



Michele Di Salvo

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9531-0591>

e-mail: mik.disalvo@gmail.com

Crossmedia Labs, ENIA (ente nazionale per l'intelligenza artificiale), Italy

The Aesthetic Dimension of Outdoor Education: Enriched Learning Environments as Integrated Systems for Emotional Regulation and Conflict Reduction

Estetyczny wymiar edukacji outdoorowej.
Wzbogacone środowisko edukacyjne
jako zintegrowany system regulacji emocji
i redukcji konfliktów

KEYWORDS

outdoor education,
enriched learning
environments,
neuroaesthetics,
conflict reduction,
embodied cognition

ABSTRACT

Outdoor Education (OE) faces persistent dilemmas concerning accessibility, safety, teacher preparedness, and curricular integration. The problem undertaken in this paper is a paradigm shift: conceptualizing OE as a deliberately designed Enriched Learning Environment (ELE) – an integrated system where space, pedagogy, and neuroscience converge. Critical review of literature allows to argue that the often-overlooked aesthetic dimension – the intentional incorporation of beauty, sensory richness, and artistic expression – is a critical active ingredient in this system. Drawing on environmental psychology, neuroaesthetics, and embodied cognition, this conceptual theoretical synthesis elucidates how aesthetically curated outdoor environments may modulate emotional states, reduce physiological stress, and help mitigate conflict and anger among learners. The theory is illustrated through international examples, including the Reggio Emilia Approach, Bosco Verticale, NaturBornholm. The paper concludes that a conscious, evidence-based application of aesthetic principles in OE is not a luxury but a neuroeducational necessity to foster psychological well-being, prosocial behavior, and meaningful learning, effectively transforming educational spaces into agents of change.

SŁOWA KLUCZE ABSTRAKT

edukacja
outdoorowa,
wzbogacone
środowiska
edukacyjne,
neuroestetyka,
redukcja konfliktów,
poznanie
ucieleśnione

Edukacja outdoorowa (OE) stoi w obliczu ciągłych dylematów dotyczących dostępności, bezpieczeństwa, przygotowania nauczycieli i integracji z programem nauczania. Problem podjęty w niniejszym artykule dotyczy zmiany paradygmatu: konceptualizacji OE jako celowo zaprojektowanego wzbogaconego środowiska nauczania (Enriched Learning Environment – ELE) – zintegrowanego systemu, w którym przestrzeń, pedagogika i neuronauka się spotykają. Na podstawie krytycznego przeglądu literatury argumentujemy, że często pomijany wymiar estetyczny – celowe włączenie piękna, bogactwa sensorycznego i ekspresji artystycznej – jest kluczowym, aktywnym składnikiem tego systemu. Opierając się na psychologii środowiskowej, neuroestetyce i poznaniu ucieleśnionym, ta konceptualna synteza teoretyczna wyjaśnia, jak estetycznie zaaranżowane środowiska zewnętrzne mogą modulować stany emocjonalne, redukować stres fizjologiczny i pomagać łagodzić konflikty i gniew wśród uczniów. Teorię zilustrowano przykładami międzynarodowymi, takimi jak Reggio Emilia Approach, Bosco Verticale i NaturBornholm. W artykule autor doszedł do wniosku, że świadome, oparte na dowodach stosowanie zasad estetyki w OE nie jest luksusem, lecz neuroedukacyjną koniecznością, mającą na celu wspieranie dobrego samopoczucia psychicznego, zachowań prospołecznych i wartościowej nauki, skutecznie przekształcając przestrzenie edukacyjne w czynniki zmiany.

Introduction: Navigating the Complex Landscape of Outdoor Education's Problems and Dilemmas

Outdoor Education (OE) has undergone a significant evolution, transitioning from its origins in recreational scouting and environmental conservation to a sophisticated, multidisciplinary pedagogical field with empirically demonstrated benefits. Extensive meta-analyses and systematic reviews, such as those by Rickinson et al. (2004) and Fägerstam (2012), have consistently highlighted its positive impact on cognitive development (e.g., improved critical thinking and problem-solving), physical health, social competencies (e.g., cooperation and communication), and emotional well-being (e.g., self-esteem and resilience). In an era increasingly characterized by digital saturation, sedentary lifestyles, and what Richard Louv (2008) poignantly termed “nature-deficit disorder,” OE offers a vital, experiential antidote. Its core promise is to re-engage students with the natural world, fostering not only academic knowledge but also a profound sense of ecological stewardship and place-based identity (Ernst & Stanek, 2006; Sobel, 2004).

