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Outdoor Education – Exploring A New Paradigm

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As a team of adolescents braved the winds and chilly weather to scramble up a rock phase, the winds whistled through a narrow chimney in the rocky backcountry of the Himalayas. As they belayed each other on the rock phase, emotions ran high and so did the adrenalin. One of the climbers screamed “TENSION!” meaning “Hold me tight, I can potentially fall!” and the whole team rallied behind the belayer. Lips pursed inward, bodies turned numb and faces flushed. The next five minutes elapsed in pin drop silence as the climber made a daring move up the ledge. Instantly, the team broke into a cheer, exuding relief and overflowing jubilation. The storm within had passed. Their class mate was now secure and, surprisingly, they were celebrating a ‘joint’ victory. I overheard one of the girls standing behind me comment to her friend, “Strange, isn’t it - I felt relieved to see Shashank (the climber) reach that ledge. Before this trip, he wasn’t somebody I could handle in the same space as me. But now, it felt so good to see him safe.”

This reminded me of Kurt Hahn’s words: “The experience of helping a fellow man in danger, or even of training in a realistic manner to be ready to give this help, tends to change the balance of power in a youth’s inner life with the result that compassion can become the master motive.” How true this was!

Isn’t this true education - in the outdoors?

What is Outdoor Education?

Ask a bunch of people what outdoor education is and you can rest assured that you will receive a bunch of answers moderately dissimilar from each other. Do you wonder why? Because that’s the DNA of this discerning field! Perhaps the only agreement in defining it is that outdoor education impacts the individual and

the way the individual relates with the environment. Irrespective of where these definitions come from, they can be loosely grouped into those which come from a psycho-social origin (about the individual and learning) and those with an environment origin (self and nature context).

I choose to define Outdoor Education as organized learning that takes place in the outdoors. It is never an end product but often consists of intended (and often hidden) learning disguised with an overt physical activity, meticulously put together with careful planning to achieve the end in mind. Some of the most common principles with which outdoor education programmes are put together include self reliance, compassion, diversity, leadership, environment stewardship, safety, courage, craftsmanship and mastery. Often, these are the intended qualities that outdoor education programmes build through intense engagement with the elements of Nature and fellow explorers.

In India, however, we have unfortunately not moved beyond using the outdoors as a purely adrenalin-based medium. Often, the term ‘outdoor education’ is limitedly understood as ‘adventure sports’. This is far from encompassing all that can be achieved by using this medium. But this notion is fast changing; with increasing international exposure and deeper thought that is being invested in the education process, schools are slowly dabbling with outdoor education programmes and appreciating their eye-opening benefits to students.

However, in the West, outdoor education programmes have been a part of the public school curriculum for over 25 years now. With the setting up of Outward Bound in the late 1940’s triggering the trend and Project Adventure in the 1970’s sealing it, outdoor education programmes (typically adventure based) are an integral part of the middle school and high school curricula in USA, Europe, Australia and New Zealand. These countries have also invested heavily in researching and building theory into commonly held field notions about the benefits (or the lack of them) of outdoor programmes.

Outdoor Education: Theory and Practice

Most of outdoor education philosophy can be traced to Greek origin; they were perhaps the first people who exposed citizens to participation in modern forms of outdoor adventures for the sake of ‘character’ growth. It is intriguing to note that even Alexander the Great was accompanied by scholars as he sailed to conquer the world. The reason for this is even more fascinating; rumour has it that he wanted to build the character of his men by taking them on long adventures, and his scholars on board guided this learning process.

Nature philosophers such as John Muir and Henry David Thoreau laid important foundations for outdoor education, particularly in North America. However, it is the psychological philosopher, William James and another educational philosopher, John Dewey who established education as an exploration in an outdoor experience. Dewey believed that experiential learning formed the basis of any knowledge gaining process. Taking these views further was Kurt Hahn, (an inspiring German high school teacher who first spoke of ‘train by, through and for the sea’) who has, over



the years, emerged as the biggest contributor to the field of outdoor education. Kurt Hahn formed Outward Bound as a moral equivalent of war. He propagated critical pedagogy and stated that “education must enable young people to effect what they have recognized to be right, despite hardships, despite dangers, despite inner skepticism, despite boredom, and despite mockery from the world.”

