

Outdoor Education in Review: A Look at the History, Challenges, Solutions and Other Matters

History 3510: The History of Childhood and Education

Jensen Thiessen

T00062819

8 December 2017

The curriculum of the public education system in Canada, and more generally North American, seems to have remained static in techniques for an extended period of time. The habits created of sitting in a desk, in a classroom, learning from lectors and worksheets may be ideal for some students. However, every person is unique and individual in their own way and therefore absorbs information most efficiently in techniques catered to their own needs. While school systems are slowly converting to include alternative methods of learning, historically there is one aspect missing from the education system. Instituting outdoor education into traditional models of teaching, while in some points costly, is more importantly beneficial for both students and teachers. It has been proven that with exposing students to outdoor educational methods can aid in advancing sustainability and conservation.

Bringing outdoor and nature-based education into the classroom or instead bringing the class outdoors and into nature is essential on many levels. “According to Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson, humans are genetically wired to gravitate towards nature” so it seems only natural to intertwine the desire for nature into learning.¹ While it is overwhelmingly apparent that the personal benefits of outdoor education greatly impact the well-being of students, it is important to acknowledge the important role it has on the understanding of nature and the environment around us. In fact, the surge in the environmental movement arose out of public concern for the environment.² Many institutions of outdoor education recognize “that people are one of many species on Earth” and thus “teaches students to identify and develop solutions to environmental

¹ Chris Filler, “Physical Activity in Nature: Lessons Learned from a Preschool Program.” in *Wellspring* 26, no. 2: 1-4. *Academic Search Complete*, (2015), 1.

² James Borland, "Provoking Dialogue: A Short History of Outdoor Education in Ontario." in *Pathways: The Ontario Journal Of Outdoor Education*, (2011), 32.

problems” as well as create an understanding for the delicate balance of the ecosystem.³ Entirely, outdoor learning seeks “to engage learners in compelling investigations and explorations” which are deemed beneficial to both student and environment.⁴

This paper will explore, a brief history of the origins of education to develop an understanding and awareness of the topic. Continuing, it will highlight some of the challenges faced when attempting to integrate the traditional classroom with outdoor education. However, it will also shed light on the solutions to the problems and the ease of combating such difficulties. Furthermore, this paper will explain the positive outcomes of utilizing nature-based education regarding the environment and society as well as the benefit for students. This essay will explore the use of technology in outdoor educative settings and concerns which arise with such.

To understand where outdoor and nature-based education stands within contemporary society, it is essential to follow the historical progression of outdoor education. Outdoor education has a history which extends back in time further than expected. Early efforts of creating outdoor educational methods can be viewed in the Ontario region and the province’s separation of five branches.⁵ These five chapters are broken down into “agricultural education, environmental education, outdoor adventure education, ecological education and climate change adaptation.”⁶ Each branch varies from the others but exhibits important components in the

³ *Ibid.*, 32.

⁴ George Veletsianos, et. al. "Lessons Learned from the Design and Development of Technology-enhanced Outdoor Learning Experiences." in *Techtrends: Linking Research & Practice To Improve Learning*, (2015). 79.

⁵ Borland, 32.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

creation of contemporary outdoor education methods. The institution of agricultural education in the 1880's are the roots of outdoor education in Ontario, and broadly Canada.⁷ Occurring during the province's agrarian revolution, installing this type of education "was perceived by Ontario's first Superintendent of Education, Dr. Egerton Ryerson, as a way to transform the province from a British colony into a self-sustaining society that could support the industrial expansion of Ontario."⁸ Largely, agricultural education had the capacity to increase student attendance as the knowledge being spread held actual relevance and importance concerning daily life as many of the agricultural communities were "struggling with an environment that provided subsisted livelihood."⁹

During the 1960's the Ontario Ministry of Education decided to change the genre agricultural education to environmental science.¹⁰ This change occurred due to an increase in public concern regarding the environment.¹¹ It seems almost entirely this change instigated the environmental education movement.¹² This movement triggered many changes in the realm of education but helped to reinforce the concept "that people are one of many species on Earth" and sought to teach students how to identify as well as develop solutions to environmental problems.¹³ While agricultural education is one of the first examples of bringing a focus on

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

nature and the environment into the classroom, environmental education is more significantly the instigating factors which tied the roots of outdoor education to the larger movement present today. With this movement, “outdoor educators began to integrate outdoor pursuits” into environmental educative programs in an attempt to motivate both students and teachers into participating in experiences which were nature-based.¹⁴

From the movement of environmental education emerged outdoor adventure education. During the 1990’s this form of outdoor or nature-based school began to take a dominant role in the outdoor educative sphere.¹⁵ However, just as outdoor education was establishing itself in the realm of education, Ontario experienced an economic downturn. As many school boards were facing shortages in finances, “outdoor centres were considered to be non-essential fiscal burdens and were closed.”¹⁶ These programs did not close permanently but rather began operating to corporate groups, school groups, and the public for set fees.¹⁷

