

What's the story? Outdoor education in New Zealand in the 21st century

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Abstract

Outdoor education, in its various guises, has been part of the New Zealand education system for decades and is considered by many to be integral to school life. This paper addresses outdoor education within physical education in primary and secondary schools. It critiques the priority historically given to personal and social outcomes, suggesting that this has served to keep outdoor pursuits and adventure activities at the forefront of many school programmes, particularly in secondary schools. In turn, it is proposed that this has sidetracked the focus from outdoor environmental education, a problematic outcome given contemporary concerns about the need to foster environmental appreciation, understanding, and action. A range of possibilities for a practice of outdoor education that deliberately and creatively fuses simple, 'skill-full' adventures, and student connectedness and commitment to local environments is highlighted.

Key words: schools; outdoor education; physical education; environmental education

Introduction

A recent lunchtime spent chatting with colleagues about their perceptions of the purpose of outdoor education in New Zealand schools proved to be a very thought - provoking conversation. The place of adventure in outdoor education, safety management practices, and the types of activities that could and should be included in primary school outdoor education programmes had all been chewed over and debated. Not surprisingly, a range of opinions had been shared. One of my colleagues then proceeded to recount the story of a friend's experience on camp with the junior class she is teaching overseas. All it took was reference to marshmallows, camp fires, Swiss army knives, and five-year-olds on an outdoor education camp in a small Swiss school for the conversation to take an intriguing turn. The colleague's friend - an experienced primary school teacher from New Zealand - had been "blown away" when it came time for the evening programme. To her absolute amazement, each of the five-year-old students in her class had casually pulled out their Swiss army knives and carefully whittled the end of the stick they were going to use as their

marshmallow roasting tool over the fire. While the teacher's amazement appeared to be to do with the very different interpretations of safety management that she was experiencing in Switzerland, my curiosity was piqued more by the activities being used and what they suggested about the nature and practice of outdoor education in Switzerland. I was also left pondering if this would occur on an outdoor education experience in New Zealand.

This paper is a product of an invitation to comment directly about the "state of play in outdoor education" in New Zealand. In order for me to do this, the nature and purpose of outdoor education as it is currently defined in curricula documents is firstly outlined to provide some boundaries to the discussion. Following this, research is drawn on in an attempt to provide a snapshot from the available literature about the nature of outdoor education in New Zealand schools. Attention is then focused on the question, what is the state of play in outdoor education in New Zealand? Mindful of the futuristic focus of this monograph, as well as the limitations of critiques that offer little in the way of alternative practice, the paper concludes by briefly looking to the future. A series of approaches are highlighted as a guide for physical educators in their endeavours to practice an outdoor education relevant to students in New Zealand schools in the 21st century.

More specifically, the agenda of this paper is to address outdoor education as it is conceptualised and practiced within physical education in primary and secondary schools nationally. While the uniqueness of these different school contexts is acknowledged, the philosophical pitch of the paper suggests relevance across the different levels of formal schooling.

Given the historical lack of semantic agreement about the terms that demarcate our endeavours to educate outdoors (Boyes, 2000; Lynch, 2006; Zink and Boyes, 2006), further clarification of the focus of this paper is warranted. Outdoor education is broadly defined as "education in the outdoors, for the outdoors and about the outdoors" (Ministry of Education, 2002, p. 46). The 'piece' of outdoor education that sits within physical education has traditionally been understood to be much more specifically focused on "particular aspects" of this: "adventure activities", outdoor pursuits, and relevant aspects of environmental education" (ibid, p. 46). It is this latter interpretation of outdoor education, detailed more fully below, that frames this paper.

Curricula stories: What is outdoor education?

Outdoor education emerged from the period of the most comprehensive curriculum reform in New Zealand (Zink and Boyes, 2006) with its place officially secure for the first time in history in a national curriculum statement as one of seven key areas of learning in *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1999).

