



Dealing with a quandary: Funding outdoor education in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

School websites are one of a number of ways that schools communicate their vision, values, programmes, successes, and about their community in the public domain. An initial stimulus for this article was a study conducted by one of the authors investigating the presence and profile of outdoor education on secondary school websites in Aotearoa New Zealand. The cost associated with some senior outdoor education offerings

compared with other resource-intensive subject options was a finding that provoked our collective attention. This is particularly so when Ministry of Education policy prohibits schools from compelling parents to pay fees for outdoor education courses that are part of the curriculum of a school. This article catalogues the questions and quandaries that surfaced from our consideration of outdoor education funding issues, particularly in

senior outdoor education in some schools. We speculate about the importance of outdoor educators considering their 'bottom-lines' and what learning opportunities are possible if outdoor education experiences are seen to be a 'right' of all students.

Background

A teaching graduate recently shared his experience of a senior school field trip, recounting how



the trip introduced his students to a 'natural' environment that contrasted with their home city, exposing them to unique ecosystems and direct experiences that brought their classroom-based learning alive. All up, he thought it was a memorable experience for the students however felt a little conflicted about the \$200 plus cost per student for the trip. Despite the teachers bringing samples of field evidence and photographs back so that the students who had not participated in the field trip could complete the assessment for the relevant Achievement Standard, something did not sit comfortably with this teacher. It didn't seem right that only those students whose families met the cost of the trip got to experience the 'authentic' field learning experience and the holistic benefits that such experiences often offer. Additional concern was expressed about an option offered to students that enabled them to do further field work in a more remote environment, for an added cost. Although the teacher could see how this 'once in a lifetime' opportunity might be desirable as an experience and add further enrichment to the students' learning, he grappled with the questions it raised about students' access to outdoor learning.

With current Ministry of Education (MOE) (June 2013) policy prohibiting state and partnership schools from charging fees for curriculum-related outdoor education activities, the scenario the teacher described accentuates the challenges educators continue to face when offering outdoor education or other subject-related

field trips in environments away from the school grounds. It also highlights the potential ripple effects for students, something that we find to be troubling as this teacher clearly did. Working from a starting point that equity issues associated with the provision of outdoor education warrant our steadfast professional attention, this article charts our efforts to contribute to ongoing discussion about funding in outdoor education. We begin by briefly introducing Margie's research analysing the representation of outdoor education on secondary school websites in Aotearoa New Zealand. We shed light on our respective disquiet at finding outdoor education within senior school subject offerings is usually costly, if not the most expensive subject option for students, even when compared with other resource-reliant subject areas. We then turn to examine the questions and quandaries we identified about funding outdoor education that continued to nag at us, drawing on commentary from a previous issue of this journal (Irwin, 2015). The final part of the article suggests we review our 'bottom-lines' for the provision of outdoor education and consider what learning opportunities are possible if outdoor education experiences are seen to be a 'right' of all students.

'Within three clicks' – The research study

As noted, one key stimulus for this article was a study conducted by Margie in 2015 examining how outdoor education is portrayed on secondary school websites.

The decision to examine school websites was a deliberate one as the public availability of a school website means that it allows 'front window' access to a school's community, vision and values, curriculum, and achievements. Schooling in Aotearoa New Zealand is based on choice about which school young people attend, hence school leaders need to drive differentiation in order to 'put their best foot forward' to construct or affirm their desired identity and reputation (Hesketh and Selwyn, 1999; McGuire, Perryman, Ball & Braun, 2011; Wylie, 2013). While the presentation and functionality of a school website is indicative of the resources allocated to its design and maintenance; the visual, textual and audio-visual messages inform and represent the 'story' school leaders wish to convey about their school. Outdoor education has had a long and rich history in Aotearoa New Zealand schools and arguably is an expected aspect of school life and recognised as a valuable learning context (Boyes, 2012; Lynch, 2006; MOE, 2016). With this in mind, the research started with the premise that outdoor education is likely to be reflected on a school website if it is perceived as a valued learning context and/or creates differentiation in curriculum offerings.

