

Infant Plus Project with Camosun College Practicum Students

Enid Elliot with Annette Annicchiarico and Samantha Wylie

During an Early Learning and Care (ELC) students' second year practicum seminar at Camosun College, instructors and students began a discussion about outdoor spaces and transforming an outdoor play space. This idea became the Infant Plus Project, an invaluable learning experience for the practicum students to help transform an outdoor space. The instructors share how it all evolved.

We began by viewing a short video that documented a Vancouver research project <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O2ZZVFyzDAM/> about working with YMCA and YWCA centres to support educators' engagement with outdoor play, and we then listened to a presentation about the project. Students noted what changes they could imagine in their practicum centres. But as one student noted, most centres did not have either time or money to make changes to their outside space. Another student responded by saying, "We could help them!" An idea was born.

We began to gather ideas, look at outside spaces where students were doing their practicums, and think how we might enrich the spaces. We wondered, what opportunities do children have to connect to the Land? How might students contribute to practicum centres in collaborative ways so as to bring themselves into the centre, while leaving a little of themselves behind?

Centres often must make do with a parking lot or concrete space. Licensing has lowered the space requirements for outside areas so these spaces can often be cramped with minimal connection to earth and greenery. Due to concerns for children's safety on play equipment, pea gravel or bark mulch are often required. Working with small spaces as well as pea gravel and cement surfaces, we wondered what students could contribute. How might students build on what educators in their practicum setting value, how might they collaborate?

When the Child Care Resource and Referral (CCRR) heard of the students' plans, they offered to support them financially. In 2021 CCRR had supported students' interest in gardening by providing garden boxes



Practicum students brought in logs and added plants and dirt for the children to play in.

and soil for children and educators to plant. This year, when they offered to support our project and the students, we weren't sure how to move forward. As ELC faculty, we think intentionally alongside the students and invite community relationships with agencies to deepen our work together and broaden possible opportunities. This also offers the students, agencies, community, and early learning centres the opportunity to create connections offering rich dialogue and generative collective experiences.

We collected photos and began to wonder what we might do to support a change in a child care centre's outdoor space. What were simple changes that could be made to an outdoor space that was inviting to children and would also create connections to Land? We began to think of fabric bags or plastic pots for bamboo and other plants so that children or educators could move them around. We also thought of piles of dirt for digging and plants to create small hiding places. By the end of the winter term we had not decided on a centre or what

changes we were capable of doing. The timeline had been too short.

The project moved on to the short May/June term, which is seven weeks long instead of the usual 14 weeks. A small group of students took up the project as they did an extra practicum that would enable them to have two specialties. Often these experiences can be ongoing and move from one term to another.

Enid was the instructor for this group and the following are her reflections.

I did not feel fully qualified to take on landscaping or project management, but I figured with the help of the students we could muddle through. Believing in the process, I hoped the project would emerge from our collaboration. We would all have to trust the process.

Using a child care centre where one of the students was doing her practicum made sense. We wanted to support a non-profit program

that would welcome us in their outdoor space. We chose Infant Plus Day Care where an infant/toddler practicum student, Rebekah, was working with the toddlers. They were in a new building and were working to develop their outdoor space. They have a small yard in the front for toddlers and in the back for preschool-age children in a residential area of Victoria, and they were still figuring out what the children were interested in and what was possible in their area.

They welcomed our help. During our second seminar class we met at Infant Plus to observe the space and to brainstorm ideas.

The back yard had an old apple tree and pear tree which provided shade and the comfort of old settled trees. There was a garden planter and a variety of small logs which the children moved around to create a ship or a train or whatever. The ground was bare as it was a small yard with an active group of children which did not allow for the grass to take

hold. There was a small playhouse which served as a smaller space within the play yard.

The front yard had a fence looking onto the street and the children loved to climb on stumps to look out to the street which had the usual traffic plus horse and buggies which took tourists around the neighbourhood. We noted that they needed shade in the front yard.

We brainstormed what was needed and what might be possible in our six weeks. We listed the following:

- Shade for the front yard
- Rain barrels to maximize water use without wasting water
- Some plants to create spaces for the children
- Plants for smelling and tasting
- Dirt for digging
- More stumps for children to look over the fence and to sit on
- Holes in the fence for children to look out

We had a list but what could we accomplish along with doing the



The students brought in plants to create spaces for the children (l) and drilled holes in the fence for children to look out (r).

assignments and discussion of practice that was part of the course?

We investigated shade possibilities. We knew that the PRO-ECO project we were using for inspiration had a grant from the cancer agency for shade sails. Claire, an inclusive care student, wrote to the Victoria Cancer Agency but we did not hear back. Infant Plus already used small canopies. Another practicum site had struggled with shade and found a permanent gazebo that worked well for them. But Infant Plus would need a building permit to erect it. Solving this issue would not work within our timeline or budget.

