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### A bit about me...

- 30+ years in education; ~10 of those as a nature-based preschool director
- Nature-based early childhood education researcher & consultant (*Founder of Samara Early Learning*)
- Author of multiple books about nature-based education
- Live in Michigan; Grew up on a vegetable farm in Central Illinois

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### Today's Agenda

1. Nature-based Pedagogy
2. Trail Map for Change
3. Reimagining practice:
  - Schedules
  - Physical environment
  - Curriculum, planning, & ongoing assessment
  - Collaborations & community building

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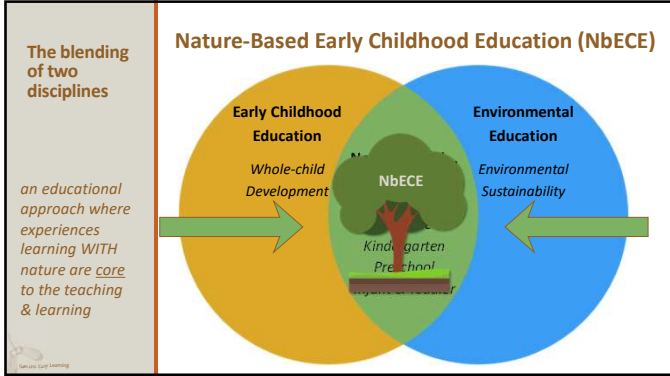
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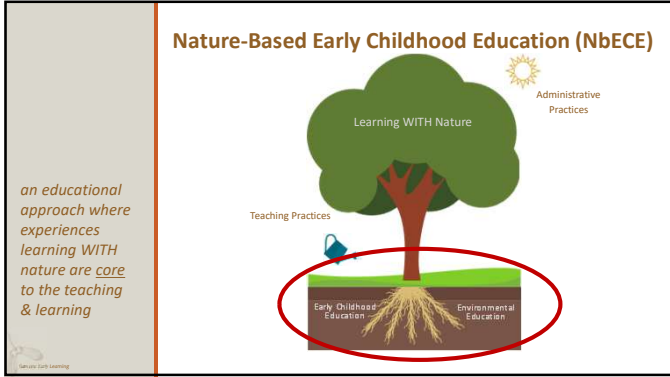
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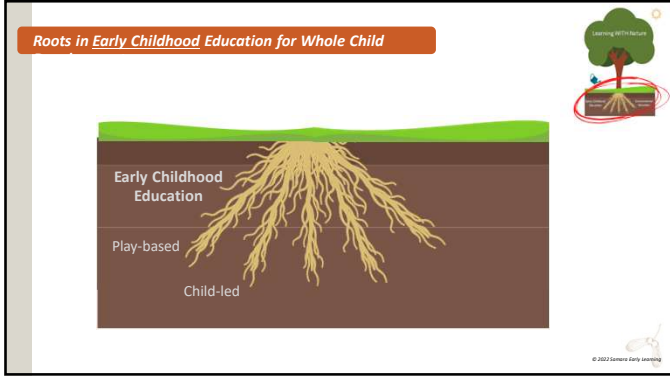
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**Power of play**



“Play is nature’s way of teaching children how to solve their own problems, control their impulses, modulate their emotions, see from others’ perspectives, negotiate differences & get along with others as equals. There is **no substitute for play** as a means of learning these skills.”  
*-Peter Gray*

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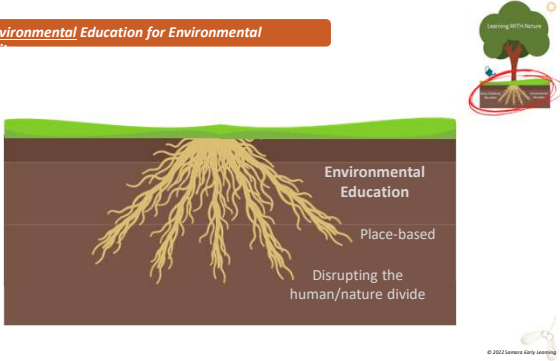
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**Roots in Environmental Education for Environmental Sustainability**



Environmental Education  
 Place-based  
 Disrupting the human/nature divide

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**Connection to place**



“We are meaning makers, and a sense of place is central to meaning-making.”  
*-Brené Brown*

