Getting Outside to Learn

Learning Landscapes
A place where learning can take place, regardless of whether a teacher has provided the students with a learning activity.
Learning Affordances
Any object or action that people will find in the environment and use for learning. A teacher might plant learning affordances, might guide students to a particular set of learning affordances, or the learning affordances might emerge from the learning landscape. Ideally, the learning affordances emerge, but I have never felt that I shouldn't plant items to spark inquiries.

Introduction
Getting children outdoors, into natural or naturalized areas, is integral to their healthy growth and development, and their development of a sense of place. Children should learn to love their place so as to work towards making it the best place it can be.
Questions to guide children when they get to a place are things like who lives here (help them expand beyond just humans – there are plants, animals, etc. also living there) and what happens here. They can consider the relationships between the who and the what happens. This can help them think about what the place was like in the past, and how it might be changing to be different in the future.
Another set of questions could be oriented around who is most likely to feel comfortable in this place? Does comfort mean that this place should be home to everyone? What impact might home building have on this place? What do different homes look like? What other entities might be affected by the building of homes for other entities? IE: the woodpecker that built a home in a hole in a tree? What is the impact on the tree? The person who built a house on the prairie? What impact has that house had on the coyotes who had their den there?

In this document, I suggest that you scaffold yourself into moving outdoors for learning, and these steps are part of the scaffold. If you are already comfortable, either ignore this whole write-up, or skim it quickly.

Getting Started in the Outdoors, Transport method and location: Step 1
If getting kids outside is a new idea to you, remember that this is not an "all or nothing" game. If you are fearful, that is you, and that is OK. Humans survive better if they approach new experiences carefully.
There are supports for you, if you are brand new to getting outside. Many school divisions will have places where you can take your class, and they likely provide facilitators in those places. If the school division does not have its own places, it might provide a budget for you to take your students to a place with a facilitator. IE: Wanuskewin has numerous different learning experiences for classes. Meewasin Valley Authority has numerous places and learning experiences, with facilitators. When you take your students to these places, observe the facilitators, and what they are doing to engage the children. Learn from them.

Getting Started in the Outdoors, Transport method and location: Step 2

Start close to the school, and in areas that are more easily controlled. The best example is the school grounds, and they can provide a variety of "natural" aspects, and usually, there is a fence.

Have an activity that is bounded, just as the area is. Explain to the students, in the classroom (where it is easier to observe the level of their attention as you explain the goal of the activity to them). Tell them, also, the behaviour expected of them outdoors. You know because you are a teacher that behaviour is best explained in a positive way, and best explained succinctly. For example: "Be kind to one another, be kind to the plants and animals you find."

Establish a recall sound, and practice it in the classroom or the gym. This is something the children can choose; however, the first time, you might offer them a number of calls from nature, calls they can easily repeat. "Chick a dee dee dee", or a wolf howl? The next time, they children can choose a recall sound of their own, but stick with the second one throughout the rest of the year.

Define the area for the children. Ideally, you will have had a moment to go out to the school ground in advance, and put out some coloured cones, marking the learning landscape area. Or, you might allow them the full playground and so the fence marks the learning landscape for them. If you want to use cones, and don't have time before going out with the children, then designate a few children to help you put out the cones. For the first time out, I like to call on the most active children (the ones other teachers might have thought were "bad" – they weren't. They were just active, and they thrived on the responsibility given them) (sometimes, though, I was wrong. They just wanted to disrupt things for everyone. Ah well. It takes all kinds.) These children were responsible for putting out the cones to mark the boundaries. The next time we go out, I ask a different set of children to help.

The activity, as noted, should be relatively defined. The students need to know the goal, and you can show your excitement when they are creative and take initiative towards accomplishing that goal. Or, the activity might be well-defined. Project Wild and Project Wet offer a variety of different active outdoor simulations that you can draw on. Going through these books offers a great set of inspirations for you to be outdoors with the children in the school grounds several times a week! Since the activities are almost all simulations, with similar formats, the children will quickly develop a routine for how to engage in them. For children who come from trauma – and far too many children do, because of wars, COVID, poverty/stress, and environmental anxiety – routine can be comforting.

As well, the Wild About Learning website links to several different provincial organizations which have created outdoor and/or nature based lesson plans and unit plans based on the Saskatchewan curricula.

Get outside and go!

Getting Outside to Learn, Transport method and location: Step 3

Over the course of the week/month/year while you are getting your students outside into the playground, explore other areas near the school. The most common concerns that teachers express about getting their students outdoors to learn is the time it takes to get to the locations, and the cost of travel and admission to various sites. If you choose nearby locations, and ones that are free, you have overcome these two barriers. You have also overcome another barrier –

uncertainty about how to get children outside to learn, since you are learning how the children will behave outdoors in your first week/month/year while in the school yard.

Saskatoon has a huge advantage over many other cities. We have so many parks! Schools are often attached to a city park. Unfortunately, the schools in the urban core do not have large school grounds and are rarely attached to a city park. However, these schools are not far from the Meewasin Valley. Getting to the Meewasin Valley might involve a hike or bike; if you are teaching at schools farther from the river, you might need to take public transit. However, walking through the school neighbourhood can be an interesting lesson in itself.

