

# *The Place of Outdoor Education in the Education of Children*

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IT is natural for a child to want to be in the out-of-doors. All people regardless of age have that same basic urge. Under the stresses and strain of modern civilization man takes to the open spaces for release, relaxation and stabilization of his mind and body. The nation is approximately 85% urbanized, meaning that most people are born and raised in cities of over 5,000 population and know very little comparatively of the natural resources and what the gifts of the soil are.

This population shift from rural to urban has created complexities in our social and economic life, which puts a high premium on the kinds of experiences which will develop better human relations and understandings and a wiser use of our environment. It is little wonder that our educational programs so often come to an academic stand still in learning.

We have for so long, as a matter of routine in our schools, counted on what happens in the classroom for the total education of children. Much of the content in our education is compiled within the pages of books, pamphlets and lesson plans. Youth on the way to and from school pass by or go through much of what they go into the classrooms to learn about. It is to a large extent second, third,

fourth and fifth-handed learning. More direct, first hand learning is needed.

It is not contended here that all learning should be carried on in the out-of-doors. Much of it rightly belongs in the classroom. There are several aspects of this problem which should first be considered; man and his environment, how we learn, how the learning can take place most effectively, and the place of outdoor education in learning.

Historically, man has lived mostly in the out-of-doors. This fact was basic in determining his measures for survival and direction of his development in ways of living, food, shelter, clothing, skills and tools. All his culture and religion have been a part of this story of progress. This long development has made him one with the earth and its possessions, the open spaces and all the natural elements.

Basically, man has need for this non-artificial environment and cannot be separated from it. He is still totally dependent upon our natural resources for his existence and this condition will always be so. He is increasingly separated from the elementary experiences of humanity.

It is clear that our youth and, in fact, all citizens must be made aware of their dependence on our natural re-

sources and given ways of using them more wisely. Living, exploring, adventuring and learning in the out-of-doors is a realistic form of such education.

It is a well established fact in education that we learn most through direct experience. Of course, there may be some room for debate in the areas where one deals only with ideas and concepts but by and large the thesis is sound. In the first place through direct experience one learns faster. Certainly there is ample evidence in support of the speed of learning as one deals with specific things rather than talking about them. It is possible to learn a fact by memory and later repeat that fact, but through actual experience the learning is faster. Not only does one learn faster, but that learning is retained longer. Tests made of high school students show that the things which made the deepest impressions upon them and were remembered longest were the events experienced directly. Also the memory of their teachers and the influence their teachers had upon the students ranked high. Even though one may take courses in school administration and these courses will be helpful, he will learn more about administration when he assumes the role of an administrator. The same would be true for teachers and all professions.

There is also a deeper appreciation and understanding of the things we get through direct experience. Herein is raised the whole question of the academic versus the practical. Even for those outcomes which are purely academic, cultural, and philosophic, it is not too venturesome to say that one probably does not *really* learn things

until they have been associated with experience.

We sing patriotically, "I love thy rocks and rills, thy woods and templed hills." I dare say there is little understanding on the part of most singers of what these words *really* mean. How can one know a rill unless he has seen one, strolled beside it and explored it, heard the water babble over the rocks, seen and felt the green moss, observed the fish, and discovered some of the winter and summer secrets that a rill holds; perhaps even sketched it or written a poem about it?

You cannot get the feeling of a templed hill until you have at first-hand discovered a lot about its formation by climbing it, tramping over it, seeing the distant vista from its top, or lying down full length upon it and falling asleep somewhere on its slope. After such experiences, the hills in the song would have real meaning. One's own country would then come nearer to being "My Country 'Tis of Thee." There is even a good chance that the quality of the singing would be improved.

Another example where direct experience learning develops appreciation and understanding was found in a school camp, where a group of elementary school children had been on an exploration trip one afternoon. They brought back the story of how they discovered a hill. The excitement registered in telling about it was clear evidence of significant learnings long to be retained. Under excellent leadership these children made their own discovery, concluding that the hill was not man-made but made by nature.

They found evidence that the hill was formed by the last glacier. They

displayed samples of the rocks, rounded by erosion and grinding, pointing out that the rocks did not belong in the area of the school camp but came from the far north. They proved their point by showing that there was no strata rock in the immediate area like that found in their newly "discovered" hill composed of glacial stones and gravel. They might have spent much time in school reading from their geography books and other resource material about glaciers. But this one direct experience where they were skillfully led to discover and to reason it out will be an experience never forgotten.