¹ "Adventure activities" refers to adventure education and adventure-based learning (ABL). For definitions of adventure education and ABL, and the goals commonly associated with each, see Ministry of Education, 2002.

Formalising a long history of reference to outdoor education and outdoor education activities in previous physical education curricula, outdoor education as a key area of learning was deemed to "reflect and address the current health and physical education needs of New Zealand students" (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 35) and was required to be incorporated into programmes for all students to the end of year 10² (ibid).

As a curriculum intended to take physical education - and within it outdoor education - into a new millennium, a key concern for the principal writers had been to address a "major weakness in previous physical education curriculum statements...the tendency to ignore the social significance and influence of movement on people's lives and how movement could be used to reinforce the dominant ideology"³ (Culpan, 2000, p. 20). Physical education thus not only promoted the learning of skills in, through, and about physical activity, but also incorporated critical thinking and informed action in respect to the movement culture in students' own lives and social communities. It embodied a socio-ecological perspective that firmly acknowledged the inter-relatedness of students' lives and the social, political, cultural, and economic contexts in which they were living.

While the release of *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) means that the 1999 curriculum statement is not the most current statement of policy on health and physical education, a closer examination of the outdoor education key area of learning statement (Ministry of Education, 1999) is warranted for two reasons. Firstly, it is likely that it has been a point of reference for teachers when designing school programmes in the past decade and thus is implicated in any examination of the current state of play in outdoor education. Secondly, in the absence of any subsequent elaboration on the nature and purpose of outdoor education in the Health and Physical Education learning area statement in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (2007), it remains, at this juncture, the most detailed account of how outdoor education is constructed in any national curriculum statement in New Zealand.

The mandate of outdoor education is providing students "with opportunities to develop personal and social skills, to become active, safe, and skilled in the outdoors, and to protect and care for the environment" (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 46). An activity-based focus of adventure activities and outdoor pursuits appears to be central to outdoor education, with the former specifically fostering "students' personal and social development" and the latter developing "particular skills and attitudes in a range of outdoor settings" (Ministry

² Health and physical education, and outdoor education within it, is an elective subject beyond year 10. A range of outdoor education opportunities is available in senior secondary school as part of the National Qualification Framework (NQF). See Lynch (2006) for a discussion of the NQF and the New Zealand Qualifications Authority (NZQA) - approved, industry-based unit standards.

³ The view that previous curricula in physical education ignored the social context of learning and that the introduction of a critical perspective to the 1999 curriculum was "new" is not held by all (see Ross, 2001, for example).

of Education, 1999, p. 46). The underlying concepts of the curriculum - Hauora, the socio-ecological perspective, attitudes, and values, and health promotion - as well as these overarching aims of personal and social development, safety skills, and environmental care, are operationalised through "structured, sequenced, and developmentally appropriate learning opportunities" (Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 47). Six in particular are directly targeted:

- adventure activities and outdoor pursuits that focus on skill development, fun, and enjoyment;
- adventure activities and outdoor pursuits that focus on the development of personal and interpersonal skills;
- learning about the traditions, values, and heritages of their own and other cultural groups, including those of the tangata whenua;
- opportunities to learn about the environmental impact of outdoor recreation activities and to plan strategies for caring for the environment;
- planning strategies to evaluate and manage personal and group safety, challenge, and risk; and
- finding out how to access outdoor recreation opportunities within the community.

(Ministry of Education, 1999, p. 47)

The nine year period since the publication of *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1999) has afforded teachers a body of time to get to know the curriculum and wrestle with the practical realities of implementing the "dramatic shifts" (Burrows, 2005) embedded in it. There has been time for critique of its scope, intentions, and conceptual framework (see for example, Hokowhitu, 2004; Ross, 2001) as well as the challenges associated with its implementation in primary and secondary school contexts. The process of writing a highly abbreviated learning area statement for *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) necessitated another distillation of what the essence of physical education was seen to be. In regards to outdoor education specifically, the threat of extinction or exclusion from school curricula appears to be gone, at least for now. This means that outdoor education proponents have had the luxury of a previously unavailable philosophical 'space' in which questions of legitimacy and subject status have been able to be replaced with equally pressing questions about the what, why, and how of our practice in schools. Burrows (2005) suggests that "many teachers are embracing aspects of the 'new' document with enthusiasm, generating programmes that encourage young people and student teachers to critically engage with the values and practices associated with physical activity, health and physical culture" (p. 1). What might this have meant for outdoor education?

