Nature's New Educational Mandate: No Child Left Inside

Type: Horace Feature
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Source: *Horace* Fall 2007, Vol. 23 No. 3

It's 11:30 am, and the energy has shifted in the third/fourth grade classroom. Eyes begin moving from math work to the clock on the wall. Students begin whispering the "R" word. Even students who have not yet mastered telling time with an analog clock know that "the big hand on the 9" means it's time for recess.

I'd like to be able to say that my exciting math curriculum has the ability to stem the recess tide, but we all know, recess is a powerful force. We've all heard the universal response to the question, "What's your favorite subject in school?" And, at The Marlboro School, a K-8 rural public school, in the foothills of the Green Mountains in southern Vermont, recess is "way cool."

Here, young children roam the woods, make mud bridges in the stream, climb trees, and play tag among the meadow thicket. Older kids play a variety of sports on the playing field and hang out on student-made wooden benches. In winter, there's sledding, snow sculpture, and snowball fights. Kids return to the building for lunch 30 minutes after the long awaited release, red-cheeked, smiling, and chatting about plans for the next recess. But is 30 minutes of outdoor time in a six and a half hour school day really enough?

According to child advocacy expert and author Richard Louv, 30 minutes isn't nearly enough. In his book Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder, he discusses the events which have led our culture to move indoors and the subsequent consequences, a national trend of childhood obesity, depression, and Attention Deficit Disorder. Louv highlights the increasing difficulties in getting kids outdoors: competition with screens, media-exploited fears, more homework, and a decrease in natural areas.

But there is hope! With a little understanding, some risk-taking and careful planning, courageous teachers can strongly influence the opening of windows and doors for our nation's children while keeping up with mandated standards, personal ethics, and the CES Common Principles.

The results? Healthier, happier kids with increased creativity, broadened thinking skills and, according to Louv, better GPAs and higher standardized test scores! The benefit is kids who will grow up to shape the success of our relationship with a world in which we hope to survive. It's a great book. I wish I had written it. For the past 25 years, I have been dedicated to environmental-based experiences and curriculum. Indoors and out, with kids of all ages and with adults preparing for a teaching profession, I'll try to persuade anyone who will listen.

In the teacher-training course I offer at Antioch New England University, one activity asks adult students to access one of their most vibrant middle childhood memories and express the experience in a creative presentation. In all cases, memories involve a special place or treasure, almost exclusively nature-related.

Whether it's a neighborhood tree fort, a family vacation on a lake, finding a bird's nest with a broken egg, or engaging in some covert ritual in the elements, each memory is brought alive in the present due to its sensory-potent content. People describe the essence of memory vividly and often comment on the loss they feel in "growing up." Never has a student described a school-based experience.

In my classroom, we bring nature news and outdoor treasures from home for our over-populated science table, keep ongoing personal nature journals, and write poems about spotted salamanders. We traverse the streams and rivers of our local watershed because kids discover in a morning meeting that their homes are all connected by it and get an idea. "Hey, Jodi! Let's walk it as far as we can!"

They learn Vermont history from reading the stone-walled landscape, math by building bird boxes, and

computer skills designing field guides. They read My Side of the Mountain, play with solar-powered cars, and tell stories from the point of view of a frog. And all the while, we are well within the boundaries of the duly noted and ever-present standards.

One cold November day last fall, I found myself standing around a fire with 21 eight, nine, and ten year-olds, cooking moose meat and venison on sticks, listening to kid-perfected Abenaki storytelling and passing around a birch bark basket full of seeds and berries. I paused, realizing we were in the center of a quintessential teaching moment that I've since used as a touchstone for why the natural world and academic skill development are inseparable.

That day was student-directed, strongly hands-on, expansive in the principle "depth over breadth," and steeped in academics. It was an event culminating a trimester-long Vermont Studies Unit on the Abenaki people. The preparation for this event involved reading, writing, research, oral communication, and computer skills. Each student became an expert on one aspect of Abenaki life and presented work to the class. This approach personalizes the learning as kids chose topics in which they find personal meaning. Students presented an interactive demonstration or activity, thus incorporating the "exhibition" approach, and each student learned and retold a story from the Northeast Woodland tradition. Creating curriculum that involves a variety of activities makes the content accessible to all students.

The event involved community interaction as well. Parents fed the fire, local hunters sent in freshly-harvested meat, and a trip to the local food co-op yielded dried herbs and spices from wild plants which can be identified in our local plant communities. Bringing history to the "here and now" for the nine year-olds by connecting it to the forest they use every day at recess takes print-based curriculum to a tangible dimension. This is the "stuff" that sticks. The excitement leading up to the event kept a potentially inaccessible topic alive for three months. This is where embracing "less is more" pays off. After kids understood who lived here before us, how the Abenaki people stewarded the land and learned from the animals, they spent the next four months immersed in the natural history of the forest community and publishing a field guide to the Marlboro School playground.

On the last page of Last Child in the Woods, Richard Louv tells about his own quintessential moment and writes, "These are the moments when the world is made whole." Not every day in my classroom is like the day around the fire, and I can assure you I didn't spend any extra time outside my regular teaching week making this happen. But a large part of my every day work is devoted to the co-creation of a variety of experiences that connect people to the outdoors and each other.

Nature writer Thomas Berry wrote, "Teaching children about the natural world should be treated as one of the most important events of their lives." Crafting clay identification markers for the nature trail at our local park, producing an original musical that highlights integrated learning from a year-long thematic study on water, and interviewing a neighbor who manages his five acre meadow for Monarch butterflies are just some examples of how progressive education in the elementary grades can keep kids place-based and grounded in the natural world. We are forging instructional memories for kids to draw from as they become the land stewards of the future.

What's truly needed is a full-on infusion of nature-based literature, projects, learning stations, field trips, and systems-based year-long initiatives into the lives of our nature-starved children. It's what kids do naturally when the screens are shut down and the doors left open. Let's not forget the very basic yet endangered experience of simply breathing in some fresh air. Fresh air is essential for healthy bodies and brains, encouraging the flow of oxygen in supporting all tasks in a school day. Get kids outside, moving their bodies and interacting with their surroundings and you will notice more focus in reading circle and math class. Courageous teachers are the ones to do it!

And while figuring out just how and when to make this all happen, don't forget that recess is just around the corner.

Jodi Paloni lives and teaches third and fourth grade, surrounded by the beautiful and diverse forests of Marlboro, Vermont. She wants everybody to know she's taught lots of urban/suburban kids, too! She welcomes responses to her thoughts at jpaloni@verizon.net.

This resource last updated: February 22, 2008

Database Information:

Source: *Horace* Fall 2007, Vol. 23 No. 3
Publication Year: 2007
Publisher: CES National
School Level: Elementary
Audience: New to CES, Teacher, Parent
Issue: 23.3
Focus Area: Classroom Practice
STRAND: Classroom Practice: instruction