At the turn of the century, the sphere of environmental science was officially removed from the Ontario curriculum. As a replacement, the Ontario Ministry of Education promised to integrate “ecological concepts across new science and geography curricula.”¹⁸ While the intent was to submerge outdoor education into standardized public education, largely instruction to incorporate such themes was disregard due to restraints in time, an extensive new curriculum and

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

“a lack of attention to ecological concepts” in the new curriculum.¹⁹ While ecological education was often left out of the classroom, an attempt was made to use “direct experiences in the natural world to promote awareness about the human dependency on ecological services.”²⁰

While this progression of outdoor education in Ontario is specific to the province, it shows a larger pattern of developing outdoor education throughout Canada and more generally North America. The history of Ontario outdoor education ends with highlighting the significance of outdoor education as in 2007 it was deemed essential.²¹ It became mandatory for educators to incorporate outdoor experiences with local communities to foster understanding of the human and ecosystem balance.²²

This historical review of material on the evolution of outdoor education reveals that concern towards the natural environment and sustainability has been slowly increasing since around the 1960's. This is where the real focus on nature-based education plants its roots. With that being said, for knowledge, it is essential to interpret a modern definition of what outdoor education is. The genre of outdoor education combines learning and experience of the outdoors with traditional learning found typically in a classroom. In supplementing standard classroom knowledge with nature, outdoor learning can provide an understanding of the world around the students and create a sense of compassion for the planet our materialistic society is slowly destroying.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

One of the reasons for the slow implication and inclusion of outdoor education in public education systems are the many struggles outdoor education has inevitably faced. As found in multiple articles, “adventure learning expeditions, though engaging and successful are oftentimes logistical complex, resource-intensive, and demanding in terms of time.”²³ Thus, outdoor education programs or immersion into classrooms is typically avoided as teacher knowledge on the topic is not vast and organizers can be intimidated by the seemingly considerable amount of work needed to organize such activities.

Outdoor education programs or experiences are often left out of the traditional classroom because they are logistically complicated. Finding an area which sparks “adventure” is usually assumed to having to be exotic and remote. Furthermore, lesson plans and the logistical aspects of how the program will work to benefit the child’s intellect and learning is often out of the range of knowledge for traditionally trained teachers. For many teachers of the public school system, outdoor education seems out of reach because they have not been equipped with the tools to immerse their classroom in the outdoors properly. Another challenge the realm of outdoor education faces is the resource-intensive nature our such programs. From acquiring suitable land or areas to the tools and supplies needed to adequately proceed with the lessons and time spent outside the sheer amount of things required to prepare for the outdoors sufficiently can be rather extensive. This can put a financial strain on educative institutions that are already lacking adequate funding. Furthermore, even small-scale outdoor operations consider a large number of resources. For overnight trips, supplies such as food, camping gear, and educational gear can be costly and when intertwining outdoor education with the newer technology all contribute to the

²³ Veletsianos, et al., 79.

additional costs of which outdoor education is associated. A significant amount of resources to adequately run an outdoor endeavour can be intimidating. Lastly, another reason as to why outdoor education is not commonly practiced in the traditional classroom is how demanding outdoor education is regarding time. Finding the ideal location or land suitable for the program can take significant amounts of time. But more importantly, in many cases making the classroom into outdoor education takes time away from the curriculum. In many cases, teachers are already short on time in regard to covering all the material of the lesson plans. With a shortage of time when following the curriculum, it leaves little time to take the classroom outdoors.

While these challenges stand in the way of complete submersion of the classroom into the outdoors, there are relatively simple fixes concerning bringing aspects of the outdoor education model into the traditional classroom. For example, to combat the logistically complicated nature of outdoor education, it would be helpful for teachers to team up with specialized outdoor educators or organizations. While this may be costly, it would aid in taking more pressure off the teacher to implement a form of learning of which they are not familiar. In many cases of combined educative methods, partnering with outdoor specialists was beneficial to both the teacher and students. This can be viewed in the early example of the Outdoor Education Centre of the Hamilton Board of Education. In 1970, this model aimed at integrating aspects of outdoor education into the classroom through a partnership with outdoor specialists. This guide written by John H. Aikman and David M. Brown had the intention of helping teachings in the preparation of outdoor learning workshops and programs. Entirely, it was to help teachers supplement classroom learning with knowledge on nature and the outdoors in an engaging

manner. However, this guide used a partnership with outdoor education specialists to enhance knowledge missing on behalf of the teacher.

