

## **THEORETHICAL APPROACHES TO OUTDOOR EDUCATION. PRACTICAL SUGESTIONS**

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**Abstract:** *This article is presenting a very important aspect of nowadays education. Even if outdoor learning is a well-known concept from long time ago, it is newly approached in Romania. It is truly based on organized learning experiences that take place in nature, which has great effect on the improvement of learning quality. Throughout this study, we will present the theoretical bases of outdoor education and how to practically move the curricular content in the outside.*

**Key words:** *outdoor learning, nonformal education, activities, learning experiences, nature*

### **Introduction**

Along history, there has been many attempts to define what outdoor learning really is. This often happen nowadays too because the concept is not wide enough spread and teachers and parents don't have enough information about it. Even if there is information on the topic, usually it is totally or partially wrong. These misconceptions usually lead to severe objections on taking children outside or engaging them into learning activities that would take place outdoors. Parents are not conscious about its meaning and value; they consider it a risk taking. Teachers most of the time, are too comfortable to discuss this with them or to convince them and present them the real meaning and the tremendous value of it in all developmental stages of children: physically, mentally and affectively. Because outdoor learning activities need lots of initial planning and research, also creativity and knowledge, teachers usually decide to remain indoors and continue their well-known teaching style claiming that it is way more comfortable and easier the way they got used too. In a modern education, there is no comfort or easy way. There is only one way: the best way for the child, the way in which children can develop at their maximum capacity, giving them the complete environment whit all its elements. Also, a modern education uses learning by doing techniques, and if it came to that where else can pupil

explore, learn, research, search, find, observe and live, else then nature itself? The best kept classroom and the richest cupboard are roofed only by the sky. (Margaret McMillan 1925). If that is not enough solid foundation, then, this study will be worth reading.

### **Theoretical foundation**

A few years ago there had been given a classical definition of outdoor education, it was a short and concentrated one, defining outdoor learning as education in, about, and for nature (Donaldson, 1958). This definition was describes as being in nature, and education taking place in natural environment, learning about nature, about animals and plants and, for nature, meaning we have to thing in the future and take care of the resources of our planet. As usually there has been many reactions to this definition, from specialists in education, pedagogues and teachers as well. Many of them stated that outdoor education and many of its aspects can be done in the inside too. There can be many activities that don't require an outdoor environment. Others, on the other hand say that the learning process cannot be only about the outdoor environment. Socializing and getting involved personally could be as important as the environmental aspect of it. Hereby I would like to ad that socializing can be done more easily in a free environment then is the usual one, which is indoors. Learning situations are important as well. There are some experts who believe that the main purpose of outdoor learning should be independent learning, free thinking and independent self-reliant problem solving. This definition mentioned above, anyways, had represented a very solid base to start thinking, acting and considering outdoor learning as a new learning method (Priest, 1990).

Then, there were others that reacted to the definition above, saying that outdoor learning is based on relationships. Connections considering people and those related to natural resources. Julian W. Smith described outdoor education as a learning climate for the things which can be learned best outside the classroom (Smith, 1955). What is then outdoor education? Some describe it as a concept that takes into consideration a whole education program, based on experiencing and practical activity, taking place outside of the classroom in the natural environment. It is based on the theory and philosophy, also on the practice of experiential education, ecological education and education for environment. It helps people to better understand themselves, to understand surrounding world, and most of all to get a better knowledge of people around them. It is considered as being a modern learning method, a relatively new type of education, often called as experiential education; it produces strong educational effects, and as benefits of it, mostly are mentioned those involving innovation, leadership, communication and many more of the modern life aspects.

