

Meaningful Learning For All..... in a Bog???

Do you remember when you were little? Many of you probably had a blast running around outside, just being young and carefree. While outside perhaps you chased a butterfly or hopped after a frog. Maybe you frequented a creek and built dams or tried to capture crayfish without getting pinched. Can you recall building a fort deep in the woods, imagining this battle or that battle; possibly using the fort to nestle in the leaves, in solitude, to read a book? The night sky always seemed to hold stars twinkling with wonder, magic, and awe—just like the fireflies that many of us chased in the early evenings. And, of course, who can forget the chorusing of the cicadas on a warm summer evening; chorusing the night away as our imaginations grew with each and every moment spent outside.

These memories are fun and amazing because they enabled us to use our imagination. These memories *are* memories because they impacted us in meaningful and powerful ways. Lamentably, many children today are not having these and other outdoors-focused nature activities (Burdette & Whitaker, 2005; Hofferth & Sandberg, 2000; Louve 2005) with enough regularity. Instead of being outside with nature, children are now either too wrapped up in non-nature-focused activities, such as electronics and media, or they may be too overly-scheduled after school (homework, the need to attend to this structured activity or that structured activity, etc.) to have the time to be outside or to develop an appreciation for nature—where the imagination can grow and lead one on countless journeys.

Many teachers today are feeling more and more pressure to prepare kids for standardized tests and other means of assessment, which is prohibiting them the ability—or time—to take children outside; outside to read a poem, to craft a “bark rubbing”, to just walk the school grounds to find ant hills, a chrysalis, or watch a flower blow in the wind. In fact, when visiting schools today, it is easy to “feel the pressure” exerted on teachers to ensure that their students score as high as possible on the most recent “critical” standardized test that is now a requirement. Because of this pressure and increased accountability, it is understandable why teachers do not have the time, nor do they feel comfortable in making time to take students outside on a more regular basis. Teachers cannot be blamed for this. In talking to many teachers, they, too, lament the lack of opportunities for kids to be outside—outside just “being a kid”. Unfortunately, kids are missing out on wonderful educational (and other) opportunities when they are not provided time outside.

The question thus becomes this: how can we provide kids with opportunities to experience nature in a way that is meaningful, exciting, and in an easily assessable manner, while at school and away from school? What opportunities are available to kids that are both structured (areas where there are typically pre-planned tours) and unstructured (places where children—and adults—are free to wonder about, learn, and experience nature in essentially any manner they choose.) Of course, just taking kids outside at school, as mentioned, is great. Likewise, encouraging students to spend time outside while at home (perhaps via assigning a simple assignment to complete outside while at home) is, of course, a must. Another way to facilitate this being outside is to immerse the kids in an environment that is new and exciting and open to their imagination; something that is not as familiar, yet is accessible, with little to no cost, and indeed novel.

Outdoor Opportunities for Children

Because of the reality of today’s schools—which seem to focus more, at times, on product more so than process—teachers must identify ways to justify taking children outside to learn in and experience nature. One way to do this, for example, is to take advantage of local wildlife or nature-rich areas that are intentionally developed and available for all, at no or little

cost. Both teachers and parents can help provide access to these areas. An example of such an area that can provide outdoor experiential learning opportunities for children is the Greensboro, NC Bog Garden. The Greensboro Bog Garden (GBG) is a seven-acre site that was established in 1987 by Greensboro Beautiful Inc., in conjunction with the City of Greensboro Parks and Recreation Dept., and is a popular outdoor visitation spot for the community. It has the potential to provide individuals with myriad opportunities to learn about and experience nature.

So What is a Bog and Why are They Cool?

A Bog is a wetland that generally holds innumerable species of plant and animal life. Due to the elevated levels of moisture—and in the case of the Greensboro Bog Garden (GBG)—the copious shrubs, ground foliage, trees and subsequent tree canopy, the temperature is generally a bit cooler than the surrounding area. Because of this environment, the GBG provides children an environment that is both rich in organismal diversity, with an inviting environment to visit—especially during the warm to hot days of the Spring and Summer. Additionally, the GBG has a well-kept wooden boardwalk, in addition to well-delineated trails, for patrons. There is also a designated area for watching wildlife overlooking an adjacent lake.

Kids in Nature: Learning What They Learn

To investigate if an area like the Greensboro Bog Garden can be useful as a pedagogical tool, children were surveyed over a five-week period over the months of June and July. The purpose of this survey was to determine children's responses to the following: how often do you come to the Bog Garden, what was the "coolest" thing you saw there, and, more importantly, what is it you learned while attending the Bog Garden.

