

Outdoor Play and Learning 1.0

Research Study Summary Report

May 2026

Introduction

Why Outdoor Play and Learning in Schools Matters

Growing interest in outdoor play and learning (OPAL) within schools stems from recognition of its potential as a pedagogical approach that can support responsive and relational learning for all children.



Children today spend significantly less time outdoors and in natural environments than previous generations. This shift has contributed to steep declines in children's physical health and mental wellbeing. By the time children enter kindergarten, these challenges often present as disengagement, difficulty with self-regulation, and behavioural concerns.

OPAL offers a responsive, play-based approach to teaching and learning that supports physical activity, social-emotional development, and experiential learning alongside healthier developmental trajectories for all children.

What is Outdoor Play and Learning

Outdoor play and learning (OPAL) is a pedagogical approach that describes an experiential and hands-on approach to learning that takes place on schoolyards and in nearby nature. Research supports OPAL's effectiveness in creating the conditions for engagement with learning, social and emotional growth, as well as dispositions for learning, like executive function, and curiosity.

To learn more about outdoor play and learning

- Zeni, M., & Brussoni, M. (2026). *Embracing Risky Play at School: Getting Kids Outdoors to Explore, Learn, and Grow*. Teachers College Press. [\[Link\]](#)
- Outdoor Play and Learning – teacher tool: Designed for elementary school teachers with valuable insights and practical resources that can help move learning outdoors [\[Link\]](#)

About the OPAL 1.0 Study

Outdoor Play and Learning (OPAL) 1.0 was a one-year research study (April 2025 – March 2026) funded by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research with a focus on how OPAL is currently happening in elementary schools, and how it can become a more consistent and meaningful part of the school day. The study was led by the Outside Play Lab at the University of British Columbia, under the direction of Dr. Mariana Brussoni in partnership with Richmond School District staff: Brooke Douglas, Director of Instruction – Curriculum and Assessment, and Dr. Megan Zeni, Early Learning & Outdoor Learning Teacher Consultant.



The study also involved collaborators from Simon Fraser University, Vancouver Coastal Health, Vancouver Island University, Farm to School BC, the BC Parks Foundation, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Together, we worked to better understand the experiences, needs and priorities of teachers, administrators, students, and families related to OPAL in SD 38. The goal

was to identify how to support OPAL in SD 38 schools, and to co-develop practical approaches that reflect their needs. This work will inform a future, larger-scale intervention to expand OPAL across the Richmond School District.

To gather this information, we conducted focus groups with students and parents, and surveyed teachers and administrators. This report summarizes key findings.

What Students Shared

A total of 35 students in Grades K-2 spoke about their experiences with OPAL in two class-wide group discussions. Students were asked how they felt outside, how often they engaged in OPAL, and suggestions they had for improving OPAL at school. One of the sessions also included a drawing activity, in which students illustrated what they enjoyed most about learning outdoors. From these conversations, three key themes emerged:

1. Students enjoy learning outdoors

Students described OPAL as an enjoyable part of school, associating it with positive emotions and experiences, including:

- Feelings such as “fun,” “exciting,” and “happy”
- A space where they felt calmer
- A place where they had fewer conflicts

Many students expressed a clear preference for being outside. They described outdoor environments – especially natural spaces like forests – as more engaging than traditional playgrounds or classrooms because they offered varied terrain, textures, and sensory experiences. Specifically, students shared that they enjoyed:

- Exploring nature (e.g., finding rocks, insects, plants)
- Playing in natural elements (e.g., puddles, rain, sand)
- Climbing trees and observing their surroundings

Students’ preference for engaging with natural elements in their schoolyard was reflected in both their verbal descriptions and drawings of the spaces they enjoyed most while learning outdoors.

Several students said they would like more time outdoors and more natural features at school, such as climbable trees or open sand areas.



2. OPAL supports curiosity and independence

Students shared that OPAL gave them the freedom to explore the outdoor space independently. They described it as a time to explore, discover, and follow their interests. Students talked about certain days (i.e., “Wilderness Wednesdays” and “Forest Fridays”) when engaged in OPAL.

“For Forest Friday we like go to the forest and explore. And we found a trail in the forest that leads into a loop and there's an exit that comes out of the trail.” (FG002-12)

Students shared that OPAL often began with something in the schoolyard sparking their curiosity – such as chestnuts or earthworms – which they then learned more about through observations and questions.