Snapshots from the field: What is outdoor education in New Zealand schools?

It is challenging to definitively describe how outdoor education is understood and practiced in schools. No two schools, teachers, or students for that matter, attribute

exactly the same meanings to outdoor education, nor is it interpreted equally in practice. Describing what occurs in outdoor education in schools becomes even more fraught given the paucity of nation-wide data available and given that local variation remains “a key feature of current outdoor education practice” (Lynch, 2006, p. 217).

National surveys conducted on outdoor education (Zink and Boyes, 2006) and on education outside the classroom (EOTC) (Haddock 2007a, 2007b) are useful to consider at this point for the broad brush insights they provide on primary and secondary school practices. Zink and Boyes' study (2005/2006, 2006) on the nature and scope of outdoor education defined outdoor education as “the use of the natural environment for the purposes of teaching and learning in the outdoors” (2007, p. 60). Haddock's survey (2007a, 2007b) took an even wider view by focusing on EOTC, described as “curriculum based learning that extends beyond the four walls” (2007a, p. 4). Both studies clearly had a much broader focus than outdoor education as it has been defined in this paper and need to be considered in this light. While acknowledging this, as well as being mindful that findings cannot be generalised to all schools⁴, both studies can nevertheless be seen to provide ‘snapshots’ of relevance to this discussion.

In primary schools, both studies found health and physical education was the learning area the outdoors was most used for, closely followed by Science and Social Studies⁵. A diverse range of experiences were offered in primary schools, with Zink and Boyes (2006) noting that this variety reflected “the fact that curriculum enrichment was seen as the main focus” (p. 14). Personal and social development was the next focus identified by primary respondents, followed by outdoor pursuits (Zink and Boyes, 2006). In contrast, curriculum enrichment was not identified clearly as a programme focus by secondary school respondents, with social and personal development collectively receiving more programme focus⁶ (Zink and Boyes, 2006). An “array” of activities, including a wide range of outdoor adventure activities, were used in secondary schools with non-pursuits based activities mentioned less frequently than by primary school respondents. Within health and physical education at the senior secondary level, the outdoors was primarily used for pursuits-based activities. While a range of NZQA units were used in the senior secondary school, the majority listed by respondents were outdoor pursuits related (Zink and Boyes, 2006).

Both surveys looked at the learning outcomes that respondents considered were important

⁴ 210 of the 1500 surveys (14%) distributed to attendees at the nationwide Safety and EOTC professional development workshops were returned. This comprised 147 primary schools, 36 secondary schools, and eight area schools. Haddock (2007a, 2007b) emailed the EOTC survey to all primary and secondary school principals. 413 primary school principals (20%) and 93 (28%) secondary schools responded.

⁵ Haddock's study (2007a) used the term Social Sciences rather than Social Studies.

⁶ Respondents identified that, on average, 22% of the programme focus was curriculum enrichment, 23% was social development, and 19% was personal development (Zink and Boyes, 2006, p. 15).

to outdoor education or that EOTC achieved. Zink and Boyes (2006) identified that the learning outcomes that primary and secondary school respondents considered to be most important were group co-operation, improved self-esteem, consideration for others, safety knowledge, increased self-responsibility, and social and communication skills. These were "largely concerned with personal and social development" (p. 16). They suggested that this focus on learning outcomes to do with personal and social development was "consistent with dominant themes that permeate much of outdoor education literature" (p. 17), and that the learning outcomes considered important in outdoor education "fitted well with the skill development, fun, enjoyment and personal and interpersonal skill development objectives in the H & PE Curriculum document" (p. 20). While the learning outcomes of environmental knowledge and appreciation and environmental action were not ranked as highly as personal and social development learning outcomes, they were still considered important. This is reflected in respondents' "high level of agreement" with belief and values statements that "the outdoors is ideal for promoting aesthetic appreciation" and that outdoor education is "the best medium for environmental education" (Zink and Boyes, 2006, p. 18). Cultural/ethnic understandings and Tikanga Maori were considered less important learning outcomes.