Some say that the greatest need is for better methods of teaching. Here, no doubt, there is great room for improvement. But we must remember that it is not easy to teach *about* things when the things are not present and have to be conjured up by the teacher's waving a magic pointer or pronouncing magic words. When the teacher takes the children into the open spaces and lives with them in the school camp environment, she is confronted with a galaxy of materials written in the classroom books neatly organized in chapters, pages and paragraphs. Out in the open everything is all inter-related. The teacher is confronted with the reality that she has not been trained, in her teacher education program, to cope with material presented in the open spaces. There is difficulty to isolate specific parts of subject matter. At the moment, the interest may be centered on soil erosion, plant or tree growth—then along comes a fox or some other animal and immediately takes the attention of everyone. If a fox should happen to dash through a school room,

two catastrophies would occur; the planned lesson would be completely disrupted and the teacher would have to throw the lesson plan out the window. The children would love it.

The out-of-doors cannot and should not control or compartmentalize subject matter. It has to come in a flow of experience and discovery. The teacher in this situation may not have been prepared about foxes or such animal life and may not know the answers. It calls for a whole new aspect of learning. Immediately she will be learning with the children and should not be embarrassed in the least by having to say, "I do not know."

Outdoor education is based on the simple thesis of learning through experience and all of the subject matter in any area at any level should be divided on the basis of where it can best be learned, inside the classroom or outside.

Simply stated, this thesis is; that which ought and can best be learned inside the classroom should be learned there; and that which can best be learned through direct experience outside the classroom, dealing directly with native materials and life situations, should there be learned. This is the simple thesis embodying the fundamental principle of camping and outdoor education. It is by no means contended that all learning should be conducted in the out of doors. Obviously, some research and laboratory work and activities that depend chiefly upon reading, upon writing, or even upon discussion should continue inside the classroom. If the principle of this division be sound and acceptable, why do we not apply it at once?

The application of this principle would mean that a large amount of

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learning and teaching would be done in the outdoors and in school camps. To some this may sound like good theory and have doubts that it can be put into practice. But the idea has taken hold and is rapidly being applied in elementary, secondary schools and colleges throughout the country.

It is estimated that over 350 community school systems are conducting some phase of outdoor education at school camps and many other schools are well along the way in developing the program. Teacher training institutions are beginning to recognize that they must change their courses of study to provide for the training of teachers in this new phase of education. There are instances where colleges and universities have plans underway to make full application of outdoor education in their courses of study and to provide for educational camping as a regular part of the four year courses. The program has extended also to graduate levels and many doctoral dissertations have been written on some phase of outdoor education and many other studies are underway.

Programs in education should stand the tests of research. It is well to ask if there is any evidence that some learnings could go on more quickly and effectively in a school camp than in the classroom. Attention should be called to an experiment in school camping recently conducted by the Outdoor Education Association in cooperation with the New York City Board of Education.

Two classes of children with their teachers, the fifth and seventh grades, extended their education by spending three weeks in a school camp. They did not take their school books; they

did not have periods of time set aside for academic study. Rather they spent their time under competent teacher-leadership exploring the hills, valleys, woods, streams, mountains, animal and plant life as they found them in their natural setting. The three weeks experience was an adventure in discovering, reasoning and exploring which led to much use of the camp library, on their own initiative. The discussions were lively and enthusiastic. The children lived together in small groups, planned their own menus, did their own marketing at the school camp store, figured per capita costs of meals, and cooked many of their own meals. Through living together, they gained a fuller understanding of each other and came to know the real meaning of cooperation. They learned to know their teacher and found her to be quite a different person than in the classroom. The teacher found out much more about the children than they had known. All and all it was a meaningful experience in group and social living.

But, how about the so-called subject matter? A testing program was set up including the selection of control groups. A series of regular standard school tests were given to both groups before the school camping project began and after the camp project was completed. The evidence in favor of the camp group was greater than anticipated. The tests showed that the children who spent the three weeks at camp rated higher in most of the tests than the children who stayed in school and participated in the regular program. With such evidence before us every effort should be made to advance this type of education.

Outdoor education is not an added subject in itself. It should not be considered a separate department. It applies equally in all subject matter areas and departments. The educational camp should be thought of as an additional facility to the total school plant. It is a place to implement the total curriculum. Every modern school, today should not be considered complete without extensive land areas to implement classroom study.

It should also be kept in mind that outdoor education activities should not be considered as extra curricular but as an integral part of school procedure.

The activities therefore should be conducted in school time. Field trips, day camping, and excursions are advantageous to learning when adequate planning and follow-up is made. It is right that they should be conducted in school time where the bulk of the learning would still be carried on in the classrooms. It is a problem of selecting the parts that can best be learned in the open.

For many years the walls of the schoolrooms have been bulging from internal pressure. Now that ways of using the out-of-door classroom are being found, it is high time to let some part of this learning spill outward into the open spaces.