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Unleashing the Transformational Power of Outdoor Education in Canada

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In this chapter, we embark on a comprehensive exploration of the prevailing systemic factors that impact the implementation of outdoor education within Canadian schools. Our primary objective is to elucidate these obstacles while offering valuable perspectives on how educators can synchronize their endeavors with a broader initiative aimed at surmounting these challenges. Throughout this chapter, we will delve into the historical roots of outdoor education, consider international exemplars, and dissect the multifaceted social, political, and educational impediments that obstruct its seamless integration into the Canadian educational landscape.

Outdoor Education: A Transformative Force

Many approaches and practiced educators cover multiple curricula in a single lesson to leverage the outdoor context to promote meaningful personal development in students. Outdoor education uses the power of the natural environments in ways where the educational experience can be remembered for a lifetime. By offering education that lasts a lifetime, developing healthy minds in healthy bodies with healthy peer relations and promoting a deeper personal connection to the natural environment, one can easily see the potential for outdoor education to transform the

future of Canada and provide an opportunity to address some of our most complex modern challenges.

We can see that education outside the classroom is part of the fabric of Canada's history. Indigenous Nations of Turtle Island (also referred to as the South and North American continents) have been learning from the land for millennia and have developed effective pedagogies still in use to this day (FNESC, 2008).

Similarly, the integration of outdoor education in other countries is not surprising. In Norway and other Scandinavian nations, they have culturally embedded the concept of outdoor education in many aspects of their societies through commonly held philosophies such as those found in Friluftsliv. Friluftsliv, which translates as "free air life," has its roots in the 19th century galvanization of Norwegian culture and romanticized notions of nature and our relationship to it. Due to it being woven into the fabric of many Nordic societies, the concept of Friluftsliv continues to provide an impetus, direction, and normalization to the integration of outdoor education into all aspects of life (Richardson, 1994). Norway is often ranked as the happiest nation on the planet (Rahim, 2023). What role might outdoor education have in Norway's joyful outlook?

In recent years, Australia integrated outdoor education throughout its national school curricula. It is one of only a few countries, who value outdoor education on par with reading, writing, and arithmetic.

The outdoor learning connection provides a framework for students to experience guided, integrated learning across the curriculum in natural environments. Students have the opportunity to gain unique and specific benefits from outdoor learning. They develop skills and understandings while valuing a positive relationship with natural environments and promoting the sustainable use of these environments.

This connection presents four dimensions, which have been developed in consultation with Outdoor Education Australia. Content related to outdoor learning in the Australian Curriculum can be delivered in a range of ways; some of these are outlined under models of delivery.... The Australian Curriculum [connects]: Health and Physical Education, Humanities and Social Sciences, Geography, Science, general capabilities and cross-curriculum priorities (Australian Curriculum, Assessment and Reporting Authority, 2023, no page).

With so many known benefits, international examples, and unique connections with our national heritage one would think that outdoor education would have a central place in Canadian education. Unfortunately, for most, this is not the case in Canada (Priest & Henderson, 2021). Our country's children suffer with poor mental and physical health, lack of nature-connection, and missed educational opportunities. Barriers to outdoor education exist in social, political, and educational systems themselves. They are multifaceted and reinforce each other to make the delivery of outdoor education vulnerable and severely limit the integration of such practices in schools.

Before looking at barriers outside of the outdoor community, it is important to acknowledge and discuss how common views on outdoor activities are exclusive. For example, the "Black Lives Matter movement has really...put the spotlight on systemic racism in all realms, in all sectors here in Canada" (Rice, as interviewed in Nawaz, 2020, no page). Since 2020, there has been an increased ongoing interrogation of race and the outdoors. Whose narrative is being expressed in and about the outdoors? The dominant narrative has been a white supremacist, colonial account. It has erased the stories of Indigenous communities, left out voices and stories from the Black community, the 2SLGBTQ2+ community, the differently-abled community, and numerous other equity-deserving communities. These erasures are part of the mechanisms of colonial systems that pervade all systems in North America. Brown Girl Outdoor World (BGOW, n.d.) and the

Race and Nature in the City report (Scott & Tennetti, 2021) are shifting this narrative, but much work remains to be done.