“You get to play first and then you're like talking about what we have found” (FG002-11)

This suggests that outdoor environments not only provide rich, engaging resources for students but also create opportunities for emergent learning. Emergent learning was evident where play and teacher guidance intersected to deepen understanding. For example, one student described how they “get to play first and then talk about what they have found during play”, highlighting how teachers facilitate students’ interests

and guide them to construct knowledge through these hands-on experiences.

3. Students learn about and care for nature

Students shared that learning outdoors helped them understand the natural world. They described learning about:

- Plants and how they grow
- Seasonal changes
- The role of trees and plants in providing oxygen
- Animals that live in the area

This understanding also made them more aware of human impact on the environment and why it is important to protect nature. Students connected what they learned about plants, trees, wildlife, and seasonal cycles to real-world issues, such as deforestation, littering, and conserving habitats.

Some students also described learning to notice patterns and observe details in nature through a practice of “looking closely.” They explained how these observations revealed recurring patterns in their schoolyard.

“Like the trees... some other countries... the people who make... more paper because they just want paper. And that kind of time they don't know that trees give up air and they just keep cutting trees until there's no more trees and then there's no more oxygens.” (FG002-10)

What Parents Shared

Thirteen parents of students in Kindergarten through Grade 7 joined one of four focus groups. These discussions offered valuable insight into how parents think about school, OPAL, and their experiences within the RSD.

1. What is the purpose of school?

Parents shared broad and thoughtful perspectives on the role of school. While they recognized the importance of preparing students for future education, they emphasized that school – especially in the early years – was about much more than academics. They described elementary school as a critical time for developing the whole child, highlighting the importance of:

- Building social skills and learning to work with others
- Developing independence and a sense of responsibility
- Being exposed to diverse perspectives, people, and ideas
- Supporting emotional growth and overall wellbeing

For many parents, these foundational experiences were just as important as academic learning and set the stage for future success.

“It’s like socialized skills for kids to develop. Study, maybe they could do it at home, but to interact with somebody, with friends, like sharing social distance, learning how to talk to the other friend, maybe polite and kind (...) And also like for us immigrant parents, we sometimes we’re not aware what kind of different culture, like how the kids needs to grow up. And my kids will learn those things in the school.” (FG002-03)

2. What is OPAL?

Parents were generally positive about OPAL, though many were not entirely clear on what it looked like in practice. Some initially associated it with recess, free play, field trips, or physical activities like sports and walks. Even with these varied interpretations, parents identified a wide range of benefits:

- Physical health: more movement, fresh air, better sleep
- Wellbeing: improved mood, reduced stress, more freedom
- Experiential learning: hands-on experiences that support different learning styles
- Confidence: opportunities for children to succeed in different ways
- Equity: access to nature for children who may not have it at home

In particular, parents valued how outdoor environments made learning more tangible. They believed that concepts explored outside often felt more real and meaningful, as students could observe and experience them directly. Some parents noted that this experiential learning extended beyond school, with their children bringing home their curiosity about nature and sharing what they've discovered.

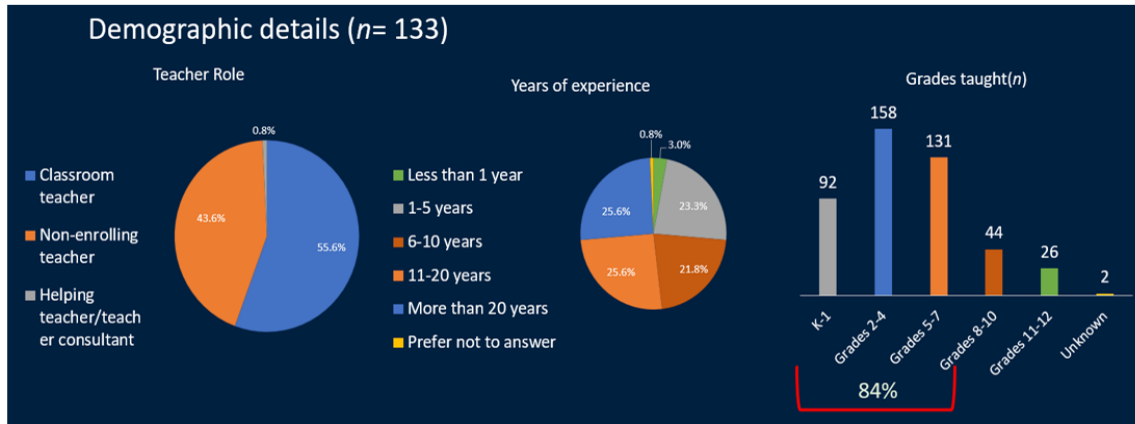
"So like, with the idea of observing the rocks, and they might not even realize that they're doing geology or something like that until after they've written it, and then the teacher can talk about it in class. And suddenly, they're like, Oh, yeah, I saw something like that out in the real world. So it makes things more realistic to them." (FG002-04)

