

# SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL ASPECTS OF OUTDOOR EDUCATION

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**Abstract:** One of the most important objectives of nowadays education is to develop useful members of the society. This is only valid if the individual is socially and psychologically developed. How can this be possible? Well, the answer is in the organization of activities in which pupils can practice group cohesion, cooperation, respect, self-esteem, self-discipline and the care for others and their well-being. Outdoor activities can be the perfect answer for this social need. During this study, we try to present the most important social and psychological aspects of outdoor learning and examples of how it can be put into practice.

**Key words:** educational process, outdoor learning, social skills, group, cooperation

## **Introduction**

Outdoor learning is a concept that aims an education based on practical activities and even more, learning experiences that are deployed outside the classical environment of school rooms. It's a relatively new type of education, also called in the specialty literature as an experiential learning method, and it is mostly based on the philosophy, theory and practice of experiential studying, ecological education, and environmental education. It is known as a great way of developing in children, concepts such as self-esteem, self-understanding, the better fathoming of those that surround them, and also the comprehension of the natural world. This new type of education produces educational effects that are longer lasting and are much stronger than any other, regarding the mastering of new and complex situations that occur in the modern society. Also it develops psychosocial characteristics at very early ages, such as leadership, innovation, communication, team spirit and mostly creates a clear self-image of the individual. Even if it is

considered as being part of the non-formal education, we have to do some imprints about the whole concept.

### **Theoretical foundation**

Outdoor learning is a non-formal type of education which happens outside of the routine of the classroom, it maximizes the learning process, minimalizes the compulsion specific of the school, offers an immediate utility of the learning content. It allows to put into value all the interest and aptitude of those involved in diverse contexts, uses methods which stimulates involvement and participation of pupils, it has got a flexible structure, the learning process is optional and orientated towards the participants, the authority is chosen by the members of the group, Outdoor education stimulates inter-human relationships, facilitates the promotion of teamwork and of an interdisciplinary learning. It is based on the experience of the participants and it is mostly realized by the one who learns. All three types of education, formal, non-formal, informal, has complex contributions over the integral development of the personality of those involved and they are all useful, none of them can be ignored or neglected.

The founder of the first experiential outdoor education school was Kurt Hahn, in 1941, as a result of the need of the modern society and as a reaction to the miss use of the modern technology and the evolution of it. The decline of creativity, practical competencies, self-esteem, self-discipline, inter human compassion and so as the lack of the imagination, the decline of physical condition have all brought to this new type of education. It was created for both the body and the mind of young people, and now in schools it has a different meaning, which is to offer its participants the possibility to develop and reach their maximum potential, and after that, to help others to do the same. It is based on challenges, on different tasks, and it develops an innovative curiosity, and invincible will, tenacity and compassion. Nowadays, Outward Bound, is the biggest organization of adventure education, and it is spread in over 30 countries. In Romania, Outdoor Life is one of the first organizations of this type, it is based on the model of outdoor education. Synonyms for outdoor education can be: education based on experience, education for environment, those also being non formal types of education and they also contain personal development education, physical education, education for health. Education for experience is a whole range of philosophy and methodology in which participants are stimulated to learn through direct experiences, direct exposure to the natural environment and its elements, reflection processes, observation, to grow in knowledge but mostly to develop competencies that are valuable for the modern society. John Dewey, 1938, said that experiential education has a great value because it creates abilities and competencies that no other education can create. It is also a fun way to learn.

Outdoor education or the education beyond institutionalized schools is a concept that aims a type of education based on practical activities that are done in

the outside environment. This type of education includes many other modern types of education, that help pupils develop personally and socially. These are: experiential education, the most direct and clear learning method, the one that encourages children to get involved on all three stages, physically, emotionally and mentally, environmental education that helps understanding and protecting the local environment, also learning through and from nature, social education and so on. It also stimulates exploring, decision making and why not gaming. It also has a non-formal character, and follows visible changes at behavioral level, and also at attitudinal level of pupils that participate to it. It has to carefully be prepared because it has to be secure in all its ways. Inside of its frame everything is presented actively and practically, (Banning, 2011). It is also based on personal experiences but to which has to be added learning experiences too. It is hard to define outdoor learning as a concept, because of its wideness, and also because it has to involve many aspects. Hereby we are going to stop on its social and psychological aspects. We are also going to present some of the most significant definitions of outdoor learning that are in great connection with its psychosocial characteristics. For example, Lappin, 2000, defines outdoor learning as a learning process which takes place outside and which includes environmental learning, adventure education, camping, outdoor activity therapies and some aspects of outdoor recreation. Priest, 1990, for example, defines it as a learning method, that uses experience and involves the use of all senses. Generally it's an exposure of natural environment, but this is not always the case.

