

THE *Active* LEARNER

In Focus: Outdoor Learning

The Outside Daily Routine

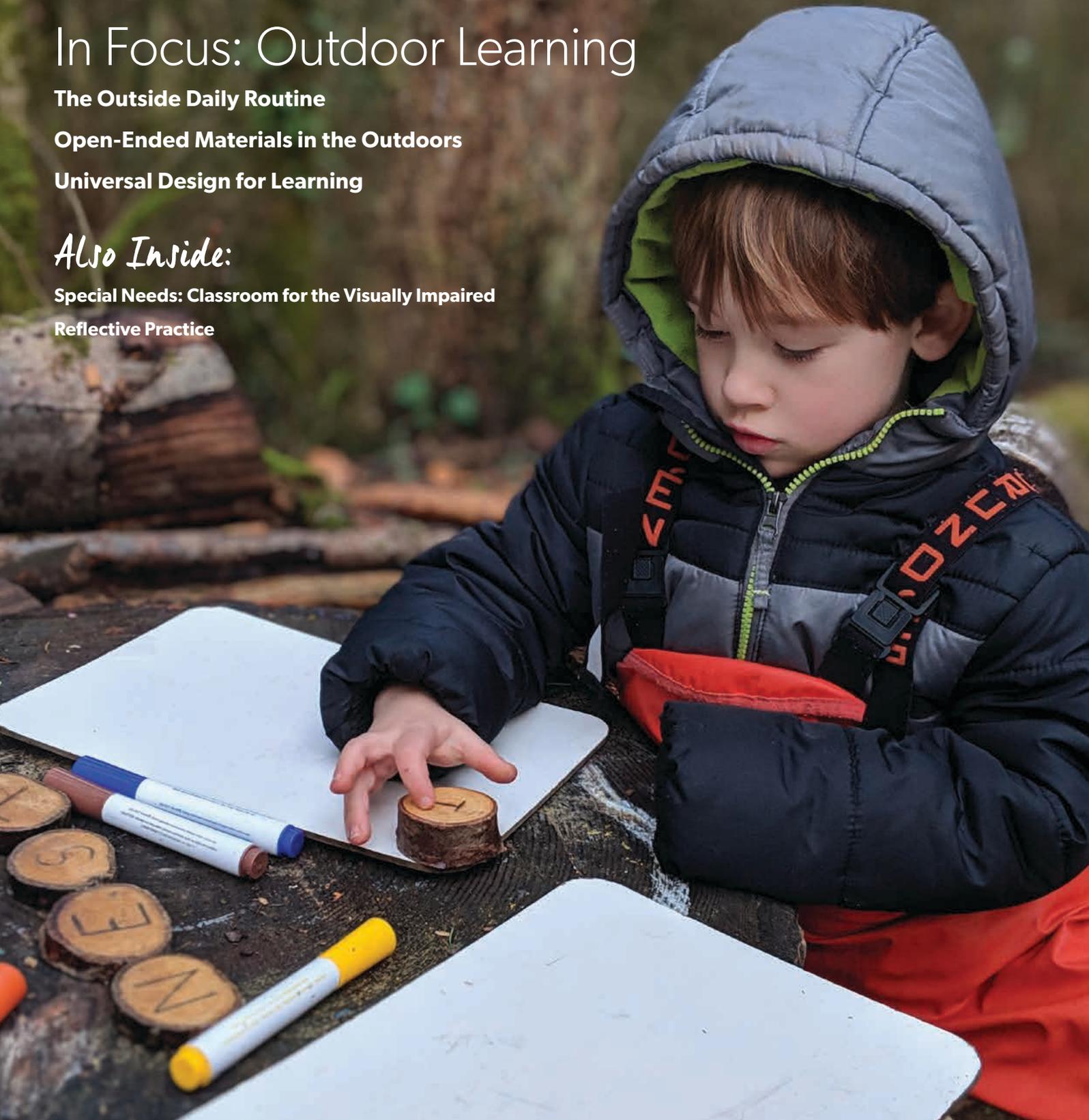
Open-Ended Materials in the Outdoors

Universal Design for Learning

Also Inside:

Special Needs: Classroom for the Visually Impaired

Reflective Practice



Seeing Without Sight

Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired Adopts the HighScope Curriculum

BY BETSY EVANS



In this inclusion program where half of the children are either blind or visually impaired, children learn each other's strengths before learning about their differences.

