



Learning Outside the School Classroom Setting: The Case of the Physical Education

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Abstract

Outdoor learning, such as the one taking place within the school module of the Physical Education, is an educational process that occurs through activities in the external environment, outside the traditional classroom setting and appears to have aroused intense research interest lately. A characteristic feature of external learning is the educational activity that takes place in the external environment and is therefore referred to as a method of acquiring education through experience (experiential learning), and as a method of learning through relationships and interactions with other people. This paper deals with both aspects and aims at analyzing thoroughly all the dimensions and parameters that play a decisive role in the success of such an educational.

Keywords: Education; Teaching; Outdoor Learning; Learning Process.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, there has been a strong interest of the educational community in the design of educational programs which are to take place outside the formal classroom environments of educational institutions, such as schools, universities, etc. As early as 1995, Warren [16] claims that the educational research must escape from the internal boundaries of the classroom and should start examining the educational process in external environments as well, since learning cannot only be restricted to the narrow boundaries of the formal school environment. There are many terms used in the international literature for outdoor education, such as experiential learning, outdoor learning and outdoor adventure education in the school yard.

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These terms are used depending on the educational provider of the knowledge, the educational environment and the purposes of the specific educational program. However, in this paper we will use the term "education in an external environment through experiential activities" or "external education". Studying the interactions between students and teachers in an external environment outside the classroom can shed more light upon the learning processes that take place in external activities as these seem to provide more opportunities and possibilities than the ones offered in the classroom [1,2]. Focusing on such interactions means that we focus on all participants in the learning process and the interactions between groups and subgroups so that we can develop a more holistic view of their experiences and gain a deeper understanding of the complexity of the educational process in an external environment outside the classroom. A review of the literature has shown that concepts such as group dynamics, group norms, the number of participants as well as leadership have been extensively studied in outdoor education.

The work conducted by many researchers [4,5,9] has led to the conclusion that there are three types of learning process in extracurricular education: a) Work in a scientific field with external visits b) educational school activities, such as physical education in an external environment or even at a stadium or gym and c) the development of research tasks (projects) in the school environment and in the wider social environment. Furthermore, in the above types of learning process, an important role is played by the students themselves, especially in the design of learning processes outside the classroom. There is research that focuses on students' expectations and experiences [2], on the way learning outcomes differ in different groups of students and the way young people perceive different types of learning activities in outdoor environments. Working in groups in outdoor education has proved to contribute positively to students' socialization, cooperation and efficiency and therefore, this is considered to be a key element in the development of programs aimed at young people. Research should focus more on the processes and social interactions among team members, because these appear to be decisive for the development and the effectiveness of outdoor education programs.

In addition, Gilbert and colleagues [6] also stress that outdoor education is a method of teaching and learning in an outdoor environment and which mainly deals with outdoor activities related to direct and multisensory experiences by integrating nature, community and individuals. They explain that outdoor education increases the physical, emotional, cognitive, social and spiritual levels of the individuals. Deciding on how to refer to the outdoor learning it's a very tricky problem. This was because in its origins it had been quite eclectic as it borrowed from many different disciplines and spheres of activity. This diversity within outdoor learning is recognized by Rickinson and colleagues [13], suggesting that this is because the concept of outdoor learning is a cultural construct, so across different countries, it is thought of and applied differently. In agreement, each description recognizes that outdoor learning is essentially comprised of three spheres; outdoor activities, environmental education and personal and social development. In this paper, we will further refer to the design of outdoor education programs based on groups and group experiential activities, shedding more light on the dimensions and characteristics of learning through outdoor experiences. More specifically speaking, in chapter 2, we will describe the characteristics of experiential learning and in chapter 3, we will present how to implement such learning through external classroom programs. In chapter 4, reference is made to the integration of learning processes through experiential activities in outdoor classroom programs. Finally, in chapter 5, we will discuss the teacher's role in experiential learning.

2. Learning Through Experience (Experiential Learning)

There appears to be a strong relationship between experience and learning [3]. This relationship shows that the process of learning is one in which knowledge is created and constructed through the transformation of experiences. Furthermore, learning is described as a change in knowledge, attitudes and behavior which can be relatively permanent and can take place through formal education, schools, universities, etc., vocational training and experiences that are acquired outside the formal education setting. Because the relationship between experience and learning seems so close, experience and learning mean almost the same thing which Beard and Wilson [3] called experiential learning as a tautology and repetition of the same thing. However, they do not completely discard the term learning, but they consider experience to be the underlying process through which learning is built. This is typically the case with very young learners, but at older ages all experiences do not always result in learning. Not every experience is equally important for learning. Our brain tends to filter out various stimuli and that is why not every single experience stays with us. However, according to Beard and Wilson [3], all experiences that are transformed into learning are unique and personal in all cases.

