

A new geography of childhood

In addition to physical geography, outdoor education may need to draw from other disciplines. Perhaps it is time to integrate outdoor education with other fields of study such as cultural geography, ecology, transpersonal psychology, deep ecology, anthropology, mythology, storytelling and mindfulness. I believe outdoor education could also benefit from engaging with other cultural perspectives, integrating non-Western traditional knowledge systems relating to space and geography from diverse mindsets and cosmologies. As a society we need to begin to view nature differently and start to renew our relationship with it. An important part of this process involves gaining insight into the kind of ideas we are propagating about nature and considering how we should go about re-envisioning our teaching goals and methods as they relate to the natural world.

Education can utilise natural spaces to help sensitise pupils to environmental predicaments and provide them with hope and inspiration about the future. It should make them feel engaged, informed and responsible, and help to foster their development of insight and awareness. In this way, nature becomes a forum where pupils can explore ideas about identity, notions of self and other, as well as fundamental psychological archetypes.

Outdoor spaces can become encounter spaces and places of learning where pupils can discover their creativity and imaginations through storytelling, myth-making, role playing, fantasy and adventure. They can express themselves through music and poetry, land-art and dance. They can investigate themselves and their surroundings and cultivate deeper awareness of the natural world and of their interconnectedness, interdependence and embeddedness in ecological reality. Nature can even become a safe and healing space to confront phobias and release traumas.

Experiencing birdsong, wind, rain, snow, or the play of light on a river can serve as inspirational events that bring pupils back into their sensorial bodies; grounding their minds in the present.

It is essential that pupils are able to focus their attention on where they are and what they are actually doing as they are doing it. They can learn to do this by developing skill sets to watch wildlife in the field: practicing patient observation, focusing with refined attention, the ability to remain still and receptive, to notice details and to recognise diversity (Figure 3). Pupils are losing these life skills because their everyday experiences carry them off into virtual worlds and



Figure 3: Developing the skills of observation in a controlled and responsible manner.
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digital representations. Reality, truth and inter-relationship disappear as pupils lose themselves to devices, social media and meaningless 'babble-chat'.

Outdoor education can be the vehicle that actively encourages pupils to delve into their innate imaginative worlds and to challenge them to express their ideas. Outdoor education can use natural spaces as inspirational places that stimulate pupils. Where they can express themselves artistically through dance, music and story. It can act as a catalyst for pupils to engage with their creativity and self-expression, to release and share their inner power. Outdoor education is also a wonderful and obvious place for learning about key environmental issues and real-world processes. It is an ideal setting for pupils to develop logical analysis and problem solving and social skills (Louv, 2005).

Outdoor education can envisage a new type of 'geography of childhood' (Nabhan, 1994), where pupils explore and immerse themselves in nature while they familiarise themselves with their own internal landscapes. A more interdisciplinary and holistic approach towards outdoor education would mean developing a dynamic relationship with post-colonial and transcultural geographies. This kind of shift could allow the subject to evolve and for educators to have more awareness about what they are doing and why they are doing it.

References

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