Given the variations and different ways in which the medium of outdoors has been used by educators, and based extensively on psychosocial theories of

enquiry and pursuit, outdoor education programmes attract explanations from a multitude of theories concerned with the individual self and learning. Loosely grouped, the field draws inspiration from the following:

1. Environmental theory: The inherent belief that Nature is good and that natural environments teach directly or indirectly; also, the fact that human beings were, after all, animals to begin with, hence, a huge sense of home-coming is associated with the outdoors. Also, that Nature gives us unambiguous feedback about ourselves, thus helping us build coping strategies rather than relying on defense mechanisms.
2. Experiential theory: Informed heavily by John Dewey’s Theory of Experience, outdoor education provides guided education experiences for students which Dewey termed as the foremost task of education. The Spirals of Learning, as Dewey called them, are very relevant to outdoor trips – planning/ negotiating–experiencing–reviewing–transferring learning. This is an ongoing process and often the crux of outdoor education programmes.
3. Psycho-social theory: Kurt Hahn propagated the idea of training the mind through the body. He spoke of the Outward Bound process to be a double-edged sword: first the cut, and then, the stronger healing that takes place. Also known as Dunk and Dry Model of training, outdoor education programmes often expose students to crisis and adversity, wherein they are forced to develop coping strategies. The theory of optimal arousal (Duffy 1057), theory of competence – effectance (White, 1959), Bandura’s theory of self efficacy (1986) and Maslow’s hierarchy of needs have brought credence to most outdoor education programmes around the globe.
4. Multi-element: Many outdoor groups (such as The Outdoor School , for example) have developed their own course design. With the basis often being the spiral of experiential education, it is acknowledged that learning

is non-linear and multi-layered, and their programmes integrate multiple domains of learning such as psychomotor, cognitive and human relationships.

Outdoor Education and Academic Curriculum – where do they meet?

In countries such as USA, New Zealand and Australia, outdoor learning has been integrated as a key component in the science, social science, math, environment education, physical and health education curriculum. The Health (H) and Physical Education (PE) curricular statement in New Zealand states that “through learning in health and physical education, students will develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and motivation to make informed decisions and to act in ways that contribute to their personal well-being, the well-being of other people, and that of society as a whole” (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 11). Similarly, in the United States of America, a revolutionary programme called “Project Adventure” started in 1971 helped reinvent and redefine their curriculum for physical education in public schools. Project Adventure is now a household name and has over 1000 schools adopting their adventure education curriculum from K1-K12. There is plenty of research evidence published in the last 15 years that have shown beyond doubt that project adventure programmes have positively impacted the school environment, helped students bring learning into the classroom, community and neighborhood thus equipping them with skills for life. What started as a physical education module has now been adopted for behaviour management, embracing diversity and interdisciplinary learning.

For example, let us consider the experience of rock climbing and see how it affects many curricular areas.

- **Geology and Geography** - climbers often need to understand the structure and strength of the rocks.
- **Math and Physics** - climbers rely on the strength of the equipment being used. The breaking strength of ropes, carabineers and other belay equipment plays a huge role in the way they are

used. The breaking strength of each of these, the actual act of belaying and the wear and tear of hard gear is indeed a lot of science.

- **Human relationships** - the equation between the climber and the belayer brings out a quintessential human dynamic of trust portraying the importance of the nature and strength of the human relationship. It is also about the skill and understanding of the entire system (rocks, belay, belayer, rope etc.), which plays on the mind of the climber.

Hence on outdoor education programmes students could potentially learn about the rock formations and strength of the rock (which guides how they hold and use the rock), different equipment being used (the hard gear, its breaking strength etc.), knots to tie into the harness, belay system and finally, achieve a level of mastery where they belay each other on the climb. This kind of interdisciplinary learning is what we must attempt to bring about through adventure-based outdoor programmes.





Outdoor Education: Indian Context

In India, unfortunately, most schools perceive ‘Sports’ or physical education as limited to competitive sports and team games. There has been a very small section of schools (almost miniscule) experimenting with adventure sports and an even smaller number who have attempted to understand (or experiment with) adventure-sport-based education or environment-based field modules. This can be attributed to a number of reasons, the primary reason being the status of physical education programmes in schools. Most schools use these avenues as coaching centres for competitive sports or free periods for extra academic work, without deliberating upon why the physical education programme needs to be carefully structured. It has been found beneficial to include adventure based programmes as part of the physical education course. Activities such as sport climbing, rock climbing, trekking and camp craft, water sports such as canoeing, kayaking, and rafting, orienteering (map and compass navigation), cycling, ropes courses can be typical inclusions in the physical education curriculum. In fact, the International Baccalaureate (IB) course recognises outdoor and adventure activities as a specialisation for students as part of the diploma in physical education.

Also, given that Life Skills are such an important requirement as students grow into young adults, it is bewildering that our education system appears to have assumed that these skills can simply be picked up and learnt. Or worse, with the Central Board for Secondary Education (CBSE) now making life skills compulsory and assessment based, schools have resorted to employing teachers for life skills - so that they are

expected to take classes on life skills. I would like to argue that most life skills such as problem solving, communication, goal setting, empathy, and decision making need to be learnt hands on. Students need to be provided with an active, live medium to experiment, make mistakes and learn from them to understand the importance or relevance of these life skills - lest they, too, become lessons that are rote learnt and later forgotten. Here’s where an outdoor or adventure based education programme can be effortlessly integrated, as the medium serves the purpose aptly.

