

EDITORIAL NOTE

Writing Research-to-Practice Briefs: Opportunities for Published Authors and Graduate Students in Advancing Research-Based Practices in Nature-Based Early Learning

Yash Bhagwanji

Florida Atlantic University, USA

Christine Kiewra

University of Nebraska - Lincoln, USA

Why This Moment Matters

People of all ages have always learned in, with, and from the natural world. Yet that relationship has been strained in our modern, largely urban and technology-focused society. Holistic development of children supported by effective teaching in natural outdoor environments is risked as children's connections with the places where they live and the natural and communities they belong to are severed. There is currently clear global recognition of the early years as foundation for lifelong learning, well-being, and environmental responsibility. A parallel rise in early childhood environmental education, nature-based learning (NBL), and outdoor and place-based early learning programs manifest as further evidence that nature-based early learning (NBEL) constitutes an important approach in our collective work.

In the past, environmental educators and early childhood teachers were seen as two separate camps with different approaches. In recent years, with increased awareness of the need to share in each other's wisdom, a compelling and creative synergy has emerged. Educators with expertise in natural science and dependable access to natural and wild spaces have increasingly created programs and resources for children's positive learning engagements with nature and in fostering children's journeys in environmental literacy development. Philosophically speaking, the hope is to foster future stewardship. Meanwhile, teachers working with young children bring pedagogical training and experience with play-based learning and are more aware of the benefits of time in nature for children's healthy development and the need to re-introduce nature in their outdoor spaces. Here, the philosophical orientation is focused on joyful childhoods, internal motivations that foster sense of belonging and place, as well as preparation for success in future school environments.

National professional organizations' efforts to enhance young children's learning and well-being align with connecting or reconnecting children and nature. The North American Association of Environmental Education describes early childhood environmental education as a holistic concept that encompasses knowledge of the natural world, as well as emotions, dispositions, and skills (NAAEE, 2016). This statement confirms what many educators, policymakers, and parents now recognize, that time in nature can positively impact young children's development. National Association for the Education of Young

Children's (NAEYC, 2020) Developmentally Appropriate Practice position statement emphasizes that nature-based experiences are essential for fostering joyful, engaged learning and emotional regulation in children. It highlights the need for access to nature for all children, supporting their well-being and development across cognitive, language social, and physical domains.

In recent years, early childhood environmental education has emerged as a complex construct that is vibrant and rapidly expanding and promoting areas of research and practice. This growth reflects a broader recognition that the early years are foundational - not only for learning and well-being, but also for shaping children's relationships with the natural world. As direct service programs, educational materials, online information, literature and video resources, and research studies multiply and surge, so too does the need for meaningful connections between research and practice. This editorial briefly frames current trends in early childhood environmental education and introduces a shared vision between Exchange Press and the International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education (IJECEE) to strengthen pathways for translating research into practice - and practice into research.

Rise in Trends in Early Childhood Environmental Education

- Significant increase has been evident in:
 - Research activity (applied, conceptual, literature review, empirical, and more)
 - Direct service programs
 - Innovative practices in ECEE/NBEL
 - Journals and publications focused on the intersections of two or more of the following: early childhood, environmental education, science education, outdoor education, sustainability education, and related disciplines
- Evidence of more focused alignment among and between:
 - Educational goals (learning, well-being, access, etc.)
 - Nature connection and outdoor learning
 - Nature connection and school curriculum and outcomes
- NAAEE's (2016) definition of ECEE as a holistic concept encompassing:
 - Knowledge
 - Emotions and dispositions
 - Skills and relationships with the natural world

What Research Tells Us

Research consistently emphasizes the benefits of nature-rich environments that encourage play and movement and skilled adult guidance. Research also documents the benefits of ECEE for high-quality early childhood education overall, with specific benefits in areas such as academic performance, cognitive development, social and emotional learning, physical development, creative and divergent thinking, and executive functioning and self-regulation. Broader impacts include support for children's development of positive environmental attitudes and motivations, knowledge, and skills as well as laying the foundation for lifelong environmental responsibility.

An example of the significant interest and research activity intersecting early childhood education and nature-based learning is a literature review conducted at Standford University (Ardoin & Bowers, 2020) which synthesized evidence from more than 60 recent studies. The studies were diverse in their design and implementation, but all emphasized the importance of nature-rich settings, play and movement, and effective guidance by mentors and teachers. The Stanford study found overwhelming evidence supporting that early childhood environmental education (ECEE) can provide wide-ranging benefits for children that overlap with high quality early education overall. Benefits were described as increased learning in a range of domains such as mathematics, science, language and literacy, enhanced social and emotional skills, and improved physical development. Additionally, ECEE programs also contributed to children and family's environmental awareness in areas such as environmental attitudes, knowledge, and skills that lay the foundation for more environmental responsibility and engagement.