A somewhat similar pattern is observable in Haddock's findings (2007a, 2007b). While 98% of primary respondents and 97% of secondary respondents considered EOTC as important⁷ for achieving the learning outcomes of improved self confidence, safety knowledge and skills, and problem solving, 80% of primary respondents and 60% of secondary respondents considered EOTC was important in helping students achieve the learning outcome of cultural and ethnic understandings.

Hill's (2007) study of senior secondary teachers' beliefs about outdoor education casts further light on some of these broad brush findings. Although a detailed discussion of the results is beyond the scope of this paper, it is noteworthy that five "collective themes" emerged where there was consistency between teachers' beliefs and their outdoor education practice. Each of these themes of environmental awareness and care, personal and social development, community involvement and social action, skill development, and making learning real (Hill, 2007, p. 44) can be intelligibly connected with findings from the national surveys highlighted above. As with Zink and Boyes (2006) and Haddock (2007a, 2007b), personal and social development were considered the most important learning outcomes that outdoor education offered students (Hill, 2007).

Uneasy stories: What is the state of play in outdoor education?

Quite clearly, these studies provide only glimpses or snapshots of outdoor education in

⁷ Respondents indicated whether EOTC was important, of average importance, slightly important, or not important in achieving the learning outcome. The figures presented here as 'important' indicate how many respondents selected "important" or "average." Learning outcomes associated with environmental education were not reported on in Haddock's (2007a, 2007b) survey.

New Zealand schools. The everyday working of programmes is not evident, nor is much in the way of detail about the memorable and meaningful educational experiences that many students have⁸. Notwithstanding this, nor the broader definitions of outdoor education and EOTC employed, consideration of the findings, along with 'evidence' gleaned from my personal experience teaching outdoor education, professional dialogue, and consideration of contemporary academic literature, means that important questions about the state of play in outdoor education are raised for me. Put crudely, what this means is digging beneath surface descriptions, beneath stories about practice in the field, or findings of studies to consider 'is this okay?' And, 'is this enough?'⁹

A focus on outdoor pursuits and adventure education with the aims of personal and social development appears to have been an enduring phenomenon in the history of outdoor education in New Zealand (Lynch, 2006). On the one hand, outdoor pursuits and adventure-based learning activities can be seen to be a 'natural' interpretation of outdoor education within physical education, given the centrality of movement to physical education. Learning to move fluidly, skilfully, and fluently, and in ways that bring pleasure, enjoyment, and meaning is arguably core to the contribution physical education makes to students' lives. Learning to move comfortably in meaningful and 'real life' contexts, including the outdoors, is equally so. What is potentially problematic, however, are the notions that 'doing' outdoor pursuits for individual skill development and for social development are the only 'real' mandate of outdoor education within physical education.

A persistent focus on outdoor pursuits in outdoor education can be seen to be the logical result if personal and social development outcomes are what we primarily seek in outdoor education. In an analysis of the reasons why outdoor pursuits appear to be privileged over other forms of outdoor education, Zink (2003) suggests that the pervasiveness of adventure and adventure discourses in everyday living mean that adventure, and by association outdoor pursuits, are kept in constant profile. This, coupled with an enduring programme focus on developing individuals' self-esteem and character building through "some form of challenging activity" (p. 59) and an increasing focus on risk narratives in outdoor education rhetoric, means activities perceived to involve risk, challenge, and skills-based competence remain privileged in programmes (Zink, 2003, p. 59). As Zink notes,

As long as we keep asking questions about the outcomes of outdoor education associated with personal development, challenge, risk and safety we will continue to get information that confirms and supports models such as the adventure experience paradigm and pursuits focus of outdoor education (2003, p. 60).