3. How is OPAL currently experienced in our schools?

Parents expressed strong support for OPAL but noted that access was inconsistent, depending on the classroom and teacher. Some students engaged in OPAL regularly, while others had limited exposure. Parents recognized that teacher comfort and confidence played a significant role, emphasizing the powerful influence of teachers. When teachers were enthusiastic about OPAL, students tended to be more engaged and excited to participate. At the same time, parents also acknowledged the practical challenges teachers may face, such as safety concerns, limited support, and time constraints.

"It's up to individual teachers, I believe. Some of them are more nature bonded. Some of them are like tree huggers. What can we do? It's a luck of draw, right? Like, it really depends which teacher your child ends up being with that year" (FG001-01)

Teacher Survey Findings



RSD teachers were surveyed about their perspectives on OPAL. Of the 137 teachers across Kindergarten to Grade 12 that participated, nearly 60% reported taking students outside at least once a month, and most felt comfortable doing so. In addition, 80% of teachers saw opportunities to connect OPAL with at least one or two subject areas. Teachers also see strong benefits for students, including:

- Wellbeing (95%)
- Holistic development (94%)
- Behaviour and self-regulation (87%)

In addition, 64% of teachers also observed improvements in literacy and numeracy, suggesting that OPAL could support academic outcomes when thoughtfully integrated.

Most teachers reported personal benefits when taking their classes outdoors, including:

- Enhancing teaching practice (84%)
- Supporting teacher wellness (78%)

Alongside these positive trends, teachers highlighted conditions that shape their capacity to teach outdoors. While 64% feel that their school's culture was generally supportive, fewer than half believed they had sufficient outdoor space, resources, or support for teaching outdoors. This suggests that, although interest and momentum exist, access and readiness vary across schools.

In open-ended responses, several key themes emerged:

- **Confidence is a key factor:** Many teachers identified uncertainty – what to teach outdoors, how to manage student behaviour, and how to ensure everyone's safety – as a primary barrier.
- **Practical constraints remain:** Time, funding, weather, and student readiness (e.g., appropriate clothing) were also noted as ongoing challenges.

- **Infrastructure matters:** Teachers emphasized the need for accessible outdoor spaces, including seating, covered areas, and natural environments that can support OPAL in different weather conditions.
- **Support systems are important:** Requests for staffing support and clearer guidelines or policies were common, alongside interest in professional learning opportunities.

Nevertheless, there was clear interest in expanding OPAL practice. Many teachers expressed curiosity and a willingness to learn more, and some shared positive experiences where OPAL was already working well, particularly when supported by resources and leadership.

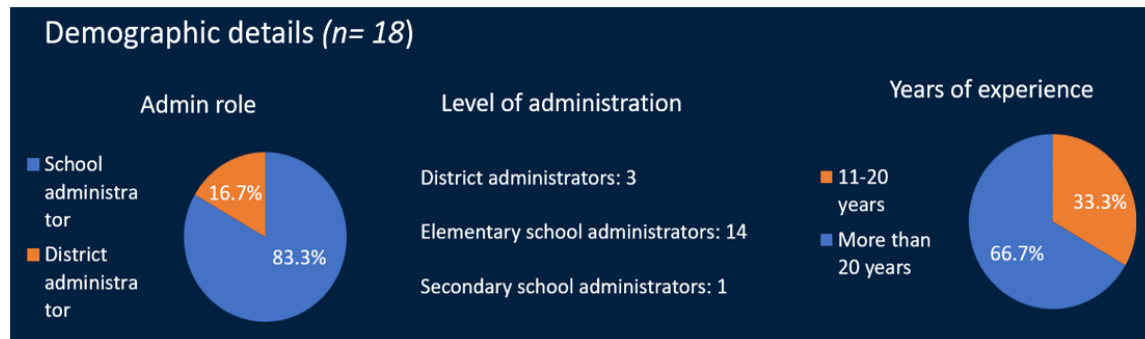
What factors matter most for OPAL?