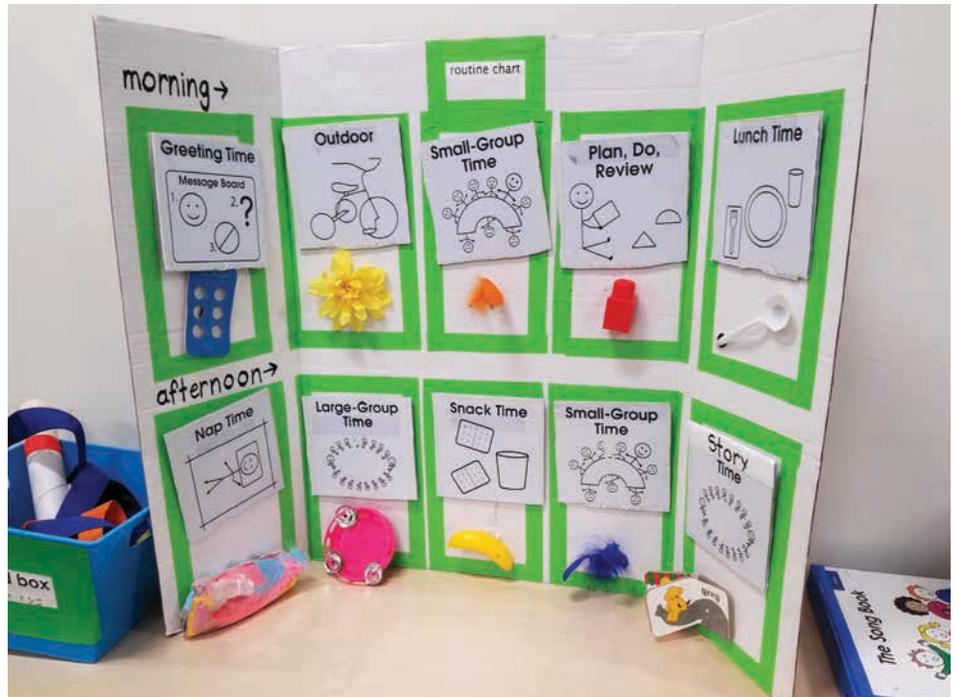
During planning time, Justin, age 3, touches the Lego brick on the toy area sign and says “shakers,” indicating that he wants to go to the toy area to use the set of sound shakers. As I approach Justin at work time, he is sitting on the floor in the toy area, surrounded by sound shakers — each a small box containing items that have varied qualities of sound, loud and soft. He shakes each box, bouncing on his folded knees to the beat of his shaking hand. He throws his head back, smiling.

His teacher, Yara, introduces me to him and leaves. I sit next to him on the floor. “My name is Betsy and you are Justin,” I say. He replies, “Justin — J is for Justin,” adding his letter link: “J is for jet.” I tell him, “My letter link is balloon — B for Betsy and B for balloon.”

“B for Betsy,” he repeats as he reaches out to touch my sleeve.

I pick up a box and shake it. For a few minutes we shake together, noticing the loud and soft sounds. Yara returns and joins us on the floor. She begins to sing “Bingo” and she and Justin each pick up nearby rhythm sticks to keep the beat. As I join in with sticks, I notice that Justin pauses for a beat when the letter B is left out. The adult has subtly scaffolded Justin’s activity by including a song that encourages children to keep a steady beat with the sticks, while adding a higher level of difficulty. Justin has happily and easily joined at that level, successfully keeping the beat and anticipating when a beat is skipped (something I am not quite managing).