⁸ Haddock (2007a, 2007b) uses some teacher and student commentary to illustrate findings.

⁹ I do not wish to imply that outdoor education is in an 'unhealthy' state or that many engaging, relevant outdoor education programmes are not occurring in schools.

Jones (2004/2005) similarly questions the dominant place of outdoor pursuits in outdoor education, specifically in the secondary school context. He suggests that the two key "drivers of change" in outdoor education in the past decade identified by the secondary school teachers interviewed, were the "introduction of health and safety legislation, and the offering of unit standards in schools" (p. 29). According to Jones, one of the outcomes of this focus on vocational training and the associated use of unit standards is that outdoor pursuits are often seen as ends in themselves and the "technical skills of 'pursuing'" (p. 30) end up dominating so much that other important personal, interpersonal, and environmental learning becomes peripheral. In a somewhat similar vein to Zink (2003), Jones suggests that increasing safety management compliance brought on by legislative changes ironically serves to "keep risky activities in focus" (p. 31) and promotes "outdoor pursuits over other forms of outdoor education" (p. 32).

Another potential outcome of this privileging of outdoor pursuits as the best or only way of achieving personal development in outdoor education is the assumption that if programmes are crammed with even more outdoor pursuits and adventure activities and we encourage students to do them faster and harder and longer, then the greater the incremental benefits are likely to be! Views of what constitutes 'real' activity in the outdoors and 'real' adventure get skewed. Images of a steady diet of activity-based "fast" outdoor education (Payne and Wattchow, 2008) and "takeaway adventures" (Hill, 2008b) come to mind. The competitive, individualistic, gendered discourses underpinning such approaches are easily overlooked, as are important questions about the holistic nature of "wellbeing" for the diverse students we teach.

Prioritising outdoor pursuits for personal development also means that outdoor education practitioners and students can avoid asking very hard questions about the problematic ways in which the outdoor world may be constructed by and through such approaches. For example, a de-contextualised approach to outdoor pursuits rests on the assumption that the outdoor environment is only part of the outdoor experience in so far as it provides a facility or resource to be used or 'consumed.' Thus, rock-climbing becomes about climbing any rock, kayaking about paddling any waterway, tramping about walking in any bush. The unique histories, geographies, and cultural understandings and traditions associated with any given rock, river, lake, or area of bush tend to be overlooked or not seen to be integral to the teaching approaches employed or students' learning. With this mindset, outdoor education practices embody a view of the earth as "an object of instrumental value, its worth determined by its uses to humans as a silo of resources, an archive of our heritage, a laboratory in which to make discoveries, a gymnasium in which to exercise, a recreational amenity..." (Gough, 1990, p. 12). By implication, humans and their needs take precedence, nature is seen to be separate from humans, and a "proclamation of difference" between humans and the earth is "cultivated" (ibid, p. 14).

Alternative stories: The state of play in outdoor education in physical education in the future?

This paper has suggested that the historical prioritising of personal and social development goals in programmes and the associated use and/or overuse of particular outdoor pursuits and adventure activities to achieve these have obscured the vision of what outdoor education within physical education can be in schools. Giving almost exclusive priority to personal and social development outcomes has meant that learning about and for the environment has often been considered to be of peripheral importance. Critics of this have noted the inadequacy of “the form of outdoor education where educators facilitate outdoor activities such as canoeing and climbing and expect understanding of nature to happen incidentally” (Nicol, 2002b cited in Lugg, 2004, p. 8), and raised questions about the compatibility of traditional outdoor adventure activities with contemporary environmental education objectives (see Lugg, 2004 for further discussion).