In practice, the study involved an analysis of the presence and profile of outdoor education within three 'clicks' of the home page of twenty percent of secondary school websites (N=104). Outdoor education featured in just over half of the websites accessed (N= 54), with its presence on those websites



ranging from minimal, to eight schools where it was highly visible and appeared integral to a school's philosophy and culture. Analysis revealed that where there was a presence of outdoor education on school websites, it could contribute to a school's appeal and distinctiveness. In particular, outdoor education created positive imagery – photographs of young people actively engaged in problem solving tasks or looking joyful in the presence of their peers at the top of a hill with a stunning landscape as a backdrop. Collectively these depicted active learning, opportunity, social connectedness and achievement and as such, these portrayals suggest outdoor education is valued as an active learning context.

In this article we initially focus our attention on the references on school websites to the cost of outdoor education in the senior school. Despite camps and other outdoor education experiences before Year 11 being visible on websites, there was insufficient information about the cost of these experiences to include junior outdoor education in this current discussion. Although many school websites include intranets for members of their school community, some websites allow public access to senior school curriculum information handbooks that detail subject option pathways, NCEA credits, policies and associated costs. Somewhat unsurprisingly given the Ministry of Education's strong encouragement of curriculum-based "learning that extends the four walls of the classroom" (2016,

p. 4), analysis of these curriculum handbooks shows teachers across a variety of subjects include experiences beyond the classroom. These often incur an additional cost especially if experiences involve some form of travel. Sometimes field trips are optional, or as noted on one website, if they are some distance from the school "a decision would be made" about whether the field trip progresses "after consultation with students and parents." Further, if there are recommended or required resources like workbooks, scientific calculators, digital SLR cameras, or fabrics needed for specific subjects; these are stated in handbooks. However, it was the outdoor education experiences, whether a subject in its own right or a component of physical education, that jumped out as costly and usually the most expensive learning and NCEA credit-bearing context on offer to young people. As published on the websites examined, the costs associated with outdoor education typically ranged from \$50 to \$550, with these amounts usually increasing from Year 11 to 13. The only subject that came close to this cost for experiences outside the classroom were some geography field trips (up to \$280 at Year 13).

The questions that nagged us

We know that school websites give only one 'window' into the outdoor education that is occurring in a school, and we firmly acknowledge they provide limited clues about the pedagogies that young people experience on a daily basis. Simply put, we appreciate that what you

see isn't necessarily what you get! We also acknowledge outdoor education often requires special and additional resources, for example in the form of equipment or transportation. However, in positioning cost as an issue of equity in our discussions for this article, the complexities and apparent lack of 'wiggle room' for schools quickly became apparent. We mulled over why other subject options that incur significant resources such as specialist teaching spaces and equipment, consumables and access to digital technology (e.g. the arts, technology, and science learning areas) did not appear to require students to pay additional costs to participate. We also wondered why if outdoor education was valued in a school curriculum, it didn't always appear to attract similar resource allocation in school budgets that other learning areas did. In turn we questioned why there were ongoing shortfalls in government funding of schools that exacerbated subject areas within a school 'competing' for funds; and repeatedly pondered questions about the impact of cost on diverse students' enrolment, involvement, learning, and achievement in outdoor education in senior school programmes.

Questions about what a "free education" means in practice for outdoor education are not new. Two years ago in the winter issue of this publication, Dave Irwin (2015) noted the increasing number of queries that Education Outdoors New Zealand (EONZ) were receiving about what could and could not be legitimately charged



for. After charting Ministry policy and the Ombudsman's opinion in March 2014 about the illegality of charging for curriculum-related materials, Irwin (2015) recounts conversations with school leaders and outdoor education teachers that point to the complexities of implementing this funding policy in schools. His conversation with one senior leader in a large secondary school picks up on a quandary that had also come to the fore in our conversations discussing the website research findings. On the one hand, the value of 'real-world' applications in meaningful contexts outside the classroom is celebrated in education policy and guidelines. The *EOTC Guidelines 2016 Bringing the Curriculum Alive* for example, emphatically state the "vision of New Zealand's national curriculum cannot be achieved inside classrooms alone" (MOE, 2016, p. 5). In turn and as enumerated by the same senior leader, schools recognise and value curriculum-based learning beyond the classroom and want to retain EOTC activities and trips. However, on the other hand, schools are not allowed to charge (MOE, June 2013) even when as this senior leader notes, it is "increasingly difficult [for schools] to cover the costs for EOTC trips and activities" (Irwin, 2015, p. 20). Furthermore, and somewhat contradictorily, although teachers have been encouraged to utilise local environments in a range of curriculum-related documents