Despite this compelling potential, the widespread and meaningful integration of OE into the fabric of mainstream formal education remains elusive, hindered by a series of complex and interrelated problems and dilemmas (Wattchow & Brown, 2011; Quay, 2013). These challenges are not merely logistical but are deeply philosophical and structural:

The Accessibility and Equity Dilemma	Socio-economic disparities profoundly determine which students have consistent access to high-quality, transformative outdoor experiences (Tyson, 2002). Is OE an equitable pedagogy, or does it risk becoming another privilege for the already advantaged, whose families can afford summer camps, wilderness trips, and access to pristine natural areas? This dilemma calls into question the very democratic potential of OE.
The Safety and Risk Paradox	While the managed, pedagogical use of risk is a cornerstone of authentic OE experiences – essential for developing resilience, self-reliance, and sound judgment (Priest & Gass, 2005) – a pervasive culture of liability and a “safety-first” dogma can sterilize these experiences. This over-sanitization strips them of the very uncertainty and challenge that are catalysts for personal growth and authentic learning (Sandseter, 2009).
The Curriculum Integration Challenge	OE is often perceived by administrators, policymakers, and even some educators as an extracurricular “add-on,” a recreational reward disconnected from the “serious” work of academic achievement measured by standardized tests (Dillon et al., 2006). This perception creates a constant pressure to justify outdoor time against the demands of a crowded, performance-driven curriculum, often relegating OE to the margins.
The Pedagogical Preparedness Gap:	Effective facilitation of OE requires a unique and complex skill set that blends deep ecological knowledge, group facilitation and management skills, risk assessment and management expertise, and an understanding of experiential learning cycles (Higgins & Nicol, 2002; Lugg, 2007). Many classroom teachers, trained primarily for indoor, didactic instruction, feel ill-equipped and lack the confidence to lead meaningful learning experiences beyond the school walls.

This paper contends that these dilemmas persist, in part, because OE is frequently implemented in a fragmented and reductionist manner. The solution, we argue, lies in a holistic, systems-oriented understanding of the learning environment itself. We propose the concept of the Enriched Learning Environment (ELE) as a comprehensive framework to transcend these challenges.

Central Thesis: The Enriched Learning Environment (ELE) as an Integrated System

We introduce and define the Enriched Learning Environment (ELE) as a synergistic system composed of three inextricably linked and mutually reinforcing components:

- Space (The Physical Agent): The physical environment – whether a forest, a urban park, a school garden, or a architecturally designed structure – is not a passive container for learning activities. It is an active, potent “teacher” that directly influences cognitive, emotional, and social processes through its design, sensory properties, and aesthetic quality (Ellison et al., 2022; Heft, 2013).
- Methodology (The Pedagogical Process): The pedagogical approaches deployed within an ELE are specifically chosen for their affinity with outdoor contexts. These include place-based education (Smith, 2002), experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), inquiry-based learning, and project-based learning. The methodology is the dynamic process that mediates the interaction between the learner and the space.
- Neuroscience (The Biological Foundation): This component encompasses the empirical understanding of how the brain, body, and environment interact to produce learning, memory, emotional states, and social behaviors (Immordino-Yang, 2016; Bratman et al., 2015). It provides the scientific rationale for why certain spatial and pedagogical choices are effective.

This paper will focus a critical lens on the role of aesthetics – the principles of beauty, harmony, sensory engagement, narrative, and artistic expression – as a potent, evidence-based mediator operating within this triad. By examining how aesthetically curated environments can directly influence neural circuits and physiological processes linked to stress, aggression, and social connection, we provide a robust, scientific rationale for elevating aesthetic considerations from the peripheral realm of “decoration” to the core of OE theory and practice. This approach re-frames beauty not as an amenity, but as a fundamental functional component of a healthy and effective learning ecosystem.

Methodological Approach: A Conceptual Theoretical Synthesis

This paper employs a qualitative, theory-building methodology best described as a conceptual theoretical synthesis with illustrative case examples (Jaakkola, 2020; Gilson & Goldberg, 2015). Unlike empirical research, this paper does not present primary data collection or systematic qualitative analysis. Instead, it develops the Enriched

Learning Environment (ELE) framework through theoretical integration and uses real-world examples for illustrative purposes.