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**Connection to place**

“Being naturalized to place means **to live as if this is the land that feeds you,**  
 as if these are the streams from which you drink,  
 that build your body and fill your spirit...  
**Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities.”**  
 -Robin Wall Kimmerer

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**Disrupting the human/nature divide**



“Nature is always trying to tell us we are not so superior or independent or alone or autonomous as we may think.”  
 -Wendell Berry

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**What “counts” as nature?**




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**Disrupting the human/nature divide**



“We are nature, and we are it all the time, no matter how far away or close we perceive it to be at each moment.”  
-Fabiana Fondevila

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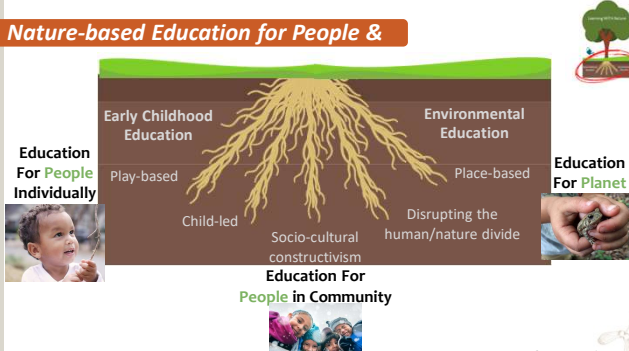
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**Nature-based Education for People &**



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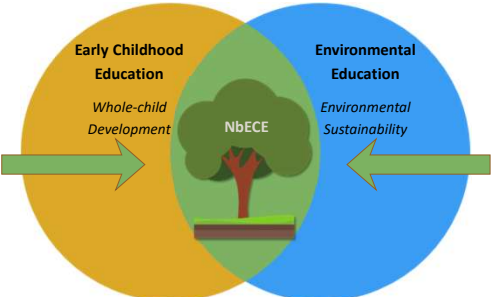
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**Nature-Based Early Childhood Education (NbECE)**



an educational approach where experiences learning WITH nature are core to the teaching & learning

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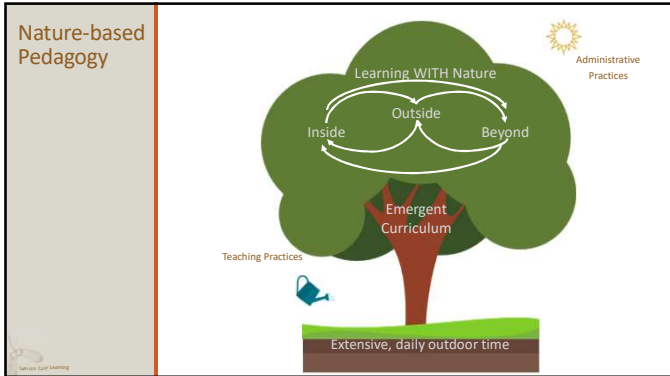
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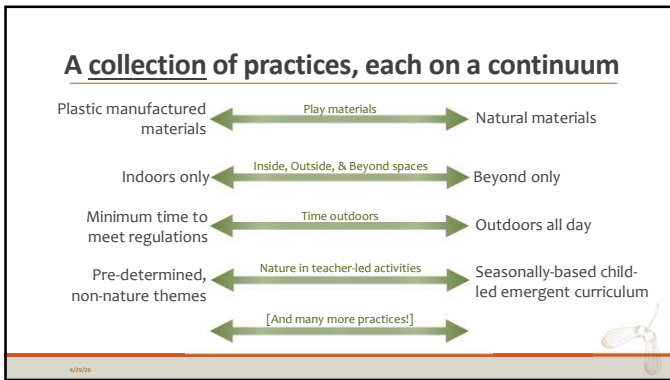
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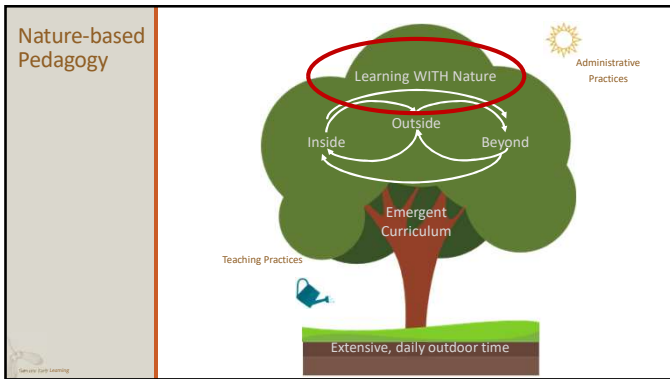
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### Moving towards learning with nature

**Learning in**  
Location

**Learning about**  
Information

**Learning with**  
Relationship

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### Learning **WITH** nature

- Starts with an experience with nature
- Sparks children's interest in learning *about* the world
- Builds over time
- Emphasis is relational (*rather than location or information*)
- Assumes nature provides more than we can plan for—serving as another teacher!