Creating safer spaces where all are welcome to share their story includes work to decolonize our shared spaces. Who has access to land? How are accessible lands created, designed, protected, and managed? Who gets to decide how they are used? And whose narrative does it serve? This work includes sharing the truths around Canada's relationship to the land. This includes examples such as speaking to the fact that iconic Canadian park spaces are a direct result of the removal of Indigenous Peoples and the erasure of their stories and communities.

In 2007 the Canadian Government established the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in an attempt to reconcile the harms done through Residential Schools nationally. There are many recommendations in the final report relating to education. Conscious delivery of outdoor education can support this process of truth sharing. The Call to Action #63 (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) asks the education system to build student intercultural understanding, empathy and respect towards Indigenous communities, as well as teaching the history of residential schools. As we work with students on the land, there is an authentic entry point to discussing the importance of land Canada's complex relationship with Indigenous communities.

Beyond narratives of what it means to be outside, the education systems also bring a long history of systemic racism influencing outdoor education. The social contexts within which the modern education systems have been developed have significant long-lasting implications. These systems have been a tool to reinforce structural racism and the dominant white supremacist ideology.

The development of public-school systems in the 19th century was marked by the standardization of textbooks, teacher training, classroom organization, and curriculum. Children were viewed as clay to be molded in desired forms (Gaffield, 2013, no page).

Pedagogical methods used in the school systems have evolved and adapted. For example, the "clay to be molded" belief has evolved into the view of children as inherently distinct with varying levels of potential (Gaffield, 2013). Nonetheless, the aim of standardization can be felt to this day. Dominant white narrative informed the standard benchmarks to achieve in the early days of the school systems. How a system is designed informs how it will be structured over its existence. Thus, this dominant narrative can still be seen in today's school systems structures and practices. Since the Black Lives Matters movement, many Canadian schools and school systems have been taking concrete steps to dismantle the dominant narrative and be more inclusive.

A full discussion on the impact of racism goes far beyond the capacity of this chapter. Racism and all its ongoing implications are multifaceted and come in many forms. Concurrently, the work to remove barriers to outdoor education must include deconstructing the dominant narrative. This includes speaking to the implications of racism, whenever possible, and doing so as part of an ongoing process aimed at supporting increased equity for all peoples living in the country we know as Canada.

Socio-political Barriers External to Outdoor Education

Numerous barriers to outdoor education are deeply ingrained in the fabric of Canadian society, shaped by our shared history and the institutions established to govern our nation. Canada functions as a confederation, and our modern political system, influenced by the long-standing practices of the Iroquois people on Turtle Island, demands a delicate balancing act between centralizing federal authority and the more decentralized powers held by provinces and territories. The federal government exercises its authority by collecting taxes and redistributing funds to ensure that each region can adequately serve its population, thereby harmonizing national unity with regional diversity.

Since education falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction, some might argue that effecting nationwide change in outdoor education would be nearly impossible. However, consider the successful integration of technology and computers across provincial and territorial boundaries, which demonstrates the potential for cross-jurisdictional initiatives.

To be effective in our efforts, it is essential to comprehend the workings of a confederation. The outdoor education community must sometimes collaborate with provinces to influence specific governments, while at other times, healthy competition among provinces can help amplify our message. Simultaneously, it is crucial to mount a coordinated national effort to engage the federal government and secure funding for outdoor education programs across the country. By navigating our national political landscape adeptly, we can influence our education systems positively.

Beyond matters of political jurisdiction, the history of our country casts a shadow over the barriers to outdoor education. The perception of the value of outdoor education within the dominant social structures of Canada can be traced back to colonial times. Early European settlers brought with them notions of nature and wilderness that continue to influence our understanding of outdoor education. The colonial agenda was predicated on the belief that bringing civilization, development, and technology to wild and untamed regions was morally right. Wilderness was seen as a place fraught with unpredictable dangers and threats, further perpetuating a fear of the natural world. This historical perspective has left a legacy of disconnection between people and nature, with many now perceiving nature as a hostile environment. It's essential to acknowledge and address this disconnect in our efforts to promote outdoor education.