A narrative literature review was conducted across Web of Science, Scopus, ERIC, PsycINFO, and PubMed (1980–2023). Search terms included “outdoor education,” “environmental aesthetics,” “neuroaesthetics,” “biophilic design,” “attention restoration,” “stress reduction,” “conflict reduction,” “embodied cognition,” and “third teacher.” Inclusion criteria were peer-reviewed sources directly relevant to environment, emotion, and learning. A total of 127 sources were included.

Four illustrative examples were selected purposively based on demonstrable success, ability to illustrate different facets of the ELE concept, and contextual diversity: Reggio Emilia Approach (Italy), Bosco Verticale (Italy), NaturBornholm (Denmark), and social art projects (Theaster Gates, 2015; Favela Painting). These examples are presented descriptively, not as systematically analyzed cases. Where claims about outcomes are mentioned, these are based on published reports and community accounts.

The findings were synthesized through an iterative process of abduction (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012), allowing the ELE framework to emerge as a coherent explanation for observed patterns across diverse contexts.

Theoretical Framework: The Tripartite Nexus of Environment, Emotion, and Learning

Environmental Psychology: Restorative Environments and Biophilic Design

Attention Restoration Theory (ART) (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989) posits that natural environments restore directed attention by offering four components:

• Being Away	A psychological distance from the usual demands and routines that fatigue directed attention.
• Fascination	The presence of “softly fascinating” stimuli (e.g., moving clouds, rustling leaves) that hold attention effortlessly, allowing the directed attention mechanism to rest.
• Extent	An environment that is rich, coherent, and sufficiently vast to feel like a whole other world, engaging the mind in exploration.
• Compatibility	A good fit between an individual’s inclinations or purposes and what the environment supports and offers.

Complementing ART, Ulrich's Psychoevolutionary Theory (Ulrich, 1983, 1991) suggests humans have an innate predisposition to respond positively to unthreatening natural settings, which may elicit positive emotions and reduce physiological stress. These theories are operationalized in Biophilic Design (Kellert & Wilson, 1993; Kellert et al., 2008). However, critiques of biophilic determinism note that individual differences – such as prior nature experience and cultural background – moderate responses to biophilic design (Joye & van den Berg, 2011; Berto, 2014).

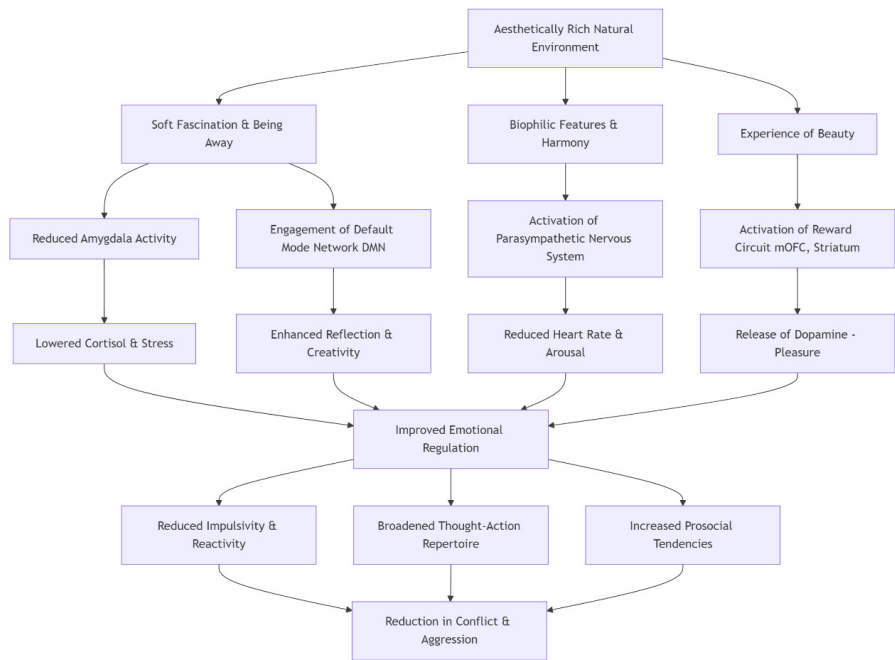
The Neuroscience of Emotion, Stress, and Aesthetic Experience

Neuroscientific research provides the biological substrate that may validate environmental psychology claims, though generalization to real-world educational contexts requires further investigation (Norwood et al., 2019). A study by Bratman et al. (2015) showed that walking in nature decreased activity in the subgenual prefrontal cortex, an area associated with rumination. Nature exposure has also been correlated with reduced amygdala activity (Kim et al., 2010) and lower salivary cortisol (Park et al., 2010). Since stress and impaired executive function drive irritability and reactive aggression (Blair, 2010), this calming of the neural threat system may represent a mechanism for conflict reduction.

