

THE UNDERTAKEN PATH, MISUNDERSTOOD: EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND THE OUTDOOR LEARNING IMPERATIVE

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*If you were to ask me, “why dwell among green mountains?”
I should laugh silently; so serene ... Li Po*

Two trails diverge around a yellowing school. One is well-trodden and oft-travelled, while the other, although always present and acknowledged as *lovely*, regularly fades into background. The more stridden leads to the school’s innards, buttressed by brick and mortar, climate controlled, soundproofed, illuminated, and plumbed. This trajectory may be described as *safe* or *known*. Within dwell teachers, students, administrators, and educational leaders engaged in planned, implemented, and evaluated learning. The other side skirts the school, enveloping it, and is commonly referred to as *outside*. It is a realm of uncontrolled experiential sensations. Its essence is our natural world. School-goers regularly traverse outside to enter/exit the school. Outside images conjure *wild* places, with distracted, over-excited, or uncontrollable learners. Some refer to this outside as *unsafe*. Outside is a divergent *path of marginalia*, where travellers are forewarned to *beware*.

In numerous ways, a growing body of literature evidences outdoor learning as essential to wellbeing and health (Bowler, Buyang-Ali, Knight, & Pullin, 2010; Cleland et al., 2008; Coon, et al., 2011; Gill, 2014). Outdoor learning, as Dewey (1916) conceived, may be akin to cultivation:

It is as absurd for the [educator] to set up his “own” aims as the proper objects of the growth of the children as it would be for the farmer to set up an ideal of farming irrespective of conditions. (p. 73)

Over the past few decades, educational practices have seen declines in outdoor learning (Faber & Kuo, 2006). Elaborated below are three central claims that seem to guide educational decisions around outdoor learning: cost, risk, and training.

As Taylor, Power, and Rees (2010) noted, “Cost to schools and to families remains a major constraint” (p. 1032) to participation in out-of-school activities. However, the outside is freely available, and location is extremely convenient—just outside the school. Curricular-wise, the local outside offers relevant, experiential, and accessible learning opportunities. Research associated with health costs of sedentary activity (Pretty et al., 2007) revealed that development of a healthy lifestyle, including being outside, reduces societal costs in later life. Educational leaders need to quell cost-related myths and promote local outdoor learning towards healthy living.

Nowadays, *risk* embodies competing notions as both liability and healthy development. Recently, liability conversations have been winning (Banack, in press), though research suggests otherwise. Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, and Sleet (2012) showed, “Children have a natural propensity towards risky play; and keeping children safe involves letting them take and manage risks” (p. 3134). They noted, “Literature from many disciplines supports the notion that safety efforts should be balanced with opportunities for child development through outdoor risky play” (p. 3134). Educational leaders need to familiarize themselves with the different types of outdoor activities current and possible at school, and school data on the cost-benefit of outdoor learning needs to be gathered and tabulated. Policy and procedure manuals, such as *YouthSafe Outdoors* (Hanna, 2005) are available to guide school leaders and educators on how to safely conduct activities outside.

Teachers need professional development to teach in classrooms, and the same holds for outdoor education. Smith (1987) commented, “Best [outdoor] results are achieved when teachers are fully involved in the activities, sharing experiences with pupils and helping to evaluate those experiences” (p. 212). Thus, all educators, not just specialists, need preparation around outdoor teaching. If not currently the practice, educational leaders need to spend time outside at various points during school days to observe what learning is going on and what learning might be going on. Outdoor education festivals such as *Wild About Vancouver* (n.d.) and *Wild About Saskatoon* (n.d.) are practical opportunities to build outdoor learning capacity. *Natural Curiosity* (The Laboratory School, 2011) and *Connecting the Dots* (Kozak & Elliot, 2014) are two free Canadian outdoor learning guides accessible to educational leaders. By educational leaders fostering outdoor professional development, the capacity of the entire school community increases.

A significant question for outdoor learning is: “How might implementation of outdoor curriculum take place?” Burns, Leung, and Yeung (2014) suggested educators change their own behaviors before asking others to change. Educational leaders may lead by role modeling such practices. For example, educational leaders could bicycle to school, eat their lunch outdoors, schedule meetings outdoor, and plan school-community events outdoors. Conducting community scans and/or consultations to assess available outdoor assets is another approach educational leaders might explore. Inviting local stakeholders to an outdoor meeting to discuss outdoor learning is one way to begin. By familiarizing oneself with outdoor learning practices, educational leaders may begin to shift school practices.

Traveling the outdoor path requires strategic efforts that three practical considerations illustrate: research, partnerships, and professional development. First, use evidence-based findings and academic partnerships to enhance outdoor learning knowledge and practice. The Sooke School District Nature Kindergarten (Colwood, BC) and the Maple Ridge School District Environmental School Project (Maple Ridge, BC) are examples of partnerships between postsecondary institutions and K–12 schools using evidence-based data to further outdoor learning research. Both programs place outdoor learning at the center of the learning experience. Students are outside daily engaged in learning in all weather, throughout the year. Educational leaders need to forge analogous relationships to appraise outdoor learning impacts.

Second, as mentioned previously, consider the local community to build partnerships. As funding limits choices, educational leaders may utilize local, adjacent, free outdoor learning spaces. For example, the Vancouver Park Board reclaimed some of their field houses in city parks as one-stop outdoor learning hubs for teachers to take students (Environmental Education and Stewardship Task Force, 2014). Vancouver schools, University Hill (n.d.) and Norma Rose Point (Sherlock, 2015) regularly integrate local outdoor spaces into learning. With regard to professional development, training opportunities need to connect educational leaders with Faculties of Education and outdoor experts offering certifications for teaching outside. For instance, skill-based outdoor education courses at the University of British Columbia provide educational leaders with outdoor curricular and pedagogical competencies for local practice (Professional Development and Community Engagement, n.d.). The Outdoor Council of Canada (OCC) developed national certification levels for outdoor leadership, and Mount Royal and Camosun Colleges include OCC content as part of their outdoor programming (A. Sole, personal communication, April 10, 2014).

Gruenewald (2005) stated, “Geographically, schools function as a tool of isolation and segregation” (p. 267), urging assembly of local connections. Smith (1987) reminded educators of, “the importance of *how* things are learned is as important as what is learned, and this style of learning, with emphasis on process, is a basic feature of the pedagogy which outdoor education has always tried to embrace” (pp. 212–213). Development of increased low cost/risk local outdoor learning pathways, which prioritize safe and sound practice, is an imperative for educational leaders. Learning outdoors results in healthy lifestyle habits that benefit individuals and society, educational leaders must aid in charting this course and reconcile divergent paths.

*Peach blossom follows moving water;
There are sky and earth beyond that world of men. Li Po*

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