For overcoming the issue of outdoor education being resource-intensive, it is essential to acknowledge that outdoor education does not need to be a massive endeavour outside of the school area. Using local environments to supplement outdoor learning would limit costs of nature-based programs. An example of using local environments in an engaging and meaningful manner can be seen through the Upper Canada College and their program in rebuilding the Bruce Trail. The reconstruction of the trail, which is apart of “the Badlands area in southern Ontario”²⁴ utilized volunteers as well as students for the completion of the project. Through fundraising costs, no financial aid was needed from the government.²⁵ Minimal funds were directly put into the programs through education administration, yet the program still had profound impacts on both the students and the environment. Students learned skills such as teamwork and independence as well as gained a greater appreciation for their local environment.²⁶ Generally speaking, using local environments for nature-based learning has a greater impact on students as they can see their learning directly imposed on the area around them. Furthermore, the environment would benefit from an increased awareness of concern for local ecosystems and nature on behalf of the students. While “local venues might not always be exotic,... they provide

²⁴ Bill Elgie, et al., "Building a Trail, Building Character." in *Pathways: The Ontario Journal Of Outdoor Education* (2007). 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 5-6.

ways to conduct field expeditions without incurring the high financial burden that goes along with travel to remote places and the support of an expedition team.”²⁷

To overcome the time demanding challenges which typically leave outdoor education from the classroom it is vital to bridge the gap between nature-based education and traditional classroom learning. Instead of viewing the two entities as separate it is crucial to combine the two in a meaningful way to efficiently merge outdoor and classroom learning. As seen through the Outdoor Education Centre of the Hamilton Board of Education in 1970, combining outdoor learning and traditional learning is productive and beneficial to both modes of teaching. Entirely, it seems to hit two proverbial birds with one proverbial stone. This guide exhibited that outdoor education did not need to entirely dismiss the classroom setting but rather instigate a relationship between the classroom and the outdoors. Studies of “math, geography, social studies, language arts, art, music, physical education, and science,” all subjects of the standard classroom were supplemented through outdoor learning and nature in local environments.²⁸

While the struggles in implementing outdoor education are essential in understanding the progression of the genre and the resistance to implementation the system into the public school system, it is readily apparent that the benefits are far more substantial. In many cases of outdoor education programs, one of the outcomes is an increased “awareness of human-nature interconnections.”²⁹ This greatly improves society as the increased knowledge of the local environment benefits the students and the natural world. Students hold the benefit of increased

²⁷ Veletsianos, et al., 80.

²⁸ John H. Aikman and David M. Brown. "Outdoor Education." (1970), 117.

²⁹ Borland., 32.

knowledge, where the natural world benefits from a heightened awareness of human impact on nature. Outdoor education teaches students that “the forest is a dynamic, living, ever-changing community of plants and animals dependent upon each other and the natural resources for survival.”³⁰ This knowledge is important in creating an understanding of the natural world and fostering awareness regarding human actions on the environment. Through nature-based education it seems completely true that “if man is to survive on earth he must learn to live in harmony with the natural resources because he is totally dependent on them.”³¹ Entirely, society and the environment benefit from subjecting students to nature-based education because an increase in awareness concerning environmental impacts can instigate change in how humans interact and affect the environment.

Alongside, positive impacts on society and the environment there a multitude of benefits to each student. In a recent review of the literature, there is support to the claim that “children under the age of 12, who engage directly with nature regularly, experience improved physical, emotional, and mental health.”³² Furthermore, it has been observed that "greater well-being; increased cognition; superior social skills" as well as an increased likelihood "to feel concern for the environment and connectedness to nature" occurs in students subjected to outdoor education.³³ Furthermore, “recent studies have demonstrated that time spent in nature can result

³⁰ Aikman., 110.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 110.

³² Elizabeth A. Beattie. "A Young Child's Perspectives on Outdoor Play: A Case Study from Vancouver, British Columbia." in *International Journal Of Early Childhood Environmental Education* (2015), 39.

³³ *Ibid.*

in a myriad of physiological benefits.”³⁴ Outdoor education allows “for greater social interactions between” pupils,³⁵ and encourages “the class to become acquainted with the aims, [approaches], terminology and skills” of the outdoors which may not be present solely in a traditional classroom.³⁶ Through outdoor education, students are given the opportunity to develop skills and knowledge which may not be taught through the single goal method of the public education system. While supplementing children skill set, the nature-based education systems also broaden knowledge of nature and the surrounding environment. Outdoor education is a diverse and multifaceted mode of teaching which promotes and teaches a wide variety of skills. As seen through the Earth Quest School in Vernon, British Columbia outdoor education fosters skills and abilities in teamwork, responsibility and group accountability through the program's goals of promoting diversity.³⁷ Another good example of the outcomes of outdoor education is the Saturna Ecological Education Centre which focuses on “personalized, self-directed, co-created and integrated” education through emphasizing “place and sustainability.”³⁸ This example represents the independence taught and given to students through “challenging students to develop creative and critical thinking skills.”³⁹

³⁴ Filler., 4.