The Default Mode Network (DMN) (Raichle, 2015) is active during wakeful rest and mind-wandering, and is crucial for memory consolidation and creative insight (Immordino-Yang et al., 2012). Natural, aesthetically rich environments that promote “soft fascination” may be ideal for DMN engagement.

Neuroaesthetics research has shown that perceiving beauty activates the brain's “reward circuit,” including the medial orbitofrontal cortex and ventral striatum, which may lead to dopamine release (Ishizu & Zeki, 2011; Chatterjee & Vartanian, 2014). However, most neuroaesthetics research uses abstract visual stimuli in laboratory settings, and aesthetic responses vary across individuals and cultures (Vessel et al., 2012; Pearce et al., 2016).

Figure 1. *The Neuroscience of Emotion, Stress, and Aesthetic Experience*



Source: Author’s elaboration

Embodied and Enactive Cognition

Embodied and enactive cognition theories posit that cognitive processes are rooted in the body’s sensorimotor interactions with the environment (Varela et al., 1991; Wilson, 2002). An ELE, rich in textures, sounds, and kinesthetic opportunities, provides “affordances” (Gibson, 1979) – possibilities for action. When a child navigates a stream, cognitive understanding is inseparable from physical action. This full-body engagement channels restless energy into purposeful exploration, reducing boredom and frustration that often lead to conflict in traditional classrooms.

The “Third Teacher”: The Pedagogical Power of Space

The concept of the “Third Teacher” (Il Terzo Maestro), central to the Reggio Emilia philosophy, provides a powerful metaphor for understanding the role of space in an ELE (Edwards et al., 2012; Strong-Wilson & Ellis, 2007). The first teacher is the adult

educator, the second is the peer group, and the third is the physical environment. This is not a passive metaphor; it implies that the space is an active, communicative, and responsive participant in the educational process.

A space that functions as a “Third Teacher” possesses specific characteristics:

- **Intentionality:** It is carefully designed and prepared to provoke inquiry, discovery, and relationship-building. Nothing is left to chance; the arrangement of materials, the quality of light, and the presence of natural and artistic elements are all pedagogically considered.
- **Affordances for Interaction:** It is filled with open-ended, malleable materials (loose parts like sticks, stones, fabrics) that invite manipulation, combination, and transformation. These materials “ask questions” of the children, prompting them to hypothesize, experiment, and create.
- **Aesthetic Provocation:** It is beautiful, cared for, and harmonious. This beauty is not static but dynamic, changing with the light, seasons, and children’s interventions. It communicates respect for the learner and the learning process, fostering a sense of belonging and responsibility.
- **Flexibility and Fluidity:** It is not a fixed, rigid setup but can be adapted and reshaped by the children to suit their projects and interests, promoting agency and ownership.

When the environment becomes the “Third Teacher,” the educator’s role shifts from a dispenser of knowledge to a researcher and facilitator who observes, interprets, and co-constructs learning with the children and within the environment. This shifts the entire dynamic of the classroom (indoor or outdoor) from a top-down transmission model to an emergent, ecological system of learning.

Aesthetics as an Active Ingredient: Proposed Mechanisms of Emotional Modulation and Conflict Reduction

We identify four primary, interrelated proposed mechanisms, supported by the previously discussed theoretical and neuroscientific frameworks. These are presented as theoretical propositions requiring empirical testing.

Sensory Regulation and Neurological Coherence. Chaotic, overstimulating, monotonous, or sensorily impoverished environments can trigger stress responses and cognitive overload. An aesthetically considered environment, in contrast, provides what Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) term “coherence” – a sense of order and legibility that allows the brain to process the scene efficiently. The harmonious arrangement of elements – the dappled light pattern filtering through a canopy, the curated color palette of a flowering meadow, the fractal patterns of a fern – provides a level of sensory

input that is engaging and rich without being overwhelming or chaotic. This regulated sensory input helps to calm the autonomic nervous system, facilitating a shift from a sympathetic (fight-or-flight) state to a parasympathetic (rest-and-digest) state (Porges, 2011). A student whose nervous system is in a state of physiological calm is neurologically primed for learning and is significantly less likely to react with aggression or impulsivity to minor frustrations or social provocations.