In a survey, we looked at how teachers make decisions about OPAL by presenting them with different scenarios. Each scenario varied across five key factors: Support from school administration, Availability of outdoor space, Weather conditions, Access to appropriate gear, and Opportunities for professional development.

While all of these factors influenced teachers' choices, support from school administration and availability of outdoor space was especially important. In other words, when teachers felt supported by their school leadership and had enough outdoor space, they were much more willing to take their students outdoors for learning.

Attribute	Relative Importance
Support from school administration	30.5%
Availability of outdoor space	28.0%
Weather condition	18.7%
Access to appropriate gear	12.6%
Opportunities for professional development	10.2%

What Administrators Shared



Eighteen school and district administrators provided a broad, system-level perspective on OPAL – highlighting both strong support and important areas for future development. Overall, administrators saw OPAL as a valuable and impactful approach. There was strong agreement on its benefits for students, including:

- Wellbeing (95%)
- Holistic development (94%)
- Behaviour and self-regulation (89%)
- Literacy and numeracy (88%)

At the same time, administrators indicated that the system is still evolving. While over 60% reported having adequate outdoor space, resources, and support, open-ended responses suggest that these conditions were not consistently experienced across all schools. Similarly, 66% perceived school culture as supportive of OPAL, suggesting room to further strengthen alignment and shared practice.

A key theme is that OPAL was present, but not yet systemically embedded. In many schools, it depends on individual teachers rather than being a consistent, school-wide approach. As a result, student experiences can vary significantly.

Administrators identified several factors that could influence progress. The most prominent was building staff capacity – supporting teachers in understanding what to teach outdoors, how to connect learning to the curriculum, and how to manage students in less structured environments. Access to funding, resources, and professional learning opportunities were also highlighted as important supports. Practical considerations, such as ensuring students have appropriate clothing, remain ongoing challenges.

Looking Ahead: Shared Priorities Across RSD Community

Across students, parents, teachers, and administrators, there is a strong and consistent message: OPAL is valued and growing, but requires clearer structures, stronger support, and greater consistency to reach its full potential. While each group brings a unique perspective, their suggestions align around several key priorities:

1. Clarity and communication

Families, teachers, and administrators all highlighted the need for clearer, more consistent communication about OPAL:

- What OPAL is and why it matters
- What OPAL looks like in everyday practice
- Clear expectations, guidelines, and long-term direction at both school and district levels

2. Building confidence and capacity

A central theme across teachers and administrators was the importance of supporting teachers taking learning outdoors, with the school principal serving as a key conduit for making this possible, through:

- Guidance on managing safety, student regulation needs, and diverse learning environments
- Support connecting OPAL to curriculum
- Professional learning to build confidence and instructional strategies

3. Consistency and coherence

All groups emphasized the need for more consistent opportunities for OPAL for students:

- More equitable access across classrooms and schools
- A clear progression of OPAL across grade levels
- Stronger integration with academic learning

4. Resources, infrastructure, and practical support

There was also a shared recognition that successful implementation of OPAL depends on practical conditions:

- Prioritization of outdoor learning with specific guidelines (e.g., time spent outdoors)
- Improved access to outdoor spaces, materials, and funding
- Consideration of student readiness, including appropriate clothing
- Clear information for families about when and how OPAL takes place

Taken together, these perspectives point to a system ready to move forward. There is strong alignment in values, growing momentum in practice, and clear direction for next steps. By strengthening communication, building teacher and school administrator capacity, improving consistency, and investing in supportive conditions, there is a meaningful opportunity to move from isolated efforts toward a more coordinated, sustainable approach – ensuring that all students benefit from high-quality OPAL experiences.

Future Work

Building on these findings, the OPAL 1.0 team has applied for additional funding through the Canadian Institutes of Health Research to expand this work into a larger implementation phase across RSD elementary schools. If funded, the next phase could begin as early as Fall 2026 and would focus on:

- Implementing OPAL pedagogy across participating schools in RSD
- Evaluating its impact on student engagement, well-being, and learning
- Understanding how to effectively scale OPAL across and beyond the RSD

For more information or to get involved, please visit <https://www.outsideplay.org/> or contact outsideplay@bcchr.ca.