If we want to take a closer look on the whole concept, we have to analyze where exactly to place it as an education type or learning method. It belongs to non-formal education, it is organized or semi organized outside the structures and routines of formal type of education, it a way of learning which children get outside school frame. Some main characteristics of non-formal education, could be that they maximize the learning process, minimize the compulsion of formal education, offers an immediate practical utility of the knowledge that has been learned, it helps to put into practice all the interests and attitudes of kids. The learning frame is really soft, it uses methods such as involvement and participation, it is oriented towards the participant actors, it is based on the experience of the participant, and the authority is not imposed but chosen by the members of the group. It stimulates the development of inter human relationship, promotes teamwork and mostly it can be structured as an interdisciplinary learning type. We have to say that all types of education have major contributions on the integral development of the personality of those involved, none of them can be neglected or ignored, but all three types of education, formal, non-formal, informal, have to work together and complete each other (Moldovan, 2007). The differences between informal learning and schooling have been discussed by Desforges (1995) and Kelly (2007).

<b>Informal learning</b>	<b>Schooling</b>
Led by learner interest and enthusiasm	Led by curriculum design and national orthodoxies, such as “intended learning outcomes” defined by teachers
An imperative to know, or be able to do, something	An imperative to test
At the pace of the learners, at a time and in a place determined by them	Controlled by semesters, academic terms, timetables and over structured lesson designs

Fig.1. Informal learning and schooling (Gibson and Haynes, 2008)

Outdoor education is an experiential method, and it involves the use of all senses, in which most of the learning process takes place in the outdoor. Another question may appear on this topic of outdoor education, and it often involves explanations on synonyms used to describe outdoor education. Some people say that outdoor education is environmental education; some say it is going out in nature; some people confuse it with field trips or forest schools. Of course, all these related words and expressions are actually parts of outdoor education. They do not represent it independently, but if they are used according to the national curriculum and they come as a completion to

indoor activities, they can easily become, all together combined, ways and parts of outdoor learning.

Outdoor education is not as it is usually believed, spending time outside, relaxing, playing, it does not either refer to free time and recreational activities in nature as it is often stated. As its name says, it is learning, and it involves learning activities, it's a way of education, it can often involve residential or journey based experiences in which students participate in a variety of adventurous challenges, but they have to have as a main purpose: learning. The aim of outdoor education is usually not the activity outside, but to learn how to overcome adversity, work alongside others, to develop deeper relationship with nature, with peers and themselves. Some people say that adventure education is outdoor education. I would say that it is only a component of outdoor education as well as environmental education. They indeed develop interpersonal relationship and intrapersonal relationships, relationships, but they alone don't represent outdoor education, but complete it. To conclude all the definitions that have been discussed here, outdoor education is a cultural construct which it is taught about and applied in different ways within and between countries. It is a comprising, personal, environmental, social developmental education (Higgins, 2002).

#### **Directions and causes of the problem**

Outdoor learning involves outdoor activities, environmental education, personal and social development (Higgins and Loynes, 1997). If we want to further analyze the concept, we should consider education in nature, outdoor learning environment, learning out of barriers, learning in landscapes and so on. It means that we can think of outdoor learning diversely.

When subjects are put to think about childhood they often come with the idea of places. Not only that they have memories of places but most of the time they remember outdoors and playing outdoors. The interesting fact about it is that descriptions abound in details: shapes, sizes, light, smells, sound. These all mean that along with an instinctive drive to play, children have also deep connections with nature and the outdoors. Unfortunately, if this is not encouraged, children may not maintain these natural connections that they born with, when they get to grow older. There are some special opportunities given by nature to all participants in outdoor learning activities:

- Physical activities
- Observation
- The involvement of many disciplines, holistic learning
- Development of social skills
- Experiential learning
- The involvement of all senses, etc.

These kinds of opportunities are missed by nowadays children. One direction and cause of the problem can be spending too much time indoors. Other reasons could be lack of time and safe spaces for outdoor play, lack of the awareness and benefits that children can get from the great outdoors and as I have already put the problem, the negative attitudes of teachers and parents as well. The number of hours that children spend indoors in front of screens has also grown significantly in the latest decades (Marie Willoughby, 2014).