Even when wilderness became a more positive concept, leading to the creation of national parks, these spaces were still considered pristine areas to be kept free from human influence, often resulting in the forced removal of Indigenous

communities. This longstanding history has fostered a perception that separates humans from the natural world, perpetuating a fear of the unknown and unfamiliar. It's crucial to address these fears directly to create a reality where people are not afraid to engage with nature, just as they do with other aspects of modern life.

Furthermore, early European explorers celebrated the natural resources found on the continent as a means of financial gain.

[Samuel de] Champlain would interest the big speculators by enumerating the wealth that could be extracted from the country; this "great and permanent trade" would comprise the following items: fisheries of cod, salmon, sturgeon, eel, and herring; whale-oil and whale-wattles; timber "of marvellous height"; gum, ashes, tar; dye roots, hemp; mines of silver, iron, and lead; coarse cloths, pelts, gems, vines, livestock; finally, profits to be obtained from the "short route to China," via the St. Lawrence (Trudel, 1966, no page, translated from French).

This view of the natural space as wilderness, or resource to be exploited for financial gain has shaped and continues to shape how it is understood, discussed, and presented within our society.

Private ownership is another important social factor leading to barriers for outdoor education. Generations of settlers and immigrants came to North America to live the "American dream." Laws and policies promoting private ownership were developed to attract more people to settle the land. Through private ownership, millions of people over multiple generations built wealth for themselves and their families. This has resulted in private land that isn't accessible to others. This is a social choice. There are countries, comparable to Canada, where private land ownership exists, yet every individual in that country has the right to travel through the land, or at least through a portion of the land. For example, in Iceland it is possible to drive up a rural road, walk through a

person's property and access areas for outdoor activities. Doing so in Canada, makes you a trespasser and you can be prosecuted. In some more rural and remote areas, if you don't "look" right, you also run a higher risk of being shot at.

Lastly, one of the most substantial social barriers to outdoor education is the fragmentation and silos that exist within the outdoor education and the broader Led Outdoor Activity community of practices. Those who make a career out of leading outdoor activities often face financial sacrifices and long working hours compared to other career paths. Teachers who incorporate outdoor education into their curriculum face additional workloads in an already demanding profession, often in environments where their colleagues may not fully appreciate the value of their efforts.

While individuals in these fields possess admirable qualities like passion, dedication, a thirst for learning, and unwavering determination, they can also be prone to egocentrism, believing that their approach is superior. Over the years, unchecked egos have led to significant divisions within the outdoor community, with certifying bodies and associations competing and disputing the quality of training. The plethora of terms and pedagogies used to describe outdoor education, while reflective of its depth and richness, can also confuse the public and legislative decision makers, diluting our message.

In summary, these socio-political barriers, deeply rooted in Canadian society, present formidable challenges to advancing outdoor education. To overcome them, we must navigate the intricacies of our confederation, address historical perceptions of nature, reconsider private land ownership practices, and foster collaboration and cohesion within the outdoor education community."

Specific Internal Barriers Within Current Education Systems

Apart from the barriers associated with social and political systems, outdoor education faces challenges directly linked to prevailing patterns within most of Canada's education systems.

These challenges are deeply rooted in the history of modern education and the societal context in which it emerged. To provide a simplified overview, during the industrial revolution, there arose a necessity to mold learners into a standardized mold. Youth residing in urban areas could no longer engage in open-field activities during the day, necessitating a means to channel their youthful energy. Industrialization demanded a disciplined and skilled workforce, prompting the development of mass K-12 education systems aimed at cultivating an efficient labor force. Unsurprisingly, the very structure of education mirrored industrial practices (Robinson, 2010).

The dynamic and flexible nature of outdoor education clashes with the rigid schedules, short time blocks, and compartmentalized curricula typical of mainstream education. It proves challenging to allow the natural environment to foster learning when teachers are expected to meticulously track specific curricular outcomes, administer standardized tests, and adhere to reporting processes that prioritize individual achievements over collective growth. Assigning an individual grade becomes problematic when success results from communal contributions, where a kind word may hold as much significance as solving an equation.