Fostering a Positive Affective State through Reward Circuit Activation. As neuroaesthetics has demonstrated, the perception of beauty is intrinsically rewarding. The experience of aesthetic pleasure – from the sight of a intricate spider web glistening with dew, the sound of wind whispering through pines, or the tactile satisfaction of smooth, cool river stones – directly induces positive emotions like joy, wonder, curiosity, and contentment (Fredrickson, 2001). According to Fredrickson’s Broaden-and-Build theory, these positive emotions do more than just feel good; they broaden an individual’s momentary thought-action repertoire, making them more open, flexible, creative, and receptive to new ideas. This broadened, exploratory mindset is the direct antithesis of the narrowed, rigid, and defensive thinking that characterizes anger, fear, and frustration. A group of students collectively experiencing a moment of awe at a sunset or shared satisfaction in a collaboratively built rock cairn is a group that is neurologically and psychologically aligned for cooperation, not conflict.

Promoting Prosocial Behavior and a Shared Sense of Place. Beautiful and well-cared-for environments can function as powerful “prosocial cues.” Empirical research has shown that exposure to natural beauty can increase tendencies toward generosity, trust, and helpfulness (Zhang et al., 2014; Weinstein et al., 2009). When an environment is intentionally made beautiful, either through natural processes or through collective artistic effort, it signals a shared value and can foster a powerful sense of collective ownership, responsibility, and identity. Collaborative art-in-nature projects – such as the transient creation of land art using found materials, the collective weaving of a willow structure, or the communal tending of a garden – require negotiation, shared vision, mutual respect, and coordinated action. This shared aesthetic labor builds social cohesion, strengthens community bonds, and provides a constructive outlet for social energy, thereby directly reducing the potential for inter-personal friction and conflict.

Providing a Non-Threatening Ground for Emotional Expression. For many students, particularly those with a history of trauma, difficulty with verbal expression, or regulatory disorders, traditional classroom settings and direct conversations about feelings can feel intimidating or confrontational. An aesthetically rich outdoor environment, acting as the “Third Teacher,” can serve as a neutral, non-judgmental ground for emotional expression. Through techniques derived from art therapy and expressive therapies (Malchiodi, 2005), a child grappling with unexpressed anger might be

guided to represent that feeling by arranging dark, jagged rocks in a powerful configuration. They might then be invited to represent a desired state of calm by creating a mandala from smooth, white stones and flower petals. This process of externalizing and symbolizing internal emotional states through aesthetic manipulation of the environment is a powerful therapeutic and self-regulatory tool. It allows for a safe distance from overwhelming emotions, facilitates cognitive reframing, and provides a tangible sense of control.

From Theory to Illustrative Educational Examples

Illustrative Example 1: The Reggio Emilia Approach and the Outdoor Atelier

The Reggio Emilia approach provides a quintessential illustration of an ELE where aesthetics are foundational. The outdoor atelier is a deliberately curated space featuring gardens, mirrors, and loose parts. Learning is emergent, project-based, and deeply sensory (Edwards et al., 2012). This practice may cultivate mindfulness and sustained attention. The environment's calmness and beauty may reduce boredom and frustration, reframing disagreements as collaborative problems.

Figure 2. *Reggio Emilia Outdoor Atelier*



Source: Reggio Emilia Outdoor Atelier

Illustrative Example 2: Bosco Verticale (Vertical Forest), Milan

The Bosco Verticale features two residential towers hosting over 900 trees and 20,000 plants on their facades (Boeri, 2015). An OE curriculum can use it as a living laboratory for biodiversity and sustainability studies. Even viewing the Bosco Verticale may provide “soft fascination” and micro-restorative breaks (Kaplan, 2001). By integrating such landmarks into OE, we may address the accessibility dilemma, making ELE benefits available to urban populations.

Figure 3. *Bosco Verticale – Milano*



Source: Boeri-Studio_ph.Dimitar-Harizanov

Illustrative Example 3: NaturBornholm, Denmark

NaturBornholm is a museum partially sunk into a hillside with a grass roof merging into the landscape (Frandsen, 2005). Exhibits are immersive, multi-sensory environments. The pedagogy is experiential and inquiry-based. The aesthetic coherence minimizes extraneous cognitive load, allowing deep engagement. The environment is so captivating that it may naturally minimize behavioral issues.