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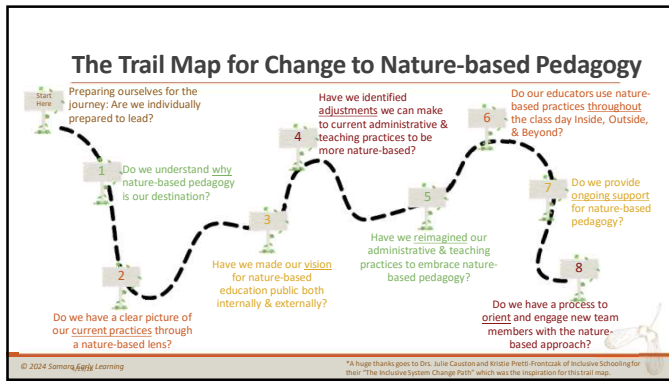
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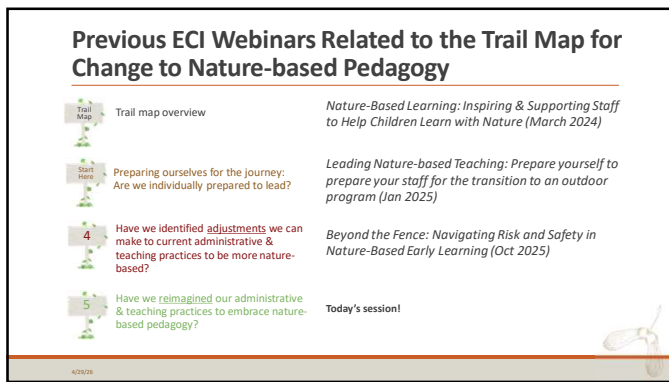
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Have you attended one of the previous ECI webinars with me (Rachel)?

If so, hit the  reaction button!



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### Today's Agenda

- Nature-based Pedagogy
- Trail Map for Change
- Reimagining practice:
  - Schedules
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**Reimagining in all areas of practice**

-  **Program schedules** to prioritize outdoor time
-  **Physical learning environment** to authentically connect to seasonal, local nature
-  **Curriculum, planning, & ongoing assessment** approaches to emphasize emergent curriculum rooted in the seasons
-  **Collaborations & community building**

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**What if we...**



**...were outside the entire class day?**

*We might need to...*

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**Have meals, snacks, & rest time outside**




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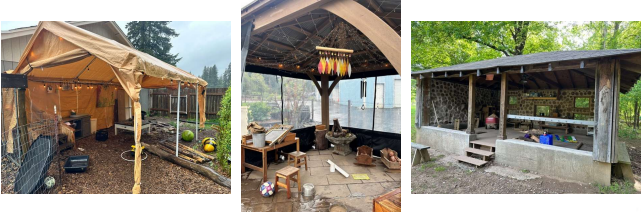
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Have a space for group meetings



Seven horizontal lines for notes.

Have porches & in-between spaces



Seven horizontal lines for notes.


Ensure children have appropriate clothing

- Have it
  - Purchase class sets
  - Have a stockpile of "extras"
  - Ask families to donate what they've outgrown
- Clean it
  - Kids & clothes are washable ☺
  - Dry, shake & then wash (for mud)
  - Place for dirty gear outside of classroom
- Store it




All for positive outdoor experiences

Seven horizontal lines for notes.



**Poll: Do you have extra outdoor clothing if children forget theirs or get wet?**

- ✓ Yes! We have plenty for everyone.
- ✓ Some, but not enough for the entire class.
- ✓ No, we don't have any extra outdoor clothing.




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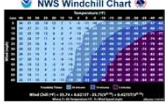
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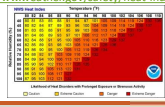
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**Pay more attention to the weather**

- Outside every day unless there is inclement or dangerous weather
- “Inclement weather” means thunder, lightning, high winds, & extreme temperatures
- Clothing is key when it comes to temperatures
- Establish clear policies & protocols



Visit [www.weather.gov/bou/windchill](http://www.weather.gov/bou/windchill) & [www.weather.gov/safetv/heat-index](http://www.weather.gov/safetv/heat-index)




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**What if we...**



...enhanced our **physical learning environment** to authentically connect to seasonal, local nature?

*We might need to...*

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**Consider three learning spaces...**

**Inside**  
Indoor space (inside 4 walls)

**Outside**  
Designated natural play area

**Beyond**  
World beyond the fence/designated play area

Most human-designed ← → Least human-designed

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**Bring nature-related materials indoors**

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**Shift to a natural play area**

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**Natural play area**



- Natural appearance and play changes based on the seasons
- This ≠ recess!
- An extension of the classroom where all learning domains are available
- All types of play—not just gross motor

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**Visit the Beyond regularly**




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**Finding “Beyond” spaces**

- Walk to a local park, courtyard, etc.
- Have families drop off &/or pick up at a natural space
- Transport children to a more “wild” space
- It doesn’t take much space or natural materials to engage children




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If you've tried going to Beyond areas...

What was the biggest challenge?

Briefly share in the chat box.




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**What if we...**

...ensured the **curriculum, planning, & ongoing assessment** approaches emphasized emergent curriculum rooted in the seasons?

*We might need to...*

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**Move toward child-led emergent studies**


Monthly Themes



*Pre-determined non-nature themes*


→

Nature Themes



*Pre-determined themes connected to seasons*

→



*Studies based on children's interests*

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### Shift from mostly teacher-led to mostly free play

4/28/26

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### Get clear about what is happening each season

**phenology**  
noun — /fē-nol-uh-jee/

the study of cyclic and seasonal natural phenomena, especially in relation to climate and plant and animal life.

- **Cultural events**
- **Geography** (land formations, water features, etc.)
- **Climate** (average temperatures, precipitation, etc.)
- **Plant & Fungal Life** (flowers, grasses, shrubs, trees, & mushrooms, etc.)
- **Animal Life** (birds, mammals, reptiles, amphibians, fish, insects, etc.)

4/28/26

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### Build our skills in seeing the learning in play

Wow! This one is really green!

I think it has those bumps on it to keep birds from eating it!

Be careful, don't squish it!

- ❖ Making observations
- ❖ Developing empathy
- ❖ Fine motor development
- ❖ Asking questions
- ❖ Self-regulation
- ❖ Cooperation

4/28/26

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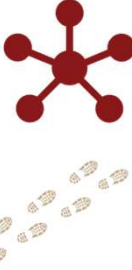
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**What if we...**



...built a strong, **collaborative community** focused on connecting young children with nature?

*We might need to...*

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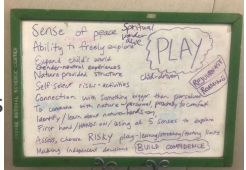
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**Designate whole-team planning time**

- Half-day of collaborative planning time each week
- Early release on Wednesdays
- Pay assistants for more before/after class time




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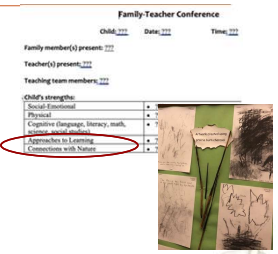
**Engage families with nature**

**Nature-related content:**

- Benefits of nature
- Activities to do at home
- Appropriate clothing
- Community nature-related activities
- Natural history facts

**Methods:**

- Handbook
- Newsletter
- Orientation
- Conferences
- Reports of class activities
- Family events



Family-Teacher Conference	
Child: [ ]	Date: [ ] Time: [ ]
Family member(s) present: [ ]	
Teacher(s) present: [ ]	
Teaching team members: [ ]	
Child's strengths:	
Social Interaction	[ ]
Physical	[ ]
Cognitive (Language, literacy, math)	[ ]
Approaches to Learning	[ ]
Connections with Nature	[ ]

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### Partnerships with local nature organizations

- Visit local nature centers, zoos, farms, etc.
- Have a naturalist come to the school
- Borrow materials & artifacts (e.g., skulls, furs, tools & equipment)




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### Reimagining in all areas of practice

-  **Program schedules** to prioritize outdoor time
-  **Physical learning environment** to authentically connect to seasonal, local nature
-  **Curriculum, planning, & ongoing assessment** approaches to emphasize emergent curriculum rooted in the seasons
-  **Collaborations & community building**




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### Possible tools to help reimagine practice

Remember others have gone off trail before you!

- Visit other programs
- Reach out to NbECE experts
- Books, journals, magazines, etc.
- Attend nature-based professional development




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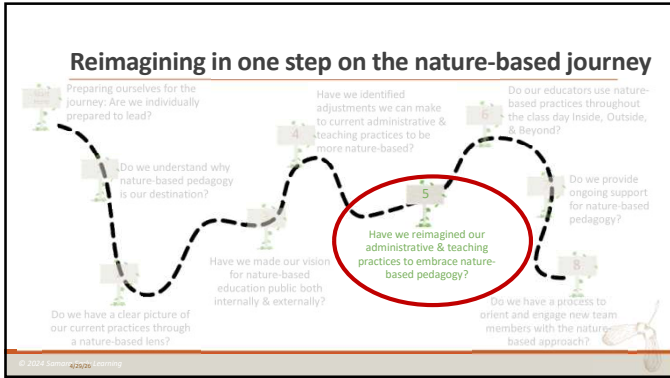
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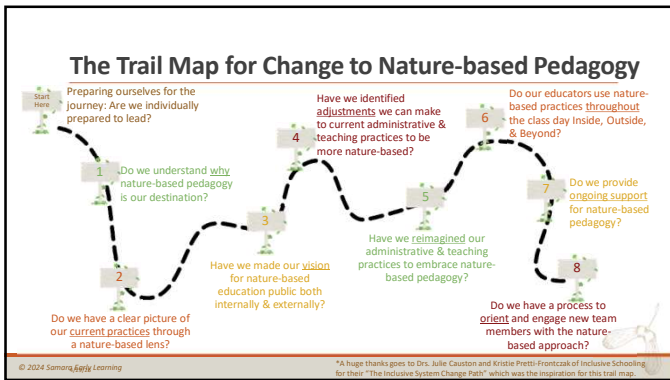
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**Where we've been**

- Nature-based Pedagogy
- Trail Map for Change
- Reimagining practice:
  - Schedules
  - Physical environment
  - Curriculum, planning, & ongoing assessment
  - Collaborations & community building



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**Progress not perfection...**



- Be intentional in making decisions
- Stop often to reflect on your practices
- There will always be compromises & trade-offs
- Let the "WHY" drive everything

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**Visit the Samara Shop for nature-based resources**



[SamaraEL.com/shop](http://SamaraEL.com/shop)

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**Take the 90-second quiz & receive a custom toolkit for your nature-based journey**



[SamaraEL.com/quiz](http://SamaraEL.com/quiz)

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**Thank you!**



*Scan to take the Nature Journey quiz & get your custom Toolkit!*



**Samara**  
Early Learning  
*Helping nature-based education take flight*

Rachel A. Larimore, Ph.D.  
[www.SamaraEL.com](http://www.SamaraEL.com)

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# Trail map for leading change toward nature-based pedagogy

Start Here

## Preparing ourselves for the journey: Are we individually prepared to lead?

*Leadership steps to reach this marker:*

- The “Inside, Outside, & Beyond” work of being a leader from a social-emotional perspective. (Openness, receptive to criticism, vulnerability, trust, etc.)

1

## Trail marker 1: Do we understand why nature-based pedagogy is our destination?

*Leadership steps to reach this marker:*

- The leadership team develops a shared understanding of nature-based pedagogy.
- Explore together the various ways nature-based pedagogy can be implemented.
- All leadership team members explore their personal WHY for this work.
- Support the leaders who continue to have questions about nature-based pedagogy.

2

## Trail marker 2: Do we have a clear picture of our current practices through a nature-based lens?

*Leadership steps to reach this marker:*

- Collect data on the current use of nature-based pedagogy.
- Share and analyze the data with the entire leadership team.

3

## Trail marker 3: Have we made our vision for nature-based education public both internally and externally?

*Leadership steps to reach this marker:*

- Craft or revise the program’s current vision statement.
- Develop a clear rationale for the new vision using key findings from Trail Marker 2 (TM:2).
- Get feedback on the vision from a diversity of program stakeholders.
- Once finalized, share the vision and rationale both internally and externally.
- Review the vision and rationale yearly and revised as needed.

4

## Trail marker 4: Have we identified adjustments we can make to current administrative and teaching practices to be more nature-based?

*Leadership steps to reach this marker:*

- Identify where current practices (TM:2) and the vision (TM:3) do and don’t align.
- Explore and name the current strengths.
- Explore and name the current opportunities for growth.





5

### Trail marker 5: Have we reimagined our administrative and teaching practices to embrace nature-based pedagogy?

*Leadership steps to reach this marker:*

- Identify program schedules to prioritize time outdoors and nature-based pedagogy.
- Identify ways to strategically adjust the physical learning environment (Inside, Outside, & Beyond) to support nature-based pedagogy.
- Identify adjustments to the curriculum, planning, and ongoing assessment approaches to emphasize emergent curriculum rooted in the seasons.
- Explore alternative program schedules to provide time for collaborative team planning.
- Explore opportunities for more ongoing nature-based family education and engagement.
- Explore opportunities for partnerships with local nature-based education organizations.

6

### Trail marker 6: Do our educators use nature-based practices throughout the class day Inside, Outside, & Beyond?

*Leadership steps to reach this marker:*

- Explore nature-based teaching practices and identify growth opportunities.
- Develop a systematic professional development plan for all team members (at both a group and individual level) around nature-based teaching.
- Implement professional learning opportunities for team members to learn from each other and outside nature-based education experts.
- Establish and communicate on expectations around nature-based teaching.

7

### Trail marker 7: Do we provide ongoing support for nature-based pedagogy?

*Leadership steps to reach this marker:*

- The leadership team continues to explore how to support team members through change.
- Design a systematic way to analyze educators' successes and needs.
- Create genuine ways to celebrate successes and progress.

8

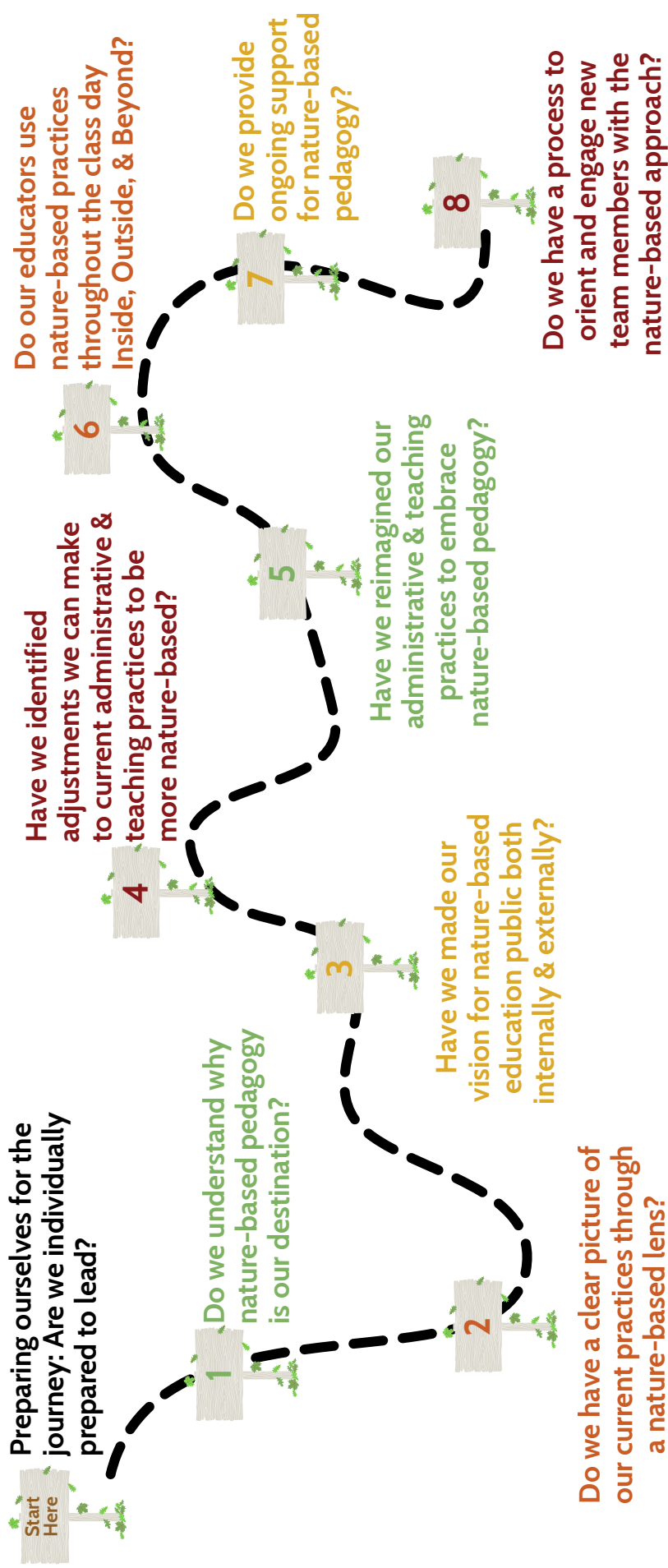
### Trail marker 8: Do we have a process to orient and engage new team members with the nature-based approach?

*Leadership steps to reach this marker:*

- Establish a process for orienting and onboarding new educators on the nature-based approach.
- Establish a process for orienting and onboarding new leadership team members on the nature-based approach.

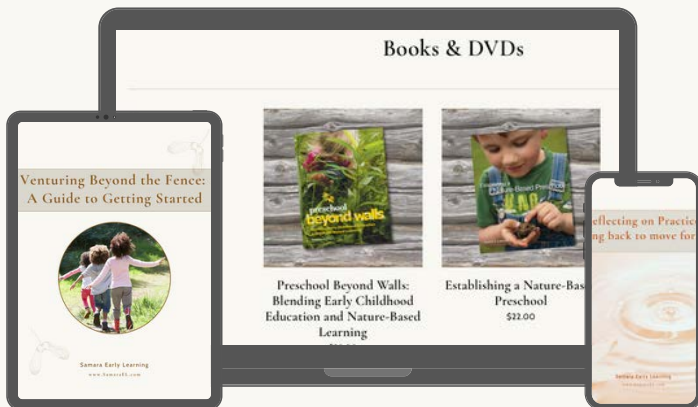
*\*Thank you to Drs. Julie Causton and Kristie Prett-Frontczak of Inclusive Schooling for their "The Inclusive System Change Path" which was the inspiration for this trail map.\**

# Trail map for leading change toward nature-based pedagogy





Take the Nature  
Journey quiz & get  
your custom Toolkit!



Visit the Samara Shop  
for more resources



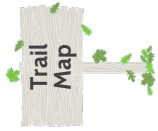
## About Samara Early Learning

Samara Early Learning helps early childhood professionals implement high-quality nature-based education. Through a variety of professional learning opportunities, we help educators overcome barriers in order to provide young children with rich nature-based learning experiences. These opportunities include written publications, workshops, speaking engagements, e-courses, and more. We offer these services because we believe all young children have a right to high-quality nature-based early childhood education for their whole development. Visit our [website](http://www.samarael.com) to learn more about both Samara Early Learning and the services we offer.

 [fb.com/SamaraEarlyLearning](https://www.facebook.com/SamaraEarlyLearning)

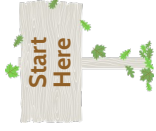
 [SamaraEL.com](http://www.SamaraEL.com)

# Previous ECI Webinars Related to the Trail Map for Change to Nature-based Pedagogy



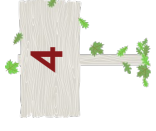
Trail map overview

*Nature-Based Learning: Inspiring & Supporting Staff to Help Children Learn with Nature (March 2024)*



Preparing ourselves for the journey:  
Are we individually prepared to lead?

*Leading Nature-based Teaching: Prepare yourself to prepare your staff for the transition to an outdoor program (Jan 2025)*



Have we identified adjustments we can make to current administrative & teaching practices to be more nature-based?

*Beyond the Fence: Navigating Risk and Safety in Nature-Based Early Learning (Oct 2025)*



Have we reimagined our administrative & teaching practices to embrace nature-based pedagogy?

Today's session!



**Use the reaction if you've attended one of these previous ECI webinars**