

Outdoor Education – the hidden classroom in urban green settings

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This presentation describes the educational potential of the green city environment, parks, school grounds and botanical gardens – the extended classroom's importance for children and young people's wellbeing and how the indoor and outdoor environment can interact in the learning process. Perspectives of where, what, why, how and when? Place based reflection and learning in and through landscape, knowledge and reflection in actions that brings us back to the hidden classroom.

Theoretical background

With a pedagogy based on *sensory experience*, learning would probably have a deeper approach. Direct physical contact with natural and cultural phenomena increases the *authenticity* in learning by providing a link to an approach that should reasonably be innate in human beings. We learn not only by seeing and hearing but also by smelling, feeling, tasting and touching; “to grip to grasp”, to use a metaphor for the distinctive character of outdoor education. We argue that in the authentic encounter with the outdoor environment there exists an important source of motivation for meaningful and creative learning processes (Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 1997, Szczepanski, 2008). The research group at the Centre for Outdoor Education at Linköping University, has proposed the following definition in an attempt to describe the field of outdoor education in the context of landscape:

- Outdoor education is an approach that aims to provide learning interplay between experience and reflection based on concrete experience in authentic situations.
- Outdoor learning is also an interdisciplinary research and education field, which involves, among other things (National Center for Environmental and Outdoor Education, 2004):
 - the learning space being moved out into life in society, the natural and cultural environment,
 - the interplay between sensory experience and book-learning being emphasised,
 - the importance of place being underlined.

A characteristic of the distinctive nature of outdoor education is action-oriented learning, which emphasises *development of knowledge through activity*. Further, the natural environment (landscape) is regarded as both the *place* and the *object* of learning. We also see outdoor education as a *way* of learning. Learning in the cultural and natural environment is more than an opportunity for fresh air and exercise. Linguistic concepts are incorporated through firsthand experience and direct physical contact with the phenomenon out of doors. Outdoor education enables interaction between emotions, actions and thoughts to take place. In

the institutionalised school, the classroom often limits this interaction.

Outdoor education has the prerequisites to become an integrative, complementary education form in a pragmatic and progressive pedagogy tradition by offering students and teachers opportunities to learn based on observations and experiences in authentic situations (Szczepanski, 2008).

We should create the necessary conditions for learning in interaction between text (book-based learning) and non text-based practices (sensory experience) where physical activity and movement can support learning. The identity of outdoor education can be found in both *edited*, arranged environments such as botanical gardens, zoos and natural and cultural history museums prepared for educational activities and purposes.

It can also be found in *unedited* environments such as our cities, cultivated, forested and water landscapes. Outdoor education is a theoretical perspective, one of the few – if not the only – example of how a pedagogy is defined with one expression, which specifies learning's location: its *where*. Outdoor education's *didactic identity* is determined by the fact that the physical natural and cultural environment (landscape) furnishes the content of learning, i.e. the identity of the phenomenon outdoor education is characterised by actual physical presence also by its holistic nature. Outdoor education is, however, not automatically more holistic than traditional classroom teaching. In the hands of an unaware educator, reality itself can be exposed to fragmentation. The experience, in every sense of the word, is often specific and situated (Dahlgren & Szczepanski, 1997):

Reflection is required to be able to transform experience into knowledge. We argue that the distinctive nature and identity of outdoor education has a potential, as if it is realised through educational awareness, that can benefit meaningful learning (Ibid, p. 40).

With outdoor education, a more movement-intensive form of learning is created in preschool and school, which is currently supported by several scientific studies focusing on our relations to the physical environment (e.g. Grahn et al., 1997). Through the way we have built society, we have eliminated people's natural need of movement and this is probably one of several reasons for the high ill-health figures in society. It is reasonable to assume that the desire to learn is dependent on the feeling of health and wellbeing. The curriculum supplements in these areas are a consequence of a growing number of reports pointing to changes in both health risks and life style. Children do not get enough exercise and gain weight. Since all pupils spend a large part of the day in school, the school's ways of arranging lear-

ning play an important role in the development of their health and ability to learn (The Swedish National Agency for School Improvement, Curriculum Supplement, 2003).

In view of the conditions in modern society, it is important that spaces for outdoor education are created in our urban green environments. Biological and ecological diversity should be increased in parks, green refuges and schoolyards together with opportunities for greater contact with this diversity (Björklid, 2005, Dahlgren, & Szczepanski, 1997/2007, Lindholm, 1995, Szczepanski, 2008, Åkerblom, 2004). Today, the densification of our living environments often eliminates the green areas around the cities, which are replaced by shopping centres, residential accommodation, roads and multi-storey car parks. This trend does not promote the health factors in the relationship between humans and the physical environment. Today's society also

creates school environments in preschool and school, which far too often lack green areas for playing and learning (Danielsson et al., 2001, Mårtensson, 2004, Sandberg, 2002).

When the protective fences increase, the individual is also separated from the surrounding world and access to more movement-intensive learning environments. Today, the principal movement arena for children and young people often consists of a triangle comprising the home, the shopping centre and school. From a health promotion perspective, we must thus begin to think about how the whole education system can help to break this "triangular life form" and create other communicative environments for learning.