This call to reorient outdoor education to more fully address the contribution that can be made to educating for and about the outdoors is neither new¹⁰ nor a cry for the abolition of outdoor pursuits and adventure activities from school programmes. In a wider context of curricula pressures¹¹ and debates about physical education trying to do too much (Tinning, 2000), such a reorientation should not be construed as suggesting that outdoor education is the educational cure-all for current environmental issues. What I am proposing, nevertheless, is the need to reconsider how programmes might more adequately integrate unique opportunities for the ‘physical’ in outdoor education with opportunities to learn about environmentally sustainable relationships and practices.

Earlier on in the paper, it was noted that one of outdoor education’s three purposes as conceived in *Health and Physical Education in the New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 1999) was the provision of opportunities for students to “protect and care for the environment” (p. 46). While this notion of environmental care can be seen to provide some cues to teachers about a possible ‘fit’ between environmental education and outdoor education, it has been argued, that in the absence of a critique of the deeper assumptions that “contribute to environmentally destructive thinking and behaviour,” it is little more than a “band-aid measure” (Hill, 2007, p. 67). This is particularly so given Hill’s observation that “much of what goes on in outdoor education continues to reinforce anthropocentric ways of relating with the environment” (2007, p. 69).

¹⁰ Recent issues of *Out and About* (the magazine produced by Education Outdoors New Zealand) clearly illustrate more consistent and conspicuous discussion about the place and need for environmental education and sustainability education within outdoor education. See for example, Chidlow (2006/2007, pp. 19-20); Campbell-Brown (2008, pp. 9-14); Hill (2008, pp. 16-17); Irwin (2007/08, pp. 6-8) or Lugg (2004), Thomas (2005), and Payne & Wattoo (2008) for Australian perspectives.

¹¹ The crowded curriculum was identified as a barrier to outdoor education in Zink and Boyes’ study (2006). Respondents in Haddock’s survey (2007a, 2007b) similarly identified curriculum pressures as a barrier.

What this might mean for the practice of outdoor education within physical education is not a straightforward question to answer. However, a range of practice-based possibilities in the academic literature provides approaches that bridge the rhetoric to reality gap. Each may provide a way forward for teachers endeavouring to reconfigure outdoor education in light of increasingly pressing social and environmental imperatives. These include the possibilities offered by: place-based approaches (see for example Brown, in press; Payne and Wattchow, 2008); integrated and multidisciplinary approaches addressing sustainability within outdoor education (Irwin, 2007/08, 2008); culturally-responsive approaches based on Maori knowledge, traditions, and beliefs (Legge, 1998); and critical outdoor education (Hill, 2008a).

Concluding thoughts

Irwin (2007/08) claims that change from a "narrowly conceived purpose and practice" is necessary for outdoor education in New Zealand to remain "relevant in a society where environmental pressures require alternative understanding and practice" (p. 8). He also argues that outdoor education "has much to offer in educating for sustainability but it requires careful consideration of what we teach, why we teach and how we go about teaching" (p. 7).

This takes me back to the story about the marshmallows, camp fires, Swiss army knives, and five-year-olds on class camp in Switzerland. This outdoor education experience suggested a practice of outdoor education grounded in the local environment, in 'real' rather than contrived adventure, and in simple activities that still necessitated skilled movement. There was a sense that this moment in time on camp built on students' everyday lives. By implication, students appeared to be considered capable and 'whole' people, able to actively contribute to the process of cooking and camping in the outdoors, and to examining the environmental implications of how this was done. There was a simplicity and immediacy to the students' experience that resonated and a sense that personal development was not the only thing on the agenda.

Embedded in this story and the approaches suggested above are possibilities for a practice of outdoor education within physical education that attends to personal development, social development, and the development of appropriate, sustainable relationships with the outdoor world. Central to this type of environmentally-attuned outdoor education are 'skill-full' adventures that foster students' connectedness with local environments, help develop sustainable human-nature relationships, and promote orientation towards environmental action. This practice of outdoor education is proposed to be a relevant way forward in New Zealand schools in the future.

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