As previously mentioned, education systems have demonstrated the capacity to adapt and evolve. The outdoor education community can draw valuable lessons from these historical shifts to support its own development. Educational systems tend to adapt when driven by multiple forces for change, typically involving an organized industry or community of practice, as well as public demand. For instance, the integration of computing technology into schools occurred as it became ubiquitous in society.

A more relevant example to outdoor education is the educational reform in the province of Québec. This reform process commenced in the mid-1990s (Guimont, 2010), with the government seeking input from citizens and education experts to assess the state of education in the province. In 1997, two pivotal documents set the course

for educational reform. From 2001 to 2008, the government revised legislation and regulations pertaining to schools and school boards. However, this was not a linear process. Between 2009 and 2017, extensive public consultations took place, resulting in new policies and strategies (Gouvernement du Québec, 2017). These changes were not without their challenges, but they emerged through grassroots involvement.

Another barrier to integrating outdoor education into the mainstream education system pertains to educator training. Few teacher training programs in Canada equip teachers with the necessary tools to effectively implement outdoor education pedagogies. Moreover, there is a lack of school administrator training that prepares principals and superintendents to fulfill their responsibilities in enabling outdoor education.

Canada boasts a substantial community of outdoor education experts. What is imperative is a collaborative effort to unify as a community of practice, strengthen our professionalism, leverage our shared networks, and harness our advocacy potential to integrate our knowledge into teacher and administrator training.

Next Steps

In order to seamlessly integrate outdoor education into Canada's educational systems, we have outlined the following collective action plan:

1. **Facilitate Access to Relevant and Meaningful Teacher and Administrator Training:** We must prioritize the development and availability of comprehensive training programs tailored to educators and administrators, ensuring they possess the knowledge and skills necessary for effective outdoor education.
2. **Engage with Professional Education Associations, Teachers and Administrators:** Collaboration with professional education associations is crucial. Advocating for the inclusion of outdoor education in their curriculum and professional development initiatives will be a significant step forward.
3. **Advocate to Provincial and Federal Government Decision Makers:** To effect systemic change, we must engage with legislative decision makers at both the provincial and federal levels. Lobbying for policies that support outdoor education as an integral part of the curriculum is essential.
4. **Foster a Collaborative Community of Practice:** Recognizing various outdoor organizations as legitimate bodies for the safe delivery of outdoor activities and coordinating efforts across these organizations is vital. By uniting as a community of practice, we can streamline resources and enhance the quality and safety of outdoor education programs.

Achieving success in these areas will be transformative, as demonstrated by recent developments in Quebec. Over the past five years, Francophone outdoor education has experienced remarkable progress. The Quebec Ministry of Education's commitment to outdoor education research is evident through the establishment of the dedicated "Chaire de recherche sur l'éducation en plein air" at the Université de Sherbrooke in 2022. Additionally, professional education associations have published several "how-to" guides for the effective delivery of outdoor education in the past decade (Ayotte-Beaudet et al., 2023). This positive change in Quebec was the result of a 20-year collaborative effort within the outdoor education community of practice, with noticeable improvements demonstrated within just a decade.

We can leverage the valuable lessons and established systems in other Canadian educational systems. For instance, land-based learning has been integral to the education of students in the Yukon since the 1980s, with many educators trained in Ontario. The Yukon has also implemented effective pedagogical approaches and risk management mechanisms over decades.

Currently, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick show promising momentum in embracing outdoor education. We stand at a tipping point, and now is the time for change. By

uniting as a community of practice, we can drive the transformation we aspire to see across the entire country, from coast to coast to coast.

Conclusion

The journey toward integrating outdoor education pedagogies into Canada's education systems will be a challenging one, but the future holds great promise. Positive steps are being taken in the right direction, and the potential for success is evident. The question that remains is whether we will come together as a dedicated community of practice, sharing resources and supporting one another to provide transformative educational experiences for every child across the nation. The road ahead may be long, but the destination is one of immense potential and possibility.

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