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Whither Risk in Education: The Moral Imperative of Outdoor Educators

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In late 1995, responding to an invitation to reflect on the state of outdoor education and the first quarter century of the Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario (COEO), a clutch of researchers and practitioners in the field responded with articles published in *Pathways: The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education*. As an outdoor educator whose career had begun more-or-less coincidentally with the founding of COEO, I answered that call with a grim piece that pronounced, among other hyperbolic prognostications, that "the world of outdoor education is crumbling before our very eyes" (Raffan, 1996, p. 9).

Indeed, those were depressing times. The bubble of energy, optimism and innovation of the 1970s and '80s had burst, or so we thought. Centres were closing, programs were being cut or cancelled, insurers were twitchier than ever, educational administrators were caught in the accountability squeeze, deaths in outdoor education programs had given everyone pause, and practitioners were so busy wondering if we'd be employed after the next round of cuts, that

it was often difficult to find the perspective necessary to argue philosophically with any heft or glimpse, even occasionally, the bigger picture of what education should be about.

In the *Pathways* essay, I quoted from a keynote given by one Thomas L. Goodale, who spoke at a foundational meeting for COEO in 1972. Goodale (1973, pp. 5-6) pulled no punches, saying:

You [outdoor educators] seemingly lack political clout, and that is the name of the game. There are a host of agencies with a very large stake in outdoor education, but they do not appear to have jelled into an effective force. Perhaps too many outdoor educators are disinterested in the political sphere...you can't afford to dissipate your energies...discussions of outdoor education jargon and particularly the attempts to distinguish between outdoor education and environmental education are interesting enough, but they don't go anywhere. If it's a problem of professional identity then

at some point someone will ask on whose behalf is the dream being dreamt. Is it the profession or those it seeks to serve?

Ouch! But twenty-five years after Goodale uttered those words at the Ontario Forest Technical School near Dorset, Ontario (that became the Leslie M. Frost Centre on Lake St. Nora, now closed) it seemed that he was saying: how important the politics of education are and how bad outdoor educators are at politics. Sadly, some things never change. However, what we might have lacked in political moxy we have made up for in sheer persistence, because now—fifty years since the founding of COEO—outdoor education did not “crumble before our very eyes.” It is not dead, by any means, but it is different and it—along with public education more broadly considered—is facing another even more serious existential threat right now.

At the risk of crying “wolf” a second time with insufficient cause, I’ll do my aged best to mete and dole a word or two about where outdoor education now resides on the educational landscape, at least in Ontario, and how it is different than it was in the 1990s. With Goodale’s keynote still reverberating in my head, as relevant now as it was way back when, I’d like to reflect on the politics of risk in this chapter and what I would call the moral imperative of outdoor educators in the 21st Century.

A telling exemplar of how outdoor education has changed is what’s happening at MacSkimming Outdoor Education Centre, the flagship centre of the Ottawa Carleton District School Board (OCDSB), where COEO was founded back in 1971 (Birchard, 1996). In the Pathways essay, I held up the fact that MacSkimming was on the chopping block and in need of immediate life support. That support—contrary to what “professional” outdoor educators had been arguing out of self-interest throughout—came from educational administrators who stripped out cash and personnel wherever they could, principally by sending the teacher-qualified outdoor educators back to the classroom and replaced them with instructor or outdoor technician positions—

different collective agreement, different power dynamics and at a fraction of the original cost of operating these centres. Some would argue that this shift was nothing more than canny management that allowed the centres to remain open at a much lower cost.

Today, OCDSB Outdoor Education Coordinator Kevin Wallace, (who manages two centres for the board) explains that even after that board’s outdoor education staff was cut from thirty-seven positions (admin, teaching, and support positions) to ten, they have maintained enrolment of 20,000 students into outdoor education programs annually and have a waiting list of nearly ten thousand other students who want to get in (personal communication, 2023). Like the outdoor centres that are still open and still running (almost all of which have followed some version of OCDSB’s restructuring model), Wallace’s two centres are perennially cash and staff-starved and they are still subject to the vagaries of annual budget hijinks, but they are very much still breathing and still providing meaningful day-long outdoor activities to mostly elementary students, even if these outdoor education experiences are one-shot, once-a-year outings for most students.