Similarly, expeditionary learning has great value for older students who are young adults waiting to chart their career paths. One notable reference here is the KFI schools (Krishnamurthy Foundation of India) who have - for over twenty years - taken older students on expeditions to the Himalayas. Perhaps the single most important value of such trips is the journey within one’s own self – building resilience, courage, leadership, self reliance, adaptability and tolerance to adversity in their students.

Walking up a mountain with the path seeming endless, your backpack tearing into your shoulders, sweat trickling down your nose, and only Nature for company – your lens for life is defined in a very personal and self-defined fashion. You know the edge of your tolerance almost instantly, you feel for those shepherds who live in these hostile conditions (building empathy), you pitch in for team tasks, wait for the storm to pass over (patience), believe tomorrow will be better weather (optimism), and just soak up to natural beauty. Aren’t the mountains teaching students key skills to survive as adults?

Schools must be encouraged to plan expeditions with their senior students to experience all of these emotions and more – in real time. They contribute to character building in ways one cannot even imagine.

Also, as part of their PT period, schools can introduce many challenges and initiatives which require no special equipment - only a skilled teacher who can help facilitate some of the learning that comes out of it. These days, some schools are exploring the idea



of setting up sports walls and ropes courses within the school premises. While these are steps in the right direction, we must not forget that interactions with Nature and wilderness has been at the heart of any outdoor education programme – nevertheless, students must be encouraged to head out of their school premises on outdoor programmes.

The Skepticism and Beyond

When I meet heads of schools or colleges and speak of outdoor education, I almost always sense an undercurrent of fear about how safe these programmes are. A lot of times, we as outdoor educators are told “this is too risky” and hence, schools become apprehensive about engaging in such activities. While it is true that outdoor travel brings with it inherent risks, most of these can be managed with prior training, prudent leadership, and the use of certified equipment. Here, I want to argue at two levels.

Firstly, don’t we believe that risk management is a key lesson for students to learn? At a philosophical level, or even literally for that matter - isn’t life full of risks anyway? How is it that we expect students to navigate life, make the right decisions and manage risks as adults, when we choose to make our education system (teachers, school management included) so risk averse? Instead of shying away from taking

risks, shouldn’t we be teaching students how to identify and analyse risk and, therefore, develop strategies to manage the risk? Teaching risk management must be central to outdoor education programmes, as it is a key life skill that students must have exposure to. Given how critical a life skill risk management is - and (on a lighter note) how even walking on Bangalore’s roads can be risky - isn’t it important for schools to shy away from being risk averse and in fact explore risk management as a core concept? And what better ‘real’ medium to teach this than the great outdoors?

Secondly, assuming that schools do not have the competence to take students on outdoor learning trips and are most often outsourcing this to an outside agency, schools must focus on managing the risk of outdoor travel by verifying the credentials (of the outdoor company/organization), the certification of equipment being used, the level of training (both skill-based and first-aid) received by the staff and lastly, their conceptual rooting in the idea of outdoor education. If the latter is ignored, schools may end up with pure adventure, fun and thrill trips where learning is not structurally ingrained.

Learning and moving forward

Given the benefits of outdoor learning trips, schools must explore designing and integrating experiential

modules to make learning more hands on. It is up to school leadership to make the most of such an easily accessible medium. After all, in our quest to make education more fun and interactive, real and contextual, outdoor education provides ample opportunity to explore not just what lies around us (the environment, Nature, people, etc) but also what fibre we as people are made up of (within). Kurt Hahn always believed that there is more in us than we really think. Isn't edu-

cation about exploring this potential? If you think it is, then read on what this humble outdoor educator (Kurt Hahn) summed up as the essence of education – **“I regard it as the foremost task of education to ensure the survival of these qualities: an enterprising curiosity, an undefeatable spirit, tenacity in pursuit, readiness for sensible self-denial, and above all, compassion.”**

Footnotes

- i) Belaying is a technique used in climbing to exert friction on a climbing rope to secure a falling climber so that he/she does not fall very far – essentially a system of rope safety.
- ii) Belayer - the person belaying and establishing safety for the climber.
- iii) Outward Bound - Outward Bound is an innovative educational idea put forth by Kurt Hahn in the 1930's. It symbolized a ship leaving its safe shores and heading into the open sea metaphorical with youth who were heading out to war leaving the comfort of their homes in the World War era. Now, more than sixty years later and with schools in over 40 countries on six continents and with a wide-variety of programs, Outward Bound is arguably the world's oldest Outdoor Education School.

The Outdoor School is an outdoor learning school, which believes that learning is about creating and engaging with experiences that are exciting, challenging, growth oriented and transformational. Based in Bangalore, it works towards integrating experiential learning as part of the curriculum. www.theoutdoorschool.in

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