3. Experiential Education in Out-of-Classroom Programs

Rickinson and colleagues (Rickinson and colleagues 2004) state that this concept relates to a wide variety of educational activities that take place in many settings. Such activities include out-of-the classroom adventure education, science field studies of common interest, natural environment studies, outdoor play, heritage education, environmental education, and agricultural education Rickinson and colleagues [13] consider that experiential learning in non-classroom educational programs is such a common method that they consider this mode of learning identical to outdoor learning and use the terms and concepts to express the same sense. But certainly experiential education seems to be a feature of outdoor education and can be regarded among others as an educational activity in educational programs outside the classroom. Scott and Gough [14] define environmental learning as a distinctive feature of outdoor education and identify nine thematic categories of interest for learning, identifying a range of experiential learning activities which may promote environmental learning. These ideas are applied to outdoor education and a number of different practices have developed resulting in the development of a variety of methods with interesting results. According to Lewis and Williams [10], field based learning is the most established type of experiential learning and has long been applied and integrated into educational systems. On the other hand, according to Rickinson and his colleagues [13], external education is widely used in science-based learning and the design of such educational programs is very common, including project work, case studies, cooperative education, learning services, etc.

4. The Integration of Experiential Activities in External Education

When we start to think about integrating experiential activities into outdoor education programs, there are always a number of issues that we need to consider.

- 1) We should take into account the conditions and peculiarities of the external environment in which the educational activity is to be carried out. In each environment, there are special conditions that not only

are they closely related to the natural conditions but they are also dependent upon the social, economic and cultural events of each region [4].

- 2) We should carefully analyze the students' population and identify their particular learning needs. Are they elementary school students, are they in middle school or high school, or are they adults? It is a parameter that must be taken into account while designing teaching activities.
- 3) We should identify appropriate learning activities for the student population as well as carefully decide on the course content; which activities are suitable for the content of our course and at the same time which ones are suitable for the cognitive and developmental needs of our students.

For external learning activities, there are also various reliability issues that may be raised. For example, how we will choose the appropriate external partners with the educational organization we belong to and how we should place the students so that they all have equal access to knowledge are some that need further consideration. All the above mentioned may arise when education is conducted outside the traditional school classroom.

5. The Role of Teacher in Learning Through Experience

The role of the teacher in an experiential learning activity outside the classroom is highly different from the role of the teacher within the traditional school classroom. Within the out-of-class learning, the teacher is the guide, the leader, a source of experience and knowledge and a valuable supporter. Since students should be in control of their own learning, the teacher should try to restrict the authoritarian influence he may exert and strive to become an integral member of the developing group instead [8]. Students gather strength and accumulate energy when the initial promise of their academic freedom begins to become a reality and not just a promise. When students acquire self-determination, then the intervention of the teacher as a leader may be regarded as necessary in situations where the group does not have the ability and the skills to overcome the obstacles encountered [16].

6. Conclusion

In this paper, we thoroughly studied the importance of learning through experience in outdoor education programs, which take place in the outdoor environment, away from the traditional classroom. There seems to be a strong relationship between experience and learning. This relationship shows that the process of learning is a process in which knowledge is created and constructed through the transformation of experiences and it is described as a change in knowledge, attitudes and behavior, being easily carried out through the experiences gained in programs of external education. We concluded that an important factor for the successful outcome of programs outside the classroom is the human factor and the interactions among participants in such educational programs. Studying the interactions between students and teachers in an external environment outside the classroom as well as the teacher's characteristics and abilities can shed more light upon the learning processes that take place in external activities. A significant role in the design of such educational programs seem to be the organization of the classroom in the external environment, the psychology of the working groups and the space chosen to implement the program, since research has shown that instruction in an external "classroom" further enhances and supports learning within the traditional school classroom. An understanding of how to approach

the design of schoolyard outdoor learning environments is needed to help give full potential to the educational experience, especially for children with learning disabilities within the academic setting of traditional classrooms. Moreover, teaching the teacher how to use lessons in the outdoor classroom when teaching the students with educational standards plays an important role in the educational process. This can be accomplished by first making sure that a good design is aligned with curriculum and second, giving the teacher resources and examples of outdoor teaching experiences for state standard teaching plans. Helping the teacher to educate the students seems to be obvious, but the point here is to provide a design to match the teachers pedagogical teaching methods, that is appropriate for the outdoor environment. This will aide in enabling and allowing access for all students, depending on age ability, physical and cognitive ability. This study has attempted to demonstrate the enormous educational value of outdoor education. It shows that not all education, in the broadest sense of the term, has to take place in the classroom. Experiencing outdoor education and participating in outdoor learning activities and instructing students, especially elementary students of our educational system, appear to have a positive impact on their development. Further research in the area of outdoor education would help clarify the benefit of participation in outdoor education for this population.

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