### **Direction and causes of the problem**

In our modern society, lately, specialty literature has put up the problem of stress at children at the most young ages possible. Ekeland, Heian, Hagen, Abbott and Nordheim, 2004, found that there are beneficial effects of physical activity both on self-esteem and depression and anxiety. These gains can be mediated by the multiple effects of physical activities and exercise on stress exposure (J.D. Brown and Lawton 1986). It was found as a direction to the cause of these problems, that exercise can obtain positive motivational properties through the association to other positive stimuli like social interaction and in this way to influence the tolerance to stress ( Salmon, 2001). School policies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, want to take care of all these problems, by implementing new directions, and this way to increase the rate of physical activities in children's schedule. The potential beneficial effect of physical activities, plus the use of natural environment has great effects on the wellbeing of children. Some studies show that even academic performance is improved by the use of the school yard or any other natural environment in the activity of schools. Also problem solving abilities, learning styles, adaptability to them, willingness to stay on task, even test scores have been improved by the use of the natural environment shows Lieberman and Hoody, 1998 from its study in 14 schools in California. Wells and Evans, 2003,

show in their studies that even the coping mechanism with adversity in children, mostly adolescents, has improved by exercising in nature and improving wellbeing both physically and psychologically. Coffey, 2001, has showed in his study that antisocial behavior such as violence bullying, vandalism and littering as well as absenteeism has been reduced significantly after the use of up to only 5 hours of spending time in nature, mostly replacing the inside contain of the Curriculum and moving it outside the classroom. Actually the combined effect of physical activity and natural environment can cause the benefits of outdoor education in children's wellbeing.

### **Recent perspectives**

The main purpose of the use of outdoor learning is to produce changes at the level of physical abilities, inter personal level, at the level of relationship with other members of the group, towards self and not lastly toward the behavior of the participants regarding natural environment. No matter the contents that are taught, outdoor education is a whole learning process which takes place in a natural environment. It comes as a completion to the formal education type, but it is done in the most pleasant way possible. It also sustains all the education and learning that pupils get in school and in families, but it is done through the use of all the modern methods: team games, free discussions, role plays, acting, practical activities, group method, brainstorming, case studies, learning through actions, learning through activities, trips, visits, event organizing too. It is not a learning experience without taking into consideration the scholar Curriculum, but it bolds and underlines the knowledge that is stipulated in it. In other words, it gives pupils and all people that are involved, the possibility to learn by doing. It supposes a lot of planning, reflection, observing and action on the activities that are going to take place and also the effort of applying learning in new situations in the outside environment. The most important aspect is taking all these learning experiences to even a higher level, and that would be the one that we have mentioned above, a longer lasting, more emphasized type of education. That is applying it in everyday life in the society, in the family, and in the classroom.

Outdoor learning has very well defined meaning. It is different from just going out in nature in order to relax. This is why it has to be beneficial and to support education. In order to have a meaning in education it has to contain active participation of subjects at specially designed activities in nature. So, outdoor learning includes curricular elements, to create a holistic learning experience though nature, above what education in a classroom can do. It is also important to underline, to emphasize a few distinct characteristics. Outdoor learning is not just taking student outside as a change of environment, even if it involves using the curricular contain for it. It has to be more than that. It has to represent activity, experience, learning, communication. It is not just going out and participating to re-creative activities in nature, it involves human effort of planning and developing,

which is definitely more than relaxing outside. It is not focusing just on teaching and learning competencies of a safe participation in a natural environment activity, it is referred more to what can we take out as learning content of curriculum, from a competition and adventure experience, from the natural environment. It is not an environmental education in which we learn about environment, it supposes the natural ambiance in which children can better understand and appreciate environment that surrounds them, but it is also connected to their connection with the environment. It is pupil centered and it helps to form competencies of working on a theme, working in an interdisciplinary way, and holistically. In this way it is important for teachers to be able to create real educational situations which strengthen self-confidence, by holding as many activities or classes in the outside area, without only using workbooks and books. If it is about using outdoor learning with preschool children, it can be organized differently, in the form of games, practical household activities, creation workshops and trips.

