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The place of outdoor schools in primary education in the context of their content focus

Karol Gorner

Department of Physical Education and Sports, Faculty of Arts, Matej Bel University in Banska Bystrica, Slovakia, Karol.Gorner@umb.sk

Julia Vitkova

Department of Physical Education and Sports, Faculty of Arts, Matej Bel University in Banska Bystrica, Slovakia

Adam Jurczak

Institute of Sport Sciences, University School of Physical Education in Cracow, Poland

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The place of outdoor schools in primary education in the context of their content focus

Authors' Contribution: Karol Görner^{1 ABDEFG}, Júlia Vitková^{1 BDEF}, Adam Jurczak^{2 DEF}

A Study Design
B Data Collection
C Statistical Analysis
D Data Interpretation
E Manuscript Preparation
F Literature Search

¹ Department of Physical Education and Sports, Faculty of Arts, Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica, Slovakia

² Institute of Social Sciences, University School of Physical Education in Cracow, Poland

abstract

Background: In our primary research, we examined the state and analysis of the implementation of outdoor schools in primary education. Our goal was to identify new initiatives to improve the content of outdoor school programs.

Material and methods: The basic method was a questionnaire from which we learned about the implementation of schools in nature. The questionnaire contained a total of 27 questions. For our contribution, we have analyzed the answers to 4 questions that touched upon our issue.

Results: Based on the results obtained, it is concluded that most teachers are convinced that outdoor schools belong to the education process and have intrinsic justification also from the point of view of fulfillment of school physical education goals. The administrative organization is, unfortunately, considered to be burdensome. In addition, we noticed shortcomings in the selection of actions in outdoor school programme. In many cases, this is closely related to a lack of awareness of their mission.

Conclusions: 81% of respondents realize outdoor schools in primary education, and up to 91.4% of respondents consider the realization of outdoor schools to be important for the educational process.

Key words: outdoor school, school physical education, primary education.

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Corresponding author: Prof. PaedDr. Karol Görner, PhD, Katedra telesnej výchovy a športu, Filozofická fakulta, Univerzita Mateja Bela v Banskej Bystrici; Tajovského 40, Banská Bystrica 974 01, Slovensko; tel.: +421-48-446 75 31; e-mail: Karol.Gorner@umb.sk

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INTRODUCTION

On the one hand, we know that when the young population is overwhelmed by the electronic media, their time actively spent in nature is shortened [1], which has the unfortunate consequences for the reduction of the basic level of physical abilities [2]. On the other hand, in the older population, we observe that the activities in nature among the general population are expanding. In particular, many are looking for different kinds of activities in the natural environment to respond to the everyday stress and noise of cities [3]. A study by Cottrell and Radik-Cottrell [4] confirms that living and walking in nature has positive effects on human perception. The fact remains that many people still lack basic habits and ways to behave in the largest and the healthiest gym [5, 6].

Outdoor schools are a great way to teach the younger generation how we should behave in nature, and wherever the natural environment can be used in favor of the harmonious development of the young personality. Pupils can experience many new stimuli and learn nonviolently not only how to behave in nature but how to use it for physical and sport activities [7]. The tradition of learning in nature has deep roots in ancient history. Ján Ámos Komenský, who recommended the transition to teach in nature as often as possible was an important personality in the inclusion of nature education in the educational process. His demand was teaching through examples and practice [8].

Thurman [9] attributes a great deal of physical activity, especially playful activities in nature, to the personal development of the child. These can greatly enhance the stays of children in recreational facilities in residential courses, in various settings, or in nature schools or camps. This is the place for streamlining the content focus of outdoor schools.

The aim should be to enable children to recognize living and inanimate nature, and to bring the nature closer to children and to stimulate them to engage in appropriate physical activities involving interdisciplinary relationships [10]. Neuman [11] sees the importance of these activities also in expanding the interest, discovery, and discovery of the interrelationships between nature and human existence.