Rain barrels also seemed like a good idea. We must take care of water and use it carefully. Children love water. How might we encourage children to become aware of the importance of water and still explore its possibilities? Rain barrels could help by collecting water during the rainy times and be used during the dry times. Several students mentioned that they had noted in other practicum placements they had seen broken rain barrels. Jessie googled Costco. They seemed to have a sturdier version and would replace it if it was broken. We found that Canadian Tire had a similar version and policy.

We ended up planting a bamboo plant and a couple of other types of plants which could be used to create an outdoor room shielded off from the larger play area. We used plastic pots and fabric planting containers so that the plants could be moved more easily by the educators and/or children. We got wheels to slide underneath to facilitate moving them.

Holes in the fence were drilled by Rumeysa's husband. Nina, a student, found stumps online for free

and was able to deliver them to her practicum site and our project site. Dirt was reasonable at the Gravel Mart and Rebekah and her father helped fill bins and bags with top soil, which cost \$15. We found logs at the beach to create two dirt piles, one in the front yard and the other in the back. The dirt would eventually move around the yard and the logs would still be useful.

Everyone acknowledged the process had been uncomfortable because we did not know what we were doing. Later I reflected that it was like work with children and families. We don't always know what will happen when we do something. We are sometimes unsure of the way forward.

We had not done big changes and we had not known exactly what we were doing, but we had ventured forth. The students said afterwards that it felt vague to them. It felt unclear to me as well as it was not certain what would make the difference, but the children's enthusiasm for small changes was rewarding.

The CCRR had been a partner with us and they planned a celebration of fruit and cookies for the day we made the changes. We met during naptime to drill, unload, and create. We arranged the logs and dirt near

the new mud kitchens the CCRR had contributed to the process. We had collected pots and pans and spoons to add to the dirt pile and we added those. We placed the stumps in different locations for children and educators to sit or climb on. Holes were drilled in the fence and a little space was created with the plants in their bags and pots.

We gathered before the children arrived outside to debrief. I asked everyone how the process had been. One student shared how she was happy that the stumps she had collected were from an already down tree. It was important that we had not contributed to a tree being cut down. Others mentioned that it would have been great to have managed and established the plants better than had happened in our quick process. Good lesson learned.

Everyone acknowledged the process had been uncomfortable because we did not know what we were doing. Later I reflected that it was like work with children and families. We don't always know what will happen when we do something. We are sometimes unsure of the way forward. I was impressed that everyone had moved forward and had contributed. We had learned from our explorations and thinking together.

At three we gathered and watched the children interact in the two yards. Children went immediately to the plant room where they could feel enclosed by the plants and the containers. Others went to the dirt and immediately dug in. The under three-year-old yard had two very serious creators working between the dirt and mud kitchen. It took children a little more time to discover the holes for looking out. They will discover how much they can see



After the outdoor space transformation, children could dig in the dirt and had plants they could smell and taste.

from an eyehole, and they will find that the dirt disappears with use, but that the logs have multiple ideas to offer. The plants may survive and the ones that don't will share a lesson in caring for plants.

Over the course of seven months, students actively decided to contribute to the community in a meaningful way by supporting a centre in their outdoor space. Students saw and experienced that we can change the environment and we can move forward in uncertainty. The CCRR, students, instructors, and centres collaborated to make a positive change to children's learning spaces through connecting children to the Land. We hope that this project will continue. We want to share what we learned with other cohorts and with other ECE programs. Students and instructors can work with programs to offer time and energy to make changes. Perhaps we could include thinking about our outdoor spaces more generally in other courses.

As Claire, the student who had made the suggestion we contribute time and energy to a program, reflected,

As ECE students we often focus on theory, as well as practical practicum experiences. However, this project gave us an incredibly valuable learning experience because *there was no predefined plan*, and as we know in the field there are moments each and everyday that we must come up with a solution for the problems that arise. Taking this project into our own hands without expecting a particular outcome helped us all to grow our skills and find our own unique pathways into how we could each support the project both individually, and as a whole. We are grateful to our instructors for following our emergent ideas and supporting us along the way.

Enid Elliot, PhD, is an early childhood educator who is currently on faculty at Camosun College and an adjunct professor at University of Victoria. Her current questions concern the pedagogies that emerge as educators and children explore and engage with all the layers of the natural and material landscape found outside school walls, as well as learning from Indigenous worldviews and narratives that honour our connections with the natural world.

Annette Annicchiarico and Samantha Wylie are instructors working alongside ELC students at Camosun College.

The authors are grateful to the Camosun ELC class of 2022 who hatched the idea and the students: Rumeysa Ergut, Rebeckah Pavia, Claire Sheehy, Nina Westby, Jessie Whitehouse, who brought the idea to fruition.