### **Study case**

For example, in the case of the primary school pupil P.J. who is 8 years old, he does not adapt to his classroom, he is marginalized and aggressive towards the other children in his group whether it is during activities or playing, he cannot participate to cooperation or socialization kind of activities. He is a single child and the relation between the subject and his parents are ones of love, care and protection. At preschool he was violent from the first time he was introduced to the group and tried to gain everyone's attention by any means. He has a hard time concentrating on certain activities but he also distracts the other children's attention by inappropriate attitudes. The other children avoid him continuously accusing the fact that he is abusive. His behavior was due firstly to his parents who by the time he was 4, gave him everything in return for nothing and did not ask him to obey any rule. After talking to his parents he was put under observation because of his behavior, hoping that with the help of outdoor activities, positive changes will be made in his behavior making him conscious of the impact that he has on others when he is aggressive but also the consequences of such a behavior.

The program in which he was included started with the observation of his behavior for several days in different moments of a day. The research process started from the hypothesis that if outdoor learning activities were introduced as a completion to the indoor ones specified in the National Curriculum, for a period of 5 weeks, there will be positive progress in his behavior, adaptability, communication, self-esteem, group work and a better understanding of people and objects that surround him. There were 2 variables included. First, the independent one, which was the use of outdoor learning activities, the second one, was the dependent variable, the expected changes in his behavior. The main instrument used to gradually check the results was the observation. There is also a chart that presents the gradual improvement of the stage in which changes were made in the

behavior of the subject but also the range in which the use of outdoor learning activities made improvements on the behavior of the subject.

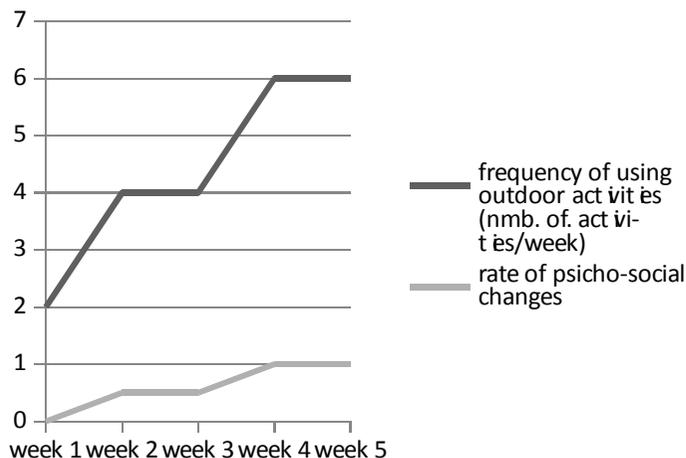


Fig. 1. The psychosocial changes function to the outdoor activities

### Intervention

The first step of the methodology of intervention is the approach of the study, by analyzing the actual situation of the subject, his abilities, his behavior, his strengths and faults. Another step is referring to the psychological observations. He is intelligent, his language is rich, has a logical memory, rich imagination, little focusing, egocentric, external motivation, selfish, unable to share ideas or objects, unable to work in a team. Regarding the social relations and his sociability the relation between his parents is in harmony, based on love, respect, trust and mutual support. That is not the case when it comes to the relationship with others: teacher, colleagues, neighbor children, foreigners. The relations with the children who are his age are tensed, everyone avoiding him because of his aggressive and boring behavior. He likes competitions, but most of the time he is not honest, he cheats and when he is eliminated from the game he cries and becomes aggressive. He does not accomplish his duties during activities, he gets bored easily. He does not cooperate; he either wants to solve it by himself or does not solve anything at all.

The next step is the elaboration of strategies of action. At personal level: stimulation of motivation for cooperation and helping; modification of the attitude of the child through group work; the modification of his attitude towards the group and the relations in the group. At the level of the group: the creation of more situations in which they should work in groups, a higher level of solicitations in the group, making the child responsible during activities, especially group activities. The level of all factors concerns the parents, colleagues and friends.