A recent Exchange Bridging Research and Practice article (Ward, et.al, 2025) also illustrated environmental and early childhood researchers, educators and policy makers joining together to learn from each other. The article described a conference session where early childhood educators, researchers, and managers came together to hear presentations and shared their perspectives in the discussions that followed. Participating authors and presenters also conducted IRB-approved 'in conference' research by engaging in an additional 90-minute workshop with the early childhood professionals who attended their session.

And, published in this issue of IJECEE are compelling study approaches, conceptualizations, and findings that go deeper in breaking down variables, research designs, and contributing to new connections and understanding. Claire Underwoods' literature review and empirical studies by Holyoke & Fletcher; Dean, Gladys, & Werner; Muscat; Ernst & Johnson; Hachey-Bell, Dietze, Craig, & O'Donoghue; and Gallo-Fox, Pic, & Novikova all engage in shaping, defining, and refining the construction of, and research-based evidence for, early childhood environmental education or NBEL in new ways. The wider ecological perspective that emerges, and that will continue to emerge, lays out the intricacies and variables that are involved in, as well as suggest, effective teaching practices, important research and scholarship activities, and meaningful and impactful policies. Also, in this same issue, the children's activity and picture books related to sensory-based exploration summarized by our book editor, Carla Gull, exemplify possible additional reading resources that complement studies by Holyoke & Fletcher about *picturebooks* that support early climate justice education, as well as by Dean, Gladys, & Werner about supporting children's deeper connections with nature through slow learning and authentic caregiving. The selection and use of appropriate children's books are just one extension of research implications that may be drawn for curriculum improvement and practice - and in the writing of research-to-practice briefs.

Gaps and Ongoing Challenges

Despite growing research, findings are not always accessible to practitioners. Also, practice-based knowledge continues to be underrepresented in peer-reviewed literature. This creates a persistent need for translation of research into classroom, program, and community settings with research questions emerging directly from educator experience.

We are collectively putting the call out for a **two-way bridge**: Research informing practice and practice informing research.

Research to Practice Opportunities

Both organizations have existing initiatives in support of research to practice discussions. The Natural Start Alliance, for example, has created opportunities through their Graduate Student Network and virtual mentoring symposiums. Exchange, on the other hand, has a tradition of promoting teacher-research and action research articles in their printed magazine and now online in Exchange Community Voices.

With the goal of sparking new dialogue that leads to new research questions grounded in lived practice, we are collaborating to bring you research to practice briefs that summarize current research and provide practical applications for classrooms, programs, and families.

Exchange Press and IJECEE: A Shared Vision

There are synergies between Exchange Press, publisher of *Exchange Community Voices* and *International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education* (IJECEE), published by Natural Start Alliance (a network and program of North American Association for Environmental Education). We share a vision for expanding authors' reach and translating practical applications of research findings. *Exchange* and *IJECEE* are also both committed to sharing research from a greater diversity of authors with readers.

At a time of increasing clarity about the importance of healthy development during the early years, research plays a vital role in shaping even-handed, effective, and responsive practice. As two leading publications serving early childhood professionals, Exchange and IJECEE are committed to creating spaces where research and practice inform one another and where diverse voices are welcomed into the conversation. We invite readers - educators, researchers, students, and advocates alike - to share how research shapes your work and to join us in building a field that values curiosity, collaboration, and children's deep connections with the natural world.

Publication Pathways and Collaborative Opportunities

IJECEE invites practitioners, graduate students, and researchers to author practice briefs and other practitioner-oriented articles. Similarly, Exchange invites teacher researchers to write about the action research projects they conduct in their classrooms. Both publications hope to spark discussion between researchers and practitioners that will lead to opportunities to investigate issues that arise from teachers' experience as well.

In this time of increasing clarity on the importance of the early years, research is fundamental. As two leading publications for professionals in the field, *Exchange* and *IJECEE* seek to scaffold and strengthen bridges linking research and practice and to bring these to professionals at all levels. IJECEE can publish special issues incorporating research completed in classrooms, programs, and homes, for example. Exchange Community Voices hosts a regular Bridging Research and Practice feature and is organizing a special issue focused on nature in 2026 with an accompanying online conference featuring the authors.

Call to Action: Invitation to Readers

We have a vision for our field where research is accessible, practice is valued as knowledge-generating, and children's relationships with nature are central to early learning. Please join us in shedding light on the critical importance of the early years as we demonstrate that young children are citizens now with

rights to quality care, education, and a healthy world to grow into. The role of research in advancing access, quality, and sustainability is essential to this vision.

Interested in writing research briefs? Please reach out to us about writing briefs based on your own published research or writing briefs of existing published studies. This latter approach is a particularly helpful way for graduate students to start building a publication record.

With appreciation for your dedication to children and nature-based learning. Please reach out to learn more about this opportunity or to submit a research brief to either one or both of us at:

Yash Bhagwanji, Editor, *International Journal of Early Childhood Environmental Education*,
ybhagwan@fau.edu

Christine Kiewra, Feature Editor, *Exchange Magazine: Bridging Research and Practice*, ckiewra2@unl.edu

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