There were a total of 80 children interviewed for this investigation. Although we did not see as many children enjoying the outdoors as we would have liked, it was clear to us that they seemed to enjoy their time in the Bog; this was clear from the laughter, smiles, and energy that was exhibited by all the children we saw and spoke with over the five weeks.

So, If Kids Come to the Bog, Do They Learn Something/ Experience Something Exciting and Meaningful to Them? (Yes!...and They Often Could Tell us What It was They Learned.)

To investigate who came to the Greensboro Bog Garden and what it is they learned, individuals who attended the Garden were asked to participate in a short three to five minute survey. Over a five-week period, from June to July 2013, 248 individuals were surveyed. Of these, eighty were children, with the vast majority of these children elementary school age.

Individuals who volunteered to be interviewed did so after spending time in the Bog Garden; that is, they were asked questions after they were returning from their visit. Results are as follows:

- 54% of the children indicated that they *wanted* to and looked forward to coming to the GBG to experience/interact with the animals.
- For the children surveyed, 83% stated that the coolest/most engaging thing they saw *while* visiting the GBG *were* the animals.
- 60% of the children surveyed said they learned something new about nature from attending the GBG. When asked what did they learn or experience that was meaningful, most of the children identified a specific observation from that day: seeing the owls, learning that caterpillars live in the Bog; baby ducks inhabit the Bog, etc., etc.

As stated, the children were extremely enthusiastic and were very eager to share their responses. Over 60% of the children who came into the Bog Garden stated that they left with new information/ learned something new. Whether it was by the signs located around the park,

by their parents, or by the direct observations they made themselves, the children were indeed gaining something very valuable from being outdoors and in an experiential learning place like this one.

Some of the responses that the children said after visiting the Bog Garden had to do with the animals: “You shouldn’t feed ducks bread” said one child, with big eyes. Others, who noticed and played in and among the local Bamboo growing at the Bog remarked that, “Bamboo doesn’t only grow where pandas are”. Furthermore, some of the children made an even deeper connection with nature just by being in it and learned “that nature is all around us and we should always take care of it”.

The trees, animals, and nature itself had an impact on almost all of the children. What is even more important is that when we asked them why they liked to visit the Bog, all of the children gave a specific answer as to why they liked going there, insisting, whether they knew it or not, just how much they were drawn to and enjoyed being outside. Humans have an instinctive liking for nature, and sometimes it is just something as simple as getting them out there to realize that. The kids who frequented the bog echoed this sentiment.

Implications for Educators

It is clear from our surveys that an important aspect to getting children interested in being outdoors is a desire to see and/or interact with the animals. This is not surprising, but it is powerful to acknowledge that about 83% of the children surveyed in this investigation said that the coolest, most engaging thing that they saw were the animals. They also articulated that this was the reason that brought them back to such an outdoors learning environment. Whether it be the birds, chipmunks, owls, ducks, geese, insects, or any other of the organisms inhabiting the Bog, children were drawn to them in many ways. These experiences clearly brought them back to the Bog...made them want to come back to the Bog. We find this to be of utmost importance as it is a way to encourage children to get outdoors and to expose them to nature. Teachers can use this as a hook...as something to capitalize on a child’s intrinsic motivation to learn while outside.

Finding ways to get a child to learn in an outdoor environment where animals are found is beneficial and a wonderful tool to engage kids to want to be outside. Given this, educators should indeed encourage more time spent outdoors for multiple reasons: learning does occur while outdoors and an appreciation for nature develops that we hope will transcend generations. We also found that 92% of the adults and parents who went to the Bog said they valued nature because they were always outdoors when they were little, doing things like building forts or playing in the woods. Consequently, these experiences are why they bring their children to nature-like places like the Bog.

(Final Thoughts) Kids do Need Nature—and They Learn While They are There!

An unstructured and free to the public outdoor space like the Bog Garden can give children an engaging learning experience that resulted in them learning something about nature. Children were involved in ways most do not get to experience anymore on a consistent basis, for multiple reasons; be it less opportunity to spend time outdoors or an over-dependence now on media for entertainment. Luckily, places such as the Greensboro Bog Garden can remedy this lack of experiences in nature or, as Louve (2005) coins it, *nature deficit disorder*. The use of unstructured learning spaces can thus be very beneficial in teaching kids and also in facilitating an appreciation for nature, a love for life, or *biophilia*.

Clearly, children do learn from being outside. And they love being outside. Teachers should accordingly continue to focus on ways to provide opportunities for kids to do something that they love to do—be outside and learn.

Citations

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