In the next pre-K class, I sit on the floor by Simone and another girl as they build an enclosure with blocks and place animals inside. A third child comes along and puts his animal on top of Simone’s wall. Simone firmly tells him to stop, and he does. She then moves to the sensory table with two animals. The third child follows her and puts his animals near hers. “No!” she says loudly. Elliana, their teacher, kneels down by them: “What’s the problem?”



This daily routine schedule includes real objects so that children who are visually impaired or blind can tactilely understand each part of the day.

"I don't want him to play here," Simone calmly answers. Elliana responds, "What can we do to solve that?" Because it is December and there has been a lot of problem-solving practice, Simone quickly gives her solution: "I can go somewhere else." And she does. Elliana explains to the other child, "I think she wants to play alone." He goes back to the block area with his animals.

“After a sighted child asked his mother about what it meant to be blind, she asked, ‘Do you know anyone who is blind?’ The child, who had been at the Miami Lighthouse for a while, responded, ‘No, I never met anyone who was blind.’”

These stories describe play and active learning as you would see it in any classroom that implements HighScope. The children have planned, are totally engaged in play, and are supported by adults who participate in their play, scaffolding children's spontaneous efforts and facilitating problem-solving negotiations when there are conflicts. The one characteristic that is unique in these classrooms is that they are inclusion classrooms at the Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Justin is totally blind, and Simone is visually impaired. The complexity of the children's play illustrates the Miami Lighthouse motto: "It's possible to see without sight."

USING INCLUSION AS A FOUNDATION

Inclusion in these Miami Lighthouse toddler and preschool classrooms means that half of the children are either blind or visually impaired and half are sighted children. Interestingly, the children don't initially perceive that they see differently — inclusion is the foundation for an anti-bias curriculum. A four-year-old, sighted

child, who had been in the program for a while, overheard his parents talking about being blind. He asked, "Mommy, what is blind?" His mom explained to him that some people have problems with their eyes and cannot see, and then asked if he knew anyone who was blind. His answer came quickly: "No, I never met anyone who was blind." Eventually he will learn about the sight differences amongst his peers, but first he will come to enjoy their interests and strengths. He will get to know them as individuals, developing respect for the many ways that each of them is unique, as well as the same.

ADAPTING THE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT AND DAILY ROUTINE

Active play is the common denominator in classrooms where individual choices — not differences — are emphasized. Learning is facilitated by the HighScope learning environment containing many areas for play, the HighScope plan-do-review process, and the HighScope framework for large- and small-group time. At Miami Lighthouse, some adaptations have been made to assist the visually impaired and blind children with the daily routine sequence. For example, real objects are attached to the schedule so that children are able to tactilely understand each component, and real objects are used on labels and area signs, along with braille. Planning and recall cards and props include real objects that represent that area (as well as the usual symbol and words), such as a small block for the block area and a real pencil for the art area. In this way all the children are using the same materials, but each is decoding the objects and symbols in a way that is

Feature

physically and developmentally accessible to them. Large- and small-group activities are active and hands-on, as they are in all HighScope classrooms. At the Miami Lighthouse, there is possibly even more emphasis on the use of sensory materials — though these materials are frequently used in all HighScope classrooms — such as soft feather boas for moving to music and art materials that are three-dimensional and messy. Miami Lighthouse also has its own music teacher who is regularly in the classrooms playing his guitar, encouraging enthusiastic singing and dancing.

Teachers add real objects to labels and signs so that all the children are using the same materials but each is decoding the objects and symbols in a way that is physically and developmentally accessible to them.