One cause of the problem of outdoor learning questions is that we don't know for example where it comes from, what is the historical base of it. The history of outdoor learning presented in easy steps, can be the following:

- Outdoor education started in the ancient Greek civilizations, it had adventurous pursuits, such as training soldiers for the wars and maybe teaching men to ride horses
- In 1907, Robert Baden – Powell has invented the Scouting Movement, where he employed non formal education with the emphasis of practical outdoor activities
- The Outward Bound Movement, started in the U.K. and it was known as the beginning of the modern outdoor education phenomenon, in 1960 it spread all around the U.S.A., and it developed there
- Kurt Hahn, a German educator, is believed as being the founder of adventure education

Another cause of the lack of using outdoor activities in schools can be some limitations that might occur. For example, the lack of equipment or the high cost of trips and materials needed, and then there are some of the space requirements, planning can also take lots of time and often be exhausting. Usually outdoor learning activities can be really complex, and that can scare or get teachers and leaders who prepare these kind of activities confused. There is also an experience needed in order to teach it effectively, and trainers and educators have to take care of the safety of provided spaces. There are also financial limitations, because there are no funds usually for these activities, and students or parents have to support all these outgoings from their personal budget. Managerial limitations might also occur, like the fact that the group members do not participate in decisions, so there is autocratic leadership, and there is the other side of this, when the participants do not get involved in the organizational part, and only one person creates and leads the whole process.

### **Recent perspectives**

Recent research stops to emphasize the great benefits of outdoor education whit all its components. For example different outdoor models can be blended together to the use of adventure or camping trips. Relationship

between students and teachers become improved after this kind of trips and as a result of them. Many cultural connections become suddenly available through these activities. There had been noticed various health benefits which are emphasized by many doctors, during these activities children who are engaged can find positive role models, learn to develop leadership opportunities, individually they can find personal growth and most of all socially, they get the opportunity to bond friendships, to connect with each other and to learn from one another. Through these activities there are great possibilities of learning accountability and independence, to increase inter and intra personal skills, to participate actively, to solve problems and to develop decision making skills.

In order to have an even clearer image of recent perspectives regarding outdoor education, we would like to present some models with its essential elements and some examples of where and how they can be put into practice. For example, there is the common adventure model, with no designated leader, trip expenses are shared by all participants. As an example for this model, we can name University of Oregon Outdoor Program from U.S.A. another model could be instructional schools, which have designated instructors or professors who teach the class, there is an offered fee or tuition charged. An example for this model is the well-known Outward Bound. There is another model, the guided packaged, which is a program that leads guests or clients on different trips and it is fully charged, the money comes from personal funds, and as example we can bring up Mountain Travel or Rocky Mt. River Tours.

There are so many topics covered by outdoor education learning programs, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as a recent perspective, due to the holistic learning view and interdisciplinary learning, and they come as it follows: history, geography, environment studies, emotional intelligence, decision making, adventure and leadership training, respect, responsibility, resilience, self-reliance, social studies and management skills.

There are some teacher responsibilities that have to be taken into consideration before engaging into outdoor learning activities, these have to include technical skills, outdoor living, safety, environmental skills, organization, instruction, facilitation, leadership, knowledge and environmental ethics. It is so very important to take all these into account, because outdoor learning educators, mentors, teachers are role models for all children that are involved in these activities.

What kind of assessments can teachers use to evaluate in a modern perspective, all those children who get involved in these kind of activities? We will try to list only a few of them as an idea for those who want initiate outdoor learning activities but didn't know how to do a correct evaluation:

1. Research
2. Group process
3. Fitness tests
4. Teach backs
5. Group feedback
6. Interaction
7. Self-analysis
8. Interdisciplinary tests
9. Application essays
10. Written tests
11. Journaling
12. Scenarios, etc.

What kind of activities could be included or which are known as outdoor learning activities? There are a few interesting ones that bring great value to the modern outdoor education. There is: archery, abseiling, art and photography, camp craft, cooking, backpacking, biking, bell boating, bush walking, camping, canoeing, expeditions, kayaking, navigation activities (orienteering), rafting, rock climbing, rope courses, swimming and not lastly, winter sports (ice fishing, cross country skiing, snowboarding, building snow caves, etc.).