(e.g. MOE, 1999, 2007; June 2013, 2016), there is also backing to broaden young peoples' horizons by introducing them to contrasting environments in "places further afield" that might extend to "travel overseas" (MOE, 2016, p. 4). Moreover, multi night experiences offer a "more powerful way of developing key life skills ... and bringing the learning areas alive in real-life contexts over an extended period of time" (ibid). Thus sound learning justifications appear to be promulgated for extending young peoples' experiences beyond

is not straightforward. Irwin's (2015) recount of another senior teacher's perspective that schools are "...wary of the Ombudsman's decision and are treating voluntary funding as unrealistic" (p. 21) points to these complexities and tensions. Schools continuing to ask parents to contribute to the cost of their children's learning outdoors might be based on the 'buy in' and value assigned to these experiences by teachers, school leaders, and parents. In other words, the experience is perceived to be worth the cost. Unlike the



those in the 'backyard' during normal school time. Once again though, critical questions arise as to whether it is desirable, realistic or even possible to do this without incurring costs beyond what a school budget can allocate, and who gets 'left behind' if costs fall to parents to pick up, even by way of a "donation".¹

Addressing the quandary?
Reconciling these quandaries

junior secondary school, at the senior level students have the opportunity to choose the subject pathways they wish to pursue and school leaders may make the case for additional costs in outdoor education on this basis. With the provision of detailed timely senior curriculum information, such as the information accessed in Margie's 2015 website research, an argument can be made that young people and their parents



have time to pre-plan their subject options. This might assist them to select subject options they can 'afford', or embark on fundraising ventures to mitigate cost barriers. With other 'free' subjects on offer, 'expensive' subjects can be framed as options rather than compulsory curriculum. To some extent, this scenario might be less problematic in larger schools with a range of subject options (Irwin, 2015) or where related subject offerings might be on offer that allow young people to 'dabble' in outdoor experiences, e.g. as part of a physical education course, for no or minimal additional costs. Nevertheless, fundamental questions of equity related to access still persist.

Working on this discussion piece reminded us how complex the issue of funding is and how straightforward resolutions are not easy to find particularly given the current financial, political and social context of schooling. In our conversations we repeatedly came back to 'bottom-line' questions about outdoor education's purpose, what outdoor education experiences all secondary school students are or should be entitled to, and how schools might prioritise outdoor education to mitigate issues related to cost. We highlight below some insights that may be useful prompts for ongoing professional dialogue about funding as an equity issue. While triggered by the senior school context as discussed earlier, we consider they have relevance when thinking about outdoor education in junior school settings also.

What are the 'bottom-lines' outdoor education can achieve?

Teachers are encouraged to put students at the centre of curriculum decision-making. By knowing our students and their abilities, interests and prior experiences we can determine what is important for their learning (MOE, 2007). In doing so, learning becomes targeted towards individuals and groups of individuals and a one-size-fits-all approach becomes outdated, opening the door for greater differentiation. This may also mean that teachers and school leaders re-evaluate some of the historical traditions of outdoor education practice within their school community, such as multi-activity year level camps far from the school. Maybe it is also timely to rethink some of the 'grand claims' that have sometimes been made about what outdoor education achieves; sometimes to justify extended, faraway (and costly) experiences. Is it realistic for example, to suggest or infer that a one-off camp demonstrably develops students' resilience, social skills and independence rather than being a catalyst or contributor to these outcomes?

Adopting a more modest pedagogy that targets outcomes related to what is relevant and meaningful to many young people today seems pertinent when talking about bottom-lines. Developing an holistic understanding of our own and other's wellbeing is a key intent of the Health and Physical Education learning area in contemporary curricula, and young people's wellbeing continues to be the focus of ongoing media

and political scrutiny. Yet, we wonder if well-being related learning and an understanding of the contributions that 'everyday' embodied experiences in nature might make to understanding ourselves, others and the environs in which we live, is prioritised enough in outdoor education curriculum and pedagogical decision-making.

Outdoor education for all?