³⁵ Aikman., 1.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 7.

³⁷ Julie Johnston. "Integrated Curriculum Programs in British Columbia." in *Pathways: The Ontario Journal Of Outdoor Education* (2011), 24.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

The development of technology has undeniably taken over every aspect of western society, including the education system. Some may argue that technology does not belong in the classroom as it is distracting to students and takes away from the learning experience. However, technology can be a helpful tool which can aid in enhancing the learning experience both in and outside the classroom. The same can be said of outdoor education and learning. While some may view the realm of outdoor education as something which should be left raw and organic, uninfluenced by the developments of technology which are taking over society, it can be used to progress the specialization within the education realm. Generally speaking, technology can be used to modernize the practice of outdoor education and make it more relatable to students and relevant to learning outside of the classroom, in a more general sense of the real world. Through the article by George Veletsianos and other authors it is demonstrated “how a diverse range of projects have used the Adventure Learning approach and how... [the refined] approach to enable individuals (e.g., designers, teachers, and faculty members) to enact technology-enhanced interventions and meaningful inquiry in their own outdoor communities.”⁴⁰ Entirely, “connecting students with nature and their surroundings is an important component of Adventure Learning environments and the use of the Internet in the design of such experiences introduces new opportunities for learning, teaching, and participation.”⁴¹

In conclusion, the history of outdoor education extends further into history, previously expected. Thus its roots are deeply planted into the educational system. That being said, outdoor and nature-based education is seldom implicated in the traditional classroom setting because of a

⁴⁰ Veletsianos, et al., 79.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

range of challenges. These challenges vary but include the fact that outdoor education is resource, time and cost intensive. However, most of these challenges have simple fixes which reduce the needs of educational programs connected to the outdoors. Regardless of the Outdoor, the positive outcomes of implementing outdoor education into the traditional classroom far outweigh the negative. Some of the benefits of immersing students into nature-based education include an increased sense of care regarding the environment, and an increase in various skills and abilities. While some view that outdoor education is a step back concerning society's technological advances, it has been examined that there are ways to incorporate technology into nature-based education which results in benefits to the mode of learning, ways of teaching as well as benefit to students. Evidently, outdoor and nature-based education have tremendous benefits which could aid in the intellectual development of students.

Bibliography

- Aikman, John H., and Brown, David M. "Outdoor Education." Internet Archive. December 07, 1970. Accessed November 04, 2017. https://archive.org/details/ERIC_ED045441.
- Beattie, A. Elizabeth. 2015. "A Young Child's Perspectives on Outdoor Play: A Case Study from Vancouver, British Columbia." *International Journal Of Early Childhood Environmental Education* 3, no. 1: 38-53. ERIC, EBSCOhost (accessed September 21, 2017).
- Borland, James. 2011. "Provoking Dialogue: A Short History of Outdoor Education in Ontario." *Pathways: The Ontario Journal Of Outdoor Education* 23, no. 2: 32-33. ERIC, EBSCOhost (accessed November 10, 2017).
- Bowdrige, Michael, and Sean Blenkinsop. 2011. "Michel Foucault Goes Outside: Discipline and Control in the Practice of Outdoor Education." *Journal Of Experiential Education* 34, no. 2: 149-163. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 21, 2017).
- Elgie, Bill, Ross MacLean, and Rebecca Dykstra. 2007. "Building a Trail, Building Character." *Pathways: The Ontario Journal Of Outdoor Education* 20, no. 1: 4-6. ERIC, EBSCOhost (accessed November 10, 2017).
- Filler, Chris. 2015. "Physical Activity in Nature: Lessons Learned from a Preschool Program." *Wellspring* 26, no. 2: 1-4. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed September 30, 2017).
- Furman, Cara. 2016. "Wonder-Full Education: The Centrality of Wonder in Teaching and Learning Across the Curriculum." *Educational Theory* 66, no. 5: 666-672. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed November 10, 2017).

Johnston, Julie. 2011. "Integrated Curriculum Programs in British Columbia." *Pathways: The Ontario Journal Of Outdoor Education* 24, no. 1: 24-27. ERIC, EBSCOhost (accessed September 30, 2017).

Veletsianos, George, Miller, Brant G., Eitel, Karla Bradley and Eitel, U.H. 2015. "Lessons Learned from the Design and Development of Technology-enhanced Outdoor Learning Experiences." *Techtrends: Linking Research & Practice To Improve Learning* 59, no. 4: 78-86. *Academic Search Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed October 1, 2017).