

Teaching Children About their Relationships to Nature: A Historical Examination of Ontario School-Board-Operated Outdoor Education Centres

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Abstract

Outdoor education (OE) is a teaching method where educators use outdoor spaces to teach skills and concepts deemed best learned through direct contact with native materials and natural landscapes. Across Ontario, school-board-operated OE centres are commonly perceived to be one of the few places where students from urban areas get the opportunity to engage with nature. A significant body of social-psychological research substantiates that OE programs help students develop a greater appreciation of nature and knowledge of ecosystems that is critical for establishing future sustainable societies. A small group of scholars who study Ontario-based OE programs have alleged that from the 1990s to early 2000s a shift in provincial educational policy from educational progressivism to fiscal accountability resulted in the closure of numerous board-run facilities. Several schools made extensive use of these sites. This shift in educational ideology has pushed the responsibility of OE programming to third-party providers. No empirical research has been conducted to substantiate the historical charges of these scholars. Furthermore a lack of empirical research exists that explores how the status of Ontario board-run OE centres has evolved in synchronicity with changes in educational policy since the establishment of the first OE centre in 1960. Through the integration of archival research methods, statistical analysis, and the use of geographic information systems, this presentation provides preliminary findings from an ongoing doctoral dissertation that discusses what historical factors have contributed to the need to establish, occasionally close, or continue to provide OE programs through board-run OE centres. The goal of this presentation is to encourage policy makers to consider more deeply the historical role that board-run OE centres have played in shaping how our institutions in the past and present educate our children about their dependent relationships to natural systems.