Linked to the questions we raised about 'bottom-lines' and the usefulness of professional reflection about what it is we are trying to achieve in outdoor education, is critical consideration about who outdoor education is for. We think that one useful approach to grapple with this question is to consider what outdoor education learning opportunities and experiences ought to be part of the curriculum experienced by all students in a school; irrespective of subject choice, background, or socioeconomic circumstances. By implication, this question draws attention to not only our 'bottom-lines', but also to how these can be enacted in programmes to be inclusive of diverse students.

We found that provocative pedagogical questions arise through critical reflection about what outdoor education learning opportunities ought to be an entitlement of all students in a given school. Resourcing-related factors like staffing, location, and timing come into sharp relief; as do the advantages of orienting experiences closer to school and in the local environment. The potential benefits of a '(re)turn'



to local places and more place-responsive approaches in outdoor education programming have been repeatedly noted in professional and academic commentary (e.g. Brown, 2012; Irwin, 2015; Thevenard, 2015, Watson, 2015). These include teachers themselves feeling less stressed when operating in local environments (Brown, 2013), students relishing the challenges and the opportunities for their input into programming decisions, and enjoyment at getting to know their local environment more intimately (e.g. Brown, 2012; Townsend, 2015). Designating herself as “Miss Optimistic” when talking about her school’s response to funding challenges, Sophie Watson (2015) reinforces the point that “authentic, powerful and relevant experiences” (p. 6) can be offered by utilising what is around us and without travelling far. A similar message came through from a local teacher who had been ‘forced’ by senior leaders to rethink outdoor education offerings based on the notion of a “free education”. Bringing experiences close to home had not only increased student input into camp planning and implementation, and the use of local places and marae; but student participation overall soared to around 100%. Arguably; local, low cost outdoor education experiences can be high quality learning experiences accessible to all students.

Having said that, we appreciate that ‘going local’ does not necessarily always equate to ‘no cost’ outdoor education and a budget to resource some opportunities might still be needed. In this regard, we have

pondered whether it would be useful for outdoor educators to argue the case for their local river, trails, or beach as needing to be seen to be akin to a functional specialist ‘classroom’. Hence these spaces and the provision of teaching and learning within them, requires further budgetary support within schools. Just as an engineering workshop is not a functioning teaching and learning space until it is equipped with the capital items such as machinery or other safety gear; and the working materials like wood, sheet metal and electronics; some resourcing of support equipment and materials for outdoor education through the school budget might further facilitate outdoor spaces being places in which learning can come alive, day in and day out.

Conclusion

We started this article by raising the respective disquiet we had felt when reflecting on the potential impacts on students of one teacher’s story about the costs associated with a field trip and of the costs associated with some senior outdoor education offerings as identified in Margie’s study. Bringing an equity lens to the question of funding in outdoor education raises many questions and quandaries. This is particularly so given the apparent tensions between ongoing curriculum policy support for learning beyond the classroom and students entitlement to a “free education”. Seeing one of the bottom-lines for outdoor education as access to quality learning experiences being a ‘right’ for all students, means thinking creatively about

how to reduce and/or eliminate costs being placed onto students and their families. Professional and academic discussion suggests schools are responding in a range of ways, including focusing learning in their local environs. We are keen to hear more from teachers across the educational sector about the ‘low cost’ innovations emerging in their practice and school communities.

(Endnotes)

1 In the MOE circular (June 2013), schools are entitled to seek donations from parents towards the cost of a trip or camp. However, payment cannot be compelled where such camps or trips are a component of a specific course and deemed to be part of the curriculum of a school.

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The National EOTC Coordinator Database initiative was implemented last year by EONZ and is supported by the Ministry of Education.

The primary function of the database is to actively support the role of the EOTC coordinator by providing a direct line of communication through:

- Notification of changes to good practice as they relate to EOTC safety management, and
- Actively building capability and competency within the EOTC coordinator role and ultimately the capability of the school to provide quality EOTC.

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Schools face a real challenge in keeping updated with current good practice in the fast-evolving landscape of health and safety.

Since publication of the Ministry of Education **EOTC Guidelines 2016, Bringing the Curriculum Alive** updated versions have twice been released. Staff in many schools will be unaware of the changes.

The database is a mechanism that all schools should take advantage of, with registration identified as an element of good practice (EOTC Guidelines 2016, P59).



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