With this approach, across a variety of classrooms at Miami Lighthouse and in other HighScope programs, young children accept that there are many individual differences in people — this does not surprise or alarm them. How children play, and the choices they make during play, is joyfully original in all classrooms and amongst all children, because all children have unique strengths and interests. During the early years of a child's life, they have much more extensive brain circuitry than they will have even after age five. Their capacity for languages, social skills growth, and sensory input is at its highest potential; therefore, a rich, varied, and interactive environment at this stage is critical. A play-based

curriculum facilitated by highly engaged adults who support individual strengths and choices is an inherently effective early intervention approach for learners in inclusive classrooms. Fortunately, there is global understanding of this critical phase of life:

"We are convinced that early childhood is one of the most significant and influential phases of life — especially the first 1,000 days. It determines the basis for every child's future health, well-being, learning and earnings potential, and sets the groundwork for young children's emotional security, cultural and personal identity, and for developing competencies, resilience and adaptability."

Statement by leaders at 2018 G20 summit in Buenos Aires (quoted from ExchangeEveryday, Dec. 18, 2018)

ESTABLISHING A FULLY INCLUSIVE PROGRAM

How did this unique program begin? Miami Lighthouse for the Blind and Visually Impaired started in a small building in downtown Miami in 1931. In time, as their mission statement says, they would provide "visual rehabilitation, eye health services, and education that promotes independence to collaborate with and train professionals, and to conduct research in related fields." The school's building and programs have grown rapidly over the years under the leadership of Virginia Jacko, the organization's first blind CEO. During the summer of 2016, six teachers completed the four-week HighScope Preschool Curriculum Course (PCC). A



At Miami Lighthouse, visually impaired or blind children work alongside sighted children and learn that each person has different strengths and abilities.



In addition to using real objects on labels for items, the labels in this classroom also include the name of the object: in words and in Braille.

“Because of the program’s inclusive approach, the young children at Miami Lighthouse accept that there are many individual differences in people and this neither surprises nor alarms them.”

month later, Miami Lighthouse opened the Lighthouse Learning Center for Children, a prekindergarten program using the first fully inclusive model in the US, with a classroom comprising 50% visually impaired children and 50% with no visual impairment. In addition to the summer PCC, Isabel Chica, Director of Children’s Programs, and Liana De Angelis, the Associate Director, have also been trained by HighScope, and more teachers are receiving training this year. This depth of commitment has created an exceptional environment for growth and implementation. Over the last two years, enrollment at the Lighthouse has grown from 15 children to 57, with the addition of a second preschool room and two toddler rooms.

SEEING RESULTS WITH THE HIGHSOPE CURRICULUM

The new Lighthouse Learning Center for Children chose the HighScope Curriculum because of its active learning, hands-on approach, as well as the daily routine structure that supports learning in an intentional and individualized way. The implementation of HighScope has been validated by research to be a very effective learning model at Miami Lighthouse. A 2017–2018 study by the University of Miami demonstrated “high levels of fidelity to their early childhood inclusion model, as well as observed high-quality instructional practices above the national average.” Children demonstrated significant gains in observed positive peer and task engagement, teacher and parent reported interactive peer play, and empathy. The evaluation also demonstrated that teachers in the Lighthouse program rated children as “significantly improving across all three time points across the year” for all [HighScope] COR developmental domain skills.

“Miami Lighthouse’s prekindergarten program is the first fully inclusive model in the United States.”

But the most important validation of all is observing children like Justin and Simone, who are engaged daily in higher-level cognitive thinking and cooperative social interactions as active learners. Play and interactions with diverse people and materials strengthens and extends their given abilities, whatever those may be, and boosts their confidence in themselves as independent learners. As with all active learners, high-quality, early intervention has prepared the children at the Lighthouse school for the joys and the challenges that lie ahead.



Teachers in this program emphasize sensory materials, as illustrated here, where the children are creating a large art mural with finger paint and brushes.

Congratulations to Miami Lighthouse teachers and staff for their commitment to providing such an inspiring model of exceptional environments for young children. 🌍

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