In order to successfully finalize these activities, there is need to know what kind of equipment we should use. Usually, teachers use materials directly from nature, what they can find from the surrounding environment. For more complex activities, for a better safety, for more organized lessons, for a better preparation, for the involvement of all participants in a more experiential way, there are a few tips on the equipment we can use: water bottles, sunscreen, cap, water proof clothes, boots, back packs, insect repellent, cooking utensils, even an outdoor kitchen set, swimsuits, toiletries, camera, sleeping bag and pillows, bike, rope and water supplies, first aid kits etc. All people involved in these activities should be aware of all issues that might appear even with great preparation and organization done before.

### **Study case**

I would like to take the example of a group of six international students from Norway. At the outdoor learning module, they had orienteering lessons. None of them had any ideas of how it will work or what was it about. Neither of them has ever participated into an action of this kind. They were all studying education so they could put into practice all they have learnt in their own countries and their own classes. Few of them have ever held a compass or used one before. They had basic knowledge on how to use a map but not at professional level. They didn't know what kind of other equipment is used in orienteering activities.

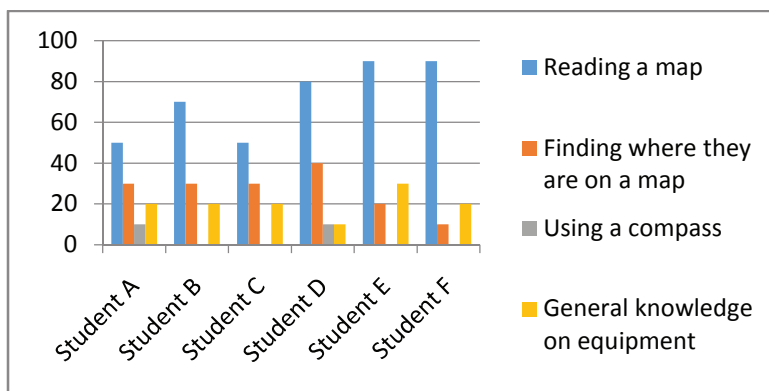


Fig.2. General knowledge on orienteering before the course

At the beginning of the course, they have received primary presentations on what is orienteering about, when and where it can be used, what ages can be used at, who can initiate orienteering activities, how to pick the perfect place, where to get the map from, how to adapt the map to different classes and age groups, and they were asked to give information about how much they consider they know about different elements of orienteering activities. At the beginning, most of them thought they knew how to read a map, recognizing most of the elements on it, but they considered having difficulties on finding themselves on the map or finding the spot they were on from a map. Only two students claimed that they know a bit about how to use a compass but this fact has changed once they were put into the situation of actually using it. That is also the case of most of the pupils of any age in schools. They think they know facts, but when they have to practically do it, they realize that it is different of what they have known.

The course lasted for three months, during this time students had 12 orienteering lessons. After the three months course, the students had answered again to the same questions. This is how the graphic looked like:

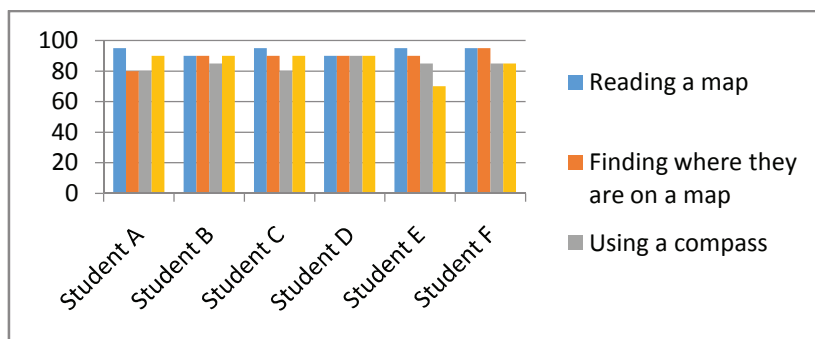


Fig.3. General knowledge on orienteering after the course



### **Analysis of the results**

The results show that there are significant raises in the percentage of general knowledge on orienteering at the six participants. There was higher percentage on the map reading, on finding themselves on a map or being able to recognize and spot a place or choose a pace from the surroundings. In using a compass there were great improvements, especially at those students who have never had contact with one. Those who already had little knowledge in using a compass admitted that it was only theoretical, and after the course they have learned all the steps involved. If we want to go even further more, they now know how to teach others to use a compass and a map. Students, during these classes, have also entered in direct contact with all equipment needed in orienteering lessons. For example, they now know how to assembly an outdoor kitchen, how to use it properly, what kind of food to bring on outdoor orienteering lessons and trips, how to clean up and reassembly the kit. Also they now know how to use water equipment, how to transport it, what to do in case of an emergency, they have also learned some canoeing strikes, how to plan an orienteering trip and how to use the perfect place.

### **Discussion and practical suggestions**

In order to have a clearer image on orienteering, we would like to present an activity. Every orienteering lesson starts with a plan. Every action starts with a lead up plan. As an orienteering activity leader, we have to know exactly how many children we operate with. We also have to choose an area, taking some of the following facts into consideration:

- Size of the area
- Placement
- Age of children involved into the orienteering activity
- Number of children
- Difficulty of the terrain

The next step is the map. If there is no map of the desired area, and the leader can't borrow it or print it, he has to create it himself. There are some apps that can be useful in this case but if there is no other possibility, the leader can adapt an already existing map, to the needs of the group. Also, the leader can show various maps to the students, so that they can get a more obvious image on the types of maps they can operate with. They should discuss with the group, the elements that can be found on a map, for example the colors of all relief forms, how they are represented, what they mean, the measures on map versus their meaning in reality, where the danger zones are, where is slippery or humid areas, what zones to avoid, and so on. All maps should display the following:

- S scale

- A north arrow
- L legend
- T title

There are several activities that can be done at this point, such as: making a map of the classroom. Encouraging accuracy in symbols and scale, making transparencies of a few to use as base maps for classroom map walk, using a base map of the inside and/or outside of the school, using the map for short indoor and outdoor walks, having the students describe where they are on the map at all times, and to verbalize their thoughts, some students could create mini courses for other groups in the class to follow to find checkpoints, answer riddles or find clues, studying a map of neighborhood and locate schools, parks, hospital, etc., looking at maps of different scale and design (city/region/province, road map/recreation, air photo, satellite image). There are three kind of orienteering activities: with compass, map and compass, and with map only.

If the leader decides to use only map orienteering, they can use the following:

- Memory orienteering
- Line orienteering
- Score orienteering

If the leader decides on the compass orienteering, he can follow this simple 4 step activity:

- Learning about the compass and cardinal points
- Circle game
- Pacing
- Point to Point Compass Course

There are some other steps that should be taken into account when planning orienteering activities and they refer to safety and awareness. Students should have general knowledge on wild plants and animals that they could meet on their track. They should know what they can touch, what they can pick and eat. They should be aware of poisonous plants and animals and all the dangers that they involve. They should pack first aid kits and they should know how to use it in case of accidents. Orienteering gear is the other important aspect of this kind of activities. Each student should be responsible for dressing appropriately and bringing his own wristwatch. The well-dressed orienteer must have a whistle, lightweight long sleeve shirt, wristwatch; compass looped at wrist, old shoes, tear resistance old pants. They should also have a backup plan in case of sudden weather changes; they should stick together and act responsibly at all times.

## Conclusions

Through this work, we have tried to present some theoretical aspects of outdoor learning, general meanings, a short history, present situation, short comparisons between formal and non-formal type of education, where to place it as a modern instruction way in schools and so on. Finding it even more useful, we have presented a short research on six international students that have experienced outdoor activities in a study semester in Norway. We have discussed the results and we have seen the benefits of these activities if they are made repeatedly. Not lastly, we have considered it as being useful to present a practical activity of orienteering. We have described how it can be done in a few easy steps. We would generously advise teachers and educators to use outdoor activities of all kind as many times as possible and to introduce them as a completion to the indoor activities, respecting of course all the requirements of the National Curriculum.

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