the nearby willow.

Aksel, running towards me with excitement, “Come quick Ms. Sarah, berries.” Bailey, “Ooh berries?” Hunter, “I come, too?!” Mack hollering to the others, “Bring some back for pie!”

We followed Aksel to where the explorers had been. “Look!” Aksel exclaimed as he showed his friends the berries. “We need tools,” Hunter said, turning on his heels and retuning moments later with small cups and tongs. Bailey and Bernadette quickly got to work collecting berries. Bernadette noticing the shape, “Stars! Stars!” Bailey carefully using her tongs, “They’re pink!” Aksel began closely investigating the flower pods with awe inspired mumbles.

In-between spaces allow for independence and interconnectedness, and a sense of adventure that propels organic learning experiences. These kinds of spaces are of great value to the nature preschooler, nature-based educator and Botanic Garden institution.

The Chicago Botanic Garden Nature Preschool, located in Glencoe, IL, is a private preschool, which serves children ages three to five; three-year-olds meet for 2.5 hours, Tu/Th, older students meet for 3 hours, M/W/F. At the Garden, we cultivate the power of plants to sustain and enrich life. Within this context, the Preschool strives to create meaningful relationships with the natural world.