So: walking through the neighbourhood: think of all the learning affordances there are on your walk. As with starting in your first week/month/year in the school grounds, for your first walk in the neighbourhood, you will likely stay closer to the school. You will want several adults (an EA, a teacher candidate, perhaps a parent) along, and the adults have to be those who will remind the children about sidewalk protocols. These are: walk two by two, and be aware of others on the sidewalk. Be sure to move aside if someone is coming towards you. Don't clump into a group so that other people are blocked and have to step into the street. Do clump into a group before crossing the street at an intersection.
The first time out, the children practice their sidewalk protocols. If there are events that need to be debriefed, you should have sufficient adults along that one of them will prompt the children to explain. Perhaps the children encountered someone they considered unsavoury. As best you can, be respectful of the "unsavoury" person, but also let the children know that they should support one another, and, if they are afraid, they should avoid this person and they should talk to one of the adults along. NB: it is rare to encounter one of these "unsavoury" persons. People collecting cans from recycling bins are just trying to earn a living. However, although rare, I have met people who are obnoxious, and upset because there is something happening that is outside of their experience.
The second time out on a walk through the neighbourhood, I would designate several children to lead individual small groups. Each child will be with an adult, but the adult will not say much. The child will lead the other children and the adult, and explain about the neighbourhood, telling stories about what happened here, who lives here, and/or what they hope the future might be like here. The children in each small group can take turns leading the tour. It is so interesting to learn about the neighbourhood from the point of view of the children! And, the stories they tell can lead directly to writing stories about their neighbourhood. It would be fun to have the children draw maps of their neighbourhood as well.
Remember: as with taking responsibility for putting out the cones, move the leaders around, so that, eventually, every child is able to lead a small group. Thus, the story telling walks can be repeated several times, almost the same protocols each time. As the teacher, I would walk with a different group each time, getting to know my students and their neighbourhood better each time. And the stories they write will also teach me much about their neighbourhood.

Getting Outside to Learn, Transport method and location: Step 4
Once you have scaffolded your students for walking, you could also scaffold them for biking. Not all children will have bikes, so you would have to get some background information on the

children (discretely). Bridge City Bike Co-Op might have bikes available for the children who don't have bikes. They also have bike repair clinics, where they teach children how to repair their own bikes. If you need more bikes, get in touch with them. The people who work at BCBC are volunteers; they are committed to supporting children in learning how to cycle safely, but they have full time jobs. However, there might be someone who is able to come to the school to run a clinic on bike repair for your students. Would that not be wonderful!
You, however, can get the regulations for cycling, and teach your children about these in the school grounds. Regardless of the regulations, be sure your students know that they should be safe rather than dead. Having a legal right to ride on the street is all well and good until an inattentive driver hits you. Have the students practice riding according to proper traffic rules on the school grounds, but also learning how to avoid collisions with traffic. This might involve making some cardboard vehicles to come out of blind corners at them!
Before taking the children out on the streets and trails, all the children must have a well-fitted helmet, a high visibility vest, and a bell on their bike. If they don't have helmets, contact your school division office. There should be bike high visibility vests and bike helmets available for loan.

When you take the children out on the roads, get off the roads and onto the bike trails as soon as you can. The trails are far safer, just because there are no cars. (It would be a great activity for the students to study the maps of where they are going, and plot out the safest and most scenic route to the destination.) However, the trails are not just "bike" but also pedestrian trails. The students become the hazards for the walkers! As for walking on the sidewalks, the children need to learn proper cycling manners. Always ring their bells a few meters in advance of a pedestrian, and then speak to them as they get close "Passing on your right" for example. They should leave room as they pass the pedestrian. Sometimes those pedestrians (and they should not do this!!) are listening to music or something through head phones and don't hear the cyclist. Vehicles are the most dangerous hazard for cyclists; cyclists are dangerous for pedestrians.
You will want at least three responsible adults along – one in the lead (who looks back often to see that the tail of the bike group is not too long), one in the middle, urging the children along, and one at the end, ensuring that everyone is doing well. If a child's bike breaks down, the person at the end will likely be the one fixing the bike. Thus, this person should have some bike repair expertise – not much, but willing to get their hands dirty to put a chain back on.

Important, and you know this: the hike is to learn the neighbourhood, and can easily get into mapping, writing, drawing activities. The biking would be to a more distant learning landscape. You will have scouted out the route and the location, and considered the risks and hazards on the way and at the location. You want to mitigate the hazards. Teaching the children about the hazards (a hazard is something that could cause irreparable damage to the child – we want to avoid these!) and how to avoid them should be done in the classroom, and should be reinforced at the location. For example, if taking the children to the riverbank, you might want to ensure the ground they stand on is not super slippery wet clay, right near a fast current (IE: you will take them to places that are not hazardous). You will explain this type of risk to the children and how you have checked out the location so that it is less likely they will slip into the water. That way, the hazard has been mitigated, but the children know that they need to be careful by the

water. The greatest danger is almost always going to be traffic – inattentive drivers, large vehicles … Having the high visibility vests and getting onto the trails and having three adults along to advise the children will mitigate this risk.
As well as having scouted the location for risks and hazards, you will also have some ideas of the learning affordances that are there. You will have some idea of the inquiries the children might engage in. The children will not be bored. They will engage in some kind and some level of learning. It is your job to either support them in what they find, helping them to inquire more, or you might guide them into a particular inquiry. The less guidance you need to provide, the better.

Getting Outside to Learn, Transport method and location: Step 5
Many outdoor programs in different parts of the world have a place the children often go, a particular spot that the students develop a sense of place with, have particular activities they engage in there, know how to get to and feel a sense of responsibility for. You could choose a spot that is for your class. You might change the spot each year, for each new group, or you might feel comfortable in that one spot and so keep taking each new group there.
Remember, too, that getting the children outside is about you getting outside too. Assess your emotional level each day, each week, each year. Some years, you can take on big challenges, and other years, you just need to relax. Get outside every day, but how far away and for how long will vary with what you can handle.

I did not cover using public transit, but that is another inexpensive method for getting around. Children need to learn how to use public transit as well, and it is not even a curricular outcome!