At the other end of the cutback change-of-priority spectrum are outdoor schools even bigger than MacSkimming, like Toronto District School Board’s (TDSB) Boyne River Natural Sciences School, near Shelburne, Ontario, or the Province of Ontario’s Bark Lake Leadership Centre near Irondale, or the Leslie M. Frost Natural Resource Centre, on Highway 35 near Dorset, Ontario, that were summarily shuttered around the new Millennium to help balance budgets in hard times. Happily, Bark Lake has opened as a private leadership and conference centre, the Frost Centre was purchased by the Ontario Public Service Employees Union in 2021 to serve as a training site for union members and their families and, in September of that same year, the TDSB announced that Boyne River Natural Science School, vacant since 2002, will be re-purposed as an Indigenous land-based learning site. Add these developments to the revised and revitalized cost-recovery programs at four TDSB day centres and five

overnight outdoor education centres and it is clear that there has been enough pressure from advocates, and sufficiently creative planning on the part of administrators, particularly with the recent pandemic's push to rediscover outdoor learning spaces, to keep outdoor education going in the big urban boards of education—for the smaller boards, not so much.

For schools and school districts without in-house outdoor education facilities, building on outdoor education's roots in the camping movement, across the country there are private facilities that provide turn-key outdoor education experiences from nature-based learning all the way through to hard-core climbing, canoe tripping and winter camping. From the educator's perspective, aside from the high cost of accessing these programmatic resources, these operators provide not only all the equipment, accommodations and hospitality a class might need to support the chosen suite of activities, but also these private facilities offer their own insurance coverages and necessary qualifications to ensure that everything is done safely and according to established regional, provincial and national guidelines. The growth of the Forest School movement shows how increasing environmental awareness and dissatisfaction of parents with the status quo in public education, vis a vis outdoor education, have created a market for private businesses but also for connecting students, with means, to nature on a sustained basis (Boileau & Dabaja, 2020).

Finally, and happily, classroom teachers remain—bless them!—from coast to coast to coast in Canada who engage their students in creative lesson planning that necessarily and seamlessly involves outdoor education. Consider the dynamic educators who, against almost all regulatory and financial odds, and in the name of nothing more than “good teaching,” have created multi-credit integrated programs like Mike Elrick's CELP Program in the Upper Grand District School Board or Bill Patterson's Tamarack Program at Mackenzie High School in the upper Ottawa Valley, both of which have outlived the untimely deaths of their founders.

Consider the example of a grade ten history teacher in Ottawa, Jessica McIntyre, who in November of 2023, invited her students to research the lives of young men listed on a plaque in the hallway who had died in war (personal communication, 2023). The research project was not necessarily earth-shaking or necessarily experiential until, under the banner of “Walking Them Home” she got her students to create lawn signs celebrating the lives they'd been learning about, all of whom lived in the catchment area of their school and, with consultation with the current property owners, to remember their young research subjects by placing the signs they had made on the front lawns at the houses where these soldiers had walked to and from school before heading off to war. Simple. Effective. Brilliant.

So, outdoor education in its many transmogrifications persists. Even in big boards of education like Ottawa and Toronto, the existing outdoor education centres are still only seeing about a quarter of the students in the district for one day once a year for what in many cases is a bit of a cookie-cutter pond study, nature activity, series of initiative tasks, or experience with a challenge course of some kind or other. Better than nothing at all. And, although there are not ready statistics available to detail classroom-initiated outdoor and experiential education, my sense is that that has quietly grown since the 1970s but that too is totally dependent on very special, and rare, teachers who have the courage and who make it their business to teach this way and to fight their way through the administrative red tape and fund-raising necessary to make things happen.

Taking students beyond the classroom necessarily involves risk for everyone—hell, I would argue any educational enterprise worth its salt involves risk—and whether the activities being undertaken have an cultural, environmental or scientific cast, or whether what's happening is formed in the crucible of building human capacity or service learning or straight-up adventure—what separates outdoor learning from indoor learning (not always, if there is an enlightened teacher at the helm) is the uncertainties that the outdoor

context necessarily involves—travelling to new locations, possibly difficult winds or weather, different foods and/or social contexts, new learning relationships, or smells, sounds, feeling and other sensory inputs that can engage memory and can enrich learning experiences.

These risks are not imagined or rendered virtually in the increasingly digital universe we inhabit. They are real! Whether the uncertainty comes from getting wet in the rain, helping a fellow student get through a mud hole, facing fear of the dark, spending time off-line from social media, eating new foods, sharing moments of emotional amplitude, experiencing cold, these risks are tangible and, if used skilfully by a teacher, can focus students' attention and anxieties so that when new learnings occur, they have a durability built of the uncertainties of the learning context. In a school system that has backed away from the possibility of failure, the consequences of facing risk in the outdoors, especially the negative ones, can be experiences that encircle students with resilience for facing other less physical, less tangible risks—financial, emotional, cultural, intellectual, social—later on in life.

Looking back through a career in outdoor education that has spanned the entire fifty-year history of COEO, I'm less worried now about the persistence of outdoor education than I was in the 90s. What I am worried about is a general and systemic shift in how educational planners and administrators think about the one thing that, in my estimation, powers all outdoor and experiential learning. That one thing is risk.