The last step is taking the decision of improving the behavior. This step includes elaborating a personalized intervention plan by using specific strategies

and outdoor learning activities (Nicu, A., Conțiu, E., (2010). Their aim is to intensify the relations and the involvement in every kind of activities and to favor sociability. The subject's problem is that his relation to those who are his age is problematic but with the help of this plan it is aimed to intensify his attitude towards other children's problems, the optimization of his focusing abilities and minimization of negative behavior as well as sharing duties with those who are in his group and mostly the change of his image about himself and where he is situated in the group, especially the knowledge of his duties and roles in the group. The observations took place in the course room, the experiment took place in the school yard, parks, field trips, the nearby forest.

The objectives of the experiment are:

- the identification of the role of outdoor learning activities in the children's behavior, the level of communication, level of involvement in activities and the relations between the children;
- the analysis of the relation between socio metric indicators and the level of communication of primary school pupils;
- the analysis of the relation between socio metric indicators and the level of communication between children.

### **Analyses of the results**

The results after the intervention include a progress regarding his involvement in didactic activities, as well as modification of his attitude towards his colleagues through creating relations in the group, the progress of the image of himself and the role that he gives himself within the group that he belongs too. With the help of including outdoor learning activities as a completion to the custom indoor activities, and the organization of activities in a manner of cooperation, a progress is noticed. After the five week program, the subject is capable of sharing, both ideas and objects, communicates with his classmates, is more self-secure, trust more his parents and his neighbors, is able to initiate activities that engage competition, also changes were observed in his academic activity, higher test scores. During the experiment, it was noticed a high level of independence and assuming responsibility. We can conclude that the use of outdoor learning activities did not have an immediate effect on the subject, the progress being obvious only after a while. It was shown once again that these kinds of activities which involve curricular aspects in nature are beneficial not only at individual level, but also at the level of the group. The attitude of the group towards the subject has also changed due to the new type of interactions between them but mostly because of the free environment that supported the whole learning activity.

### **Discussions**

As it was shown for many times, outdoor education is indeed a great method of improving life, both socially and psychological. Some believe that the

purpose of outdoor education is not sensible stewardship but independent, learning, free thinking and self-reliant problem solving as it is told by Simon Priest, the instructor of the principals of outdoor education at the University of Oregon. Outdoor learning is a concept that emphasizes relationships concerning people and natural resources. It is also a great way of modern experiential learning which require full use of the six senses, and involves all three domains of the participants: cognitive, affective and motoric. Perception is also included and observation as well because outdoor learning appeals to the use of senses. It includes more sensory than abstract theoretical matters. Children involved in outdoor education activities use their senses, their muscles, brains, and enjoy nature but also learn through the whole process. Learning in the outdoor education system is indeed a matter of building relationships. And it's not only about nature but mostly about people. It involves all categories of relationships, firstly, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and then all the connections between them. It emphasizes the way people cooperate with each other, how they communicate, how they trust one another, and this, during all the interactions that are only possible by engaging into outdoor learning activities. Then, on the other half of the issue, level of independence is raised, self-concept, the perception on their abilities, their limits and their positive and negative sides are also very well defined. The other kind of relationship that is developed is how people interact with their surroundings. How can they influence the well preservation of it.

## **Conclusions**

As a conclusion we can all agree that no matter which type of outdoor learning we use in the academic process, no matter at what age, these activities develop confident individuals who solve problems cooperatively and who can make judgments regarding self, people, ideas and why not even environment. This study, has reached out to different kind of issues that can appear regarding the concept of outdoor education, regarding free time activities and their impact on the personality of pupils engaged in them. The final results have shown the importance of introducing these activities in everyday life too at the level of group cohesion, self-esteem level, self-discipline, taking care of others and taking others into account, making a better social climate which lead to a new quality regarding methods and principals of the educational space. One of the most genuine preoccupations of the human community is to create adaptable members of the society through education. This formation, supposes a multilateral development of the individual in perfect connection with the needs and demanding of the contemporary society, not with the use of abstract theories but corresponding to real aptitudes on which the whole personality of the individual is based.

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