In our research we looked at the state and analysis of the realization of outdoor schools in primary education, as what we consider to be the starting line in solving this issue is searching for a new impetus for improving the content of the programs of outdoor schools. The aim was to analyze the factual situation of realization of outdoor schools in primary education through the prism of their content focus.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

The research group was made up of pedagogues from state and private elementary schools from the district of Banská Bystrica. In the survey, we focused on pedagogues working for grade schools in meaning working with pupils from the first to the fourth year at primary school. We sent emails to schools via e-mail address published on their school website. The submitted questionnaire consisted of 27 questions in total. For our contribution, we analyzed answers to 4 questions that touched on the issues in the target with multiple choice options (listed in order of importance). Altogether, we sent questionnaires to 140 primary schools, where 580 respondents answered our questions and, therefore, we were able to evaluate 58 questionnaires. The questionnaire was its own design and consisted of closed answers to the questions asked.

For the need for in-depth analysis, we put two pairs of confrontational questions in the questionnaire, allowing us to get into the bottom line. Individual questions naturally created links with other questions in the questionnaire.

The questions in the questionnaire concerned the state of outdoor schools, where we found selected information about the school program, the goals, the interest in the implementation of outdoor school, but we also figured out how much the high costs of living in nature are per pupil or what experience teachers have from working with animators.

The questions focused on:

- realization of outdoor schools
- the conditions of outdoor school organization
- the program
- focus on outdoor schools
- interest in organizing schools in nature
- experience with animator activities during outdoor schools.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results we obtained by evaluating the questionnaire responses, we proceeded to their in-depth analysis.

Question 1: What activities do you think a school program in nature includes:

- *physical activity*
- *outdoor games*
- *ecological games*
- *water games*
- *board games*
- *activities focusing on the development of social skills*
- *activities focusing on environmental education*
- *activities focusing on orientation and movement in nature*
- *activities with a focus on survival in nature?*

In question number 1, in our questionnaire, we found out what activities our respondents should include in the school program in nature, where we selected them for a number of activities, from which they could identify all the appropriate options in the questionnaire. In this question, each respondent could identify all the appropriate answers. Respondents selected “physical activity” options as up to 500 times, meaning that 86.2% of respondents indicated this option as appropriate for locomotive activities to be ranked second in the outdoor schools program, right behind the possibility of “outdoor games”, identified by 520 respondents as suitable, and so this option was marked by 89.6% of our respondents, making outdoor games the most suitable activity for the outdoor school program. Just a little less, 84.4% of those with a focus on orientation and movement in nature, 490 respondents identified as suitable for the program; similar findings have also been made [12]. Activities focused on environmental education were marked by 410 respondents and eco-scores were marked by 400 respondents. Social games ranked sixth in our list of activities suitable for the program in outdoor schools, which was marked by 380 respondents, representing 65.5%. Activities targeting the development of social skills were indicated by 350 respondents (60.3%) as appropriate. Activities with a focus on survival in nature were identified by 230 respondents, and water games were places as the last ones, marked by only 140 respondents.

Question 2: When organizing school in nature, the most difficult point is:

- *selection of accommodation*
- *program creation*
- *communication with school management*
- *communication with parents*
- *administration*
- *realization?*

In question 2, we asked the respondents to declare which point in organizing outdoor school is the most demanding for a pedagogue. Each respondent had the option of selecting only one matching answer from the offered answers. From the answers to this question, it is clear that the most difficult point in the organization of the outdoor school for the teachers is administration, which was identified by up to 190 respondents, which means that up to 32.8% consider the administration to be the most demanding. However, a total of 170 respondents (29.3%) identified the program as the most demanding point, bringing this organization point to second place in difficulty. The third most frequently mentioned option was the selection of accommodation, which was the most demanding for 140 respondents (24.1%). The fourth place is the realization itself, which was described as the most demanding of 60 respondents (10.4%). Only 20 respondents (3.4%) indicated communication with parents as the most difficult. Communication with the school leadership was not marked as the most demanding point by any respondent. Comber and Nixon [13] and