And, as educational planners and administrators have increased centralized control of what happens in outdoor education centres by replacing the teachers with technicians, and have worked, with some success, to reconfigure outdoor education in the curriculum, I fear that they have kept the "safe" activities and done their level best, in the name of "risk management," building safe schools or healthy choices, to eliminate or regulate out of existence educational activities that might have the perception of possible harm to students. And the upshot of all that is a

generation of young people who, because they so rarely encounter real risk and consequences, never develop skills or abilities to even think about ways to encounter uncertainty, because their parents and teachers are working around the clock to excise it from their lives.

And while this restructuring of outdoor education was going on through the early 2000s, the TDSB, among other boards, took the decision, in the name of "safety," to remove playground equipment, particularly the monkey bars, from 175 elementary schools (CBC, 2012). This, in spite of the fact that research available at the time clearly showed that the head and upper body injuries that can happen on this equipment can be reduced to almost zero (certainly lower than classroom or gymnasium injury rates) by softening the ground on which the playground equipment is situated (Bergeron et al., 2019).

Still, the boards listened to their lawyers and pressed on. In defense of these at-times beleaguered decision makers, they did engage consultants to talk about other ways to make playground interesting, through school-ground naturalization for example, but the message some read in this decision was that it was part of a broader and more comprehensive effort to remove risk from the educational context. Sad, when you consider the ways in which the monkey bars served for generations of children as a laboratory for thinking about risk—the joys and consequences of taking measured chances in the name of learning how the world works.

In a related news release—apropos of nothing, perhaps—the Thames Valley District School Board called parents, students, teachers and community members to a "unique public forum" aimed at questioning whether school are preparing today's students for tomorrow's economy. Quoted in the news release was then Director of Education, Laura Elliott (personal communication, November 12, 2014), who said:

Many students are disinterested with the educational experience we're providing. There are many disengaged students sitting

in high school classrooms across our district. We know that the classroom teacher has the greatest impact on student achievement and our students have told us they are looking for a different experience. I am challenging our school communities to be bold and innovative—to create, inspire and design program and experiences which better meet the needs of our students.

Hello? Have you heard of outdoor and experiential education—hiking, climbing, canoeing, camping out, or “Walking Them Home,” all lessons configured in the real world? Have you heard about the power of real risk in building human capacity in the citizens of tomorrow? Do you think that maybe, as you’ve been making education “safe,” guided by risk management rubrics and manuals that consider risk only as the possibility of harm to people or property, did you ever stop for a moment, long enough to consider the positive consequences of risk?

Any gambler knows how uncertainty is the name of the game and that with every roll of the dice comes the possibility of losing or winning. Why is it that for educational administrators risk is only ever a threat, never an opportunity? And why is it that the people in the educational milieu most conversant on the matter of risk, the outdoor and experiential educators, are generally absent from these kind of discussions, as if they somehow have to apologize for every bad thing that has ever happened in the out of doors and, instead, talk amongst ourselves about the good things we’re doing?

And that’s where I’d like to leave this, as a good and conversation starter. Industry talks about corporate social responsibility: the idea that company operatives “should play a positive role in the community and consider the environmental and social impact of business decisions” (BDC, 2023, p. 1). Similarly, going at least as far back as Russell observing that, as creators of knowledge, scientists are also citizens and “citizens who have...a public duty to see, as far as they can, that their skill is utilized in accordance with the public interest” (Russell, 1960, p. 391).

Scientists too have a moral or social responsibility. Might it be, inspired by science and industry, that outdoor and experiential educators should become advocates for the risks we know so well, to step away from the campfire light, have a long hot shower, seek out and join the broader conversations about what it means to be educated—drawing on our mentors like Pestalozzi, Steiner, Froebel, Dewey, Isaacs, Montessori, Hahn, and Horwood, but also on our hard won experience teaching in the field, engaging, employing and celebrating risk in its many dimensions—proposing loudly and proudly about how we might go about building an education system to achieve that goal?

Risk management, so say the ed-admin textbooks, “is the process of making and taking action on decisions that will minimize the adverse effects of risk on an organization” (Curacubby, 2023, p.1). And, of course, every school policy document contains statements about how risks will be identified, ways to assess the frequency and impact of particular risks, how to create response plans and there will be the ubiquitous matrix that sets the likelihood of something untoward happening against the anticipated impacts of whatever it is happening from negligible to severe, or something like that. Nowhere—nowhere—does anyone suggest, parenthetically or otherwise, that the biggest risk facing educators is taking no risks at all. In my opinion, as schools struggle for relevance, as society collapses on itself and anthropogenic climate change leaves us more and more baffled every day, it is the moral imperative of outdoor educators to advocate for risk and prove Goodale wrong, even five decades after the fact!

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