Figure 4. *NaturBornholm* (ph. Fanella Ovengaard)



Source: NaturBornholm

Discussion: Synthesizing the Evidence and Addressing the Dilemmas

The synthesis of theoretical frameworks and illustrative examples provides support for the ELE model and the proposed role of aesthetics. This framework offers constructive pathways to address the initial dilemmas of OE.

Addressing the Accessibility Dilemma: Examples of Bosco Verticale and community art projects demonstrate that ELEs are not contingent on access to wilderness. They can be created in urban schools and neglected lots through biophilic design and artistic interventions, shifting focus from going to nature to bringing nature and beauty to all learning spaces, promoting greater equity.

Reframing the Safety and Risk Paradox: An aesthetically considered environment is often a well-maintained, legible space. This creates a context where managed risks can be introduced within a framework of respect and intentionality, shifting focus from hazard elimination to mindful engagement.

Overcoming the Curriculum Integration Challenge: In a true ELE, the environment can become the curriculum. Learning standards in STEM, humanities, and arts emerge naturally from interacting with a rich environment, making learning relevant and intrinsically rewarding.

Bridging the Pedagogical Preparedness Gap: The ELE framework provides a structured model for teacher professional development, moving from a daunting list of outdoor skills to a holistic understanding of how to design learning within a “Third Teacher” environment.

Limitations and Boundary Conditions

Several limitations must be acknowledged. First, as a conceptual synthesis, this paper presents theoretical propositions requiring empirical testing. Second, neuroscientific evidence comes primarily from laboratory studies with adults; generalization to children in outdoor contexts remains uncertain (Norwood et al., 2019). Third, individual differences (prior nature experience, cultural background) may moderate responses (Joye & van den Berg, 2011; Berto, 2014). Fourth, illustrative examples lack quantitative outcome data; reported violence reductions are based on community accounts rather than controlled studies. Fifth, implementation of ELE principles may require resources not equally available, potentially creating new equity concerns.

Future Research Directions

Future research should prioritize: (1) longitudinal studies measuring ELE impact on cortisol and behavioral markers of conflict; (2) neuroimaging studies with children during outdoor learning; (3) comparative studies examining individual difference variables; (4) implementation science on ELE adoption in low-resource contexts; (5) randomized controlled trials comparing conflict reduction outcomes; (6) qualitative studies exploring lived experiences; and (7) cross-cultural research on aesthetic preferences.

Conclusion and Implications for Future Practice and Research

The accumulated evidence from environmental psychology, neuroscience, and educational practice suggests that the aesthetic quality of a learning environment may be a critical, active, and non-negotiable component of its educational efficacy. By deliberately designing Enriched Learning Environments that integrate space, pedagogy, and insights from neuroscience, we may be able to create powerful settings that naturally support emotional regulation, foster prosocial behavior, and cultivate deep, joyful, and meaningful engagement with learning. The experience of beauty, far from being an ornamental luxury, may function as a neurobiological “antidote” to the stress, frustration, and conflict that often impede learning and well-being. However, these conclusions are provisional and require empirical validation in authentic educational contexts.

The implications are profound for multiple fields:

- For Educators and School Leaders: To consider intentionally designing and utilizing both indoor and outdoor spaces as “Third Teachers,” prioritizing sensory richness, natural elements, and aesthetic harmony. Pilot projects and iterative implementation are recommended over wholesale adoption.
- For Architects and Landscape Designers: To consider collaborating closely with educators to create schools and learning centers that are themselves ELEs, embodying the principles of biophilic and restorative design while remaining attentive to budgetary constraints and diverse user needs.
- For Policymakers: To consider allocating resources and developing guidelines that support the creation and maintenance of beautiful, nature-rich school grounds and the necessary professional development for educators. Policy changes should be accompanied by evaluation requirements to build the evidence base.
- For Researchers: To conduct further empirical studies, particularly longitudinal and neuroimaging studies, that directly measure the impact of specific aesthetic interventions in outdoor settings on cortisol levels, brain activity, and behavioral markers of conflict in children.

The call to action is not for immediate, large-scale implementation of untested principles, but rather for systematic, evidence-building efforts to determine if, how, and under what conditions aesthetic enrichment of outdoor learning environments produces the hypothesized benefits. It is time to rigorously investigate the transformative potential of beauty in education. By doing so, we may create learning environments that do not just teach about the world, but that actively care for the minds, hearts, and social relationships of those who inhabit them.

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