

A REFLECTION ON OUTDOOR EDUCATION

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'Outdoor education promotes positive behaviour, healthy social interactions and increased happiness' (Louv, 2005). In this thought-provoking article, Adam explores the value of outdoor education and how teachers can observe and encourage the behavioural patterns outlined by Louv.

In this article I share some of my insights about the beneficial effects that outdoor education can have on young children. This is not a comprehensive or complete review and may raise more questions than it answers regarding normative approaches and ideas.

I have been working in the field of outdoor education for the last 30 years in both Europe and the USA. I have been engaged in experiential, hands-on and active learning approaches that are play-oriented and enquiry-based. I will not discuss process, methods and techniques here, but must stress that they are essential elements in the design and implementation of any quality outdoor education programme.

The benefits of outdoor education

I have seen that outdoor education helps pupils to feel empowered and deeply connected to their world. It awakens their sensory awareness, stimulates their creativity and refines their cognitive skills. Recent research has shown that outdoor educational experiences can have positive effects on children's development, social skills, educational performances and overall sense of well-being (Monbiot, 2013). It can even give a sense of meaning and stability to their lives (Louv, 2005).

Over the last decade, social science research has revealed significant evidence that primary school pupils need exposure to 'nature' in order to be healthy, happy and successful (Louv, 2005). Outdoor education enhances traditional classroom education and has a range of beneficial effects on pupil performance in mathematics, science and social studies (Monbiot, 2013).

Humans are hardwired as a species to both relate and respond to nature physically, emotionally and spiritually (Wilson, 1984). We have undoubtedly evolved, and are inextricably embedded, in nature. Humans are attracted to nature and living systems. We experience pleasure and a sense of vitality when immersed in nature or exposed to natural phenomena, what has been termed 'biophilia' (Wilson, 1984). Biophilia becomes especially apparent when observing young children at play in natural spaces.

Play and a child's affinity to nature

Providing a child with unstructured playtime in nature can provide a wonderful opportunity for exploration, discovery, play and joy. Play is an essential element in any child's education (Gray, 2014), and playtime in nature is especially valuable. Effective outdoor education practices build on this innate desire to play in natural settings and provide safe and inspirational environments where learning processes can be orchestrated.

During my work, I have encountered thousands of youngsters from all around the world. I have led them into a variety of very different landscapes and helped them explore the wonders and mystery of the natural world. Memorable episodes have involved hiking humid tropical trails in the Hawaiian rainforest with a group of young offenders; crawling through crisp leaf litter in an English beech wood with joyful nursery school pupils from inner-city London and lying in a flower-filled Alpine meadow with 50 fifth-graders from an international school in Milan, Italy. The locations were different and the pupils diverse in individual and socio-cultural terms. However, even allowing for these differences, I have noticed qualitative similarities in ways that pupils react to experiences in nature.

Qualitative trends and experiential responses

There are recognisable trends and common responses that pupils exhibit when they are immersed in a natural setting and actively engaged in exploration. Figure 1 outlines, in simplified and general terms, some of the emotive qualities that outdoor education can solicit in young pupils, and hints at some of the ways being outdoors can enhance a pupil's receptivity and engender positive states of mind, which can, in turn, positively influence the formal educational environment.

Inclusion: Feeling interconnected with a greater than human community and aware of their relationship to the ecological whole. This insight can lead to a sense of responsibility, caring attitudes and empathy with others. It helps enhance pupils' social skills and engenders positive intra-class relationships.

Sensitivity: An expanded field of awareness with an active sensory engagement and heightened sensorial perception of their surroundings and ourselves. This can lead to heightened alertness, attention and capacity to concentrate.

Stillness: Feeling a sense of peace, relaxation, centeredness, harmony and flow. Finding a still point and engaging in mindful awareness can lead to calmness and perspective.

Being grounded: A focus on somatic awareness, consciousness of physicality and the contact of our bodies to the Earth. This feeling can lead to increased co-ordination, spatial awareness and an enhanced perception of other sentient beings. Being 'grounded' leads to a sense of inclusion in natural cycles and feeling embedded in global processes. This feeling of 'being earthed' can lead to a sense of ease and feeling 'at home' in the world.

Holism: Perception of patterns, relationships, systems and emergent properties. This can lead to interdisciplinary thinking and insights into the interconnections between wide ranges of classroom subjects that are usually taught as discrete topics.

Awe: A sense of amazement about the living world's beauty, complexity and mystery. This, in turn, can inspire pupils' learning, intuition and receptivity.

Curiosity: An urge to explore, discover and learn. Fascination can engage problem-solving skills and stimulate enquiry.

Vitality: Excitement and energy generated when pupils feel directly connected to natural processes and actively engaged with living systems.

This can engender a feeling of joy, self-confidence, empowerment as well as a drive to learn and discover.

Creativity: Stimulates the imaginative faculties and inspires self-expression. The natural world provides a wonderful backdrop for pupils to engage in performance arts and artistic expression.

Transformation: Experiences outdoors can lead to positive changes in both intrapersonal and interpersonal dynamics. Pupils get a chance to explore boundaries, roles and identities. Sometimes they spontaneously seem to redefine the nature of their interpersonal relationships and create more healthy, caring and integrated class dynamics.

Figure 1: Some of the emotive qualities that young people express during outdoor education.

If we think of outdoor education we normally envision activities taking place in 'nature', or 'natural environments'. The word 'nature' is among the most complex and culturally loaded in the English language (Coates, 1998), thus any discussion of outdoor education in 'nature' or 'outdoor natural habitats' is implicitly full of paradoxes and value-laden ideas, as well contradictory tropes, cultural constructs and ideological models.

After all, what is a natural landscape? Where is nature? Which kind of nature is purer, healthier and more benign? Such questions become especially relevant when situating outdoor education programmes and designing teaching activities about ecology and the natural world. We should be aware of what kind of worldview and epistemological orientation we are promoting during the course of our teaching. What meaning are we imputing on the environment? How could this effect a child's perception of the world and their place in it? In this light, we must consider our ethical responsibilities and roles as teachers when we engage in outdoor education, as we would in any other educational arena.

Conclusion and overview

Seemingly, a generation of children has become removed from the physical realities and wonders of the living world as they have become increasingly engaged in ever more complex anthropogenic, digitalised spaces. Many children now seem to be more comfortable with cyber experiences than with exploring the vital ecosystems they inhabit, depend on and are an intrinsic part of. More and more pupils are unable to recognise the most common plants and animals that they live among (Nabhan, 1995). As they lose their natural right and cultural inheritance to learn

about and interact with the natural world, children are becoming ecologically illiterate and impoverished (Orr, 1994). Virtual worlds are displacing a whole set of other nature-based realities from the formative years in a child's life.

I believe that outdoor education provides an essential counterbalance to the virtual realities that children increasingly 'inhabit' both at home and at school. I have witnessed some amazing transformations in individuals and groups during my work with schools. I sincerely hope that primary school pupils will come to have greater access to quality outdoor education experiences and that educators and policy makers will appreciate the importance such opportunities offer for pupils and the greater learning community.

References

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For more on Adam's EcowiseItaly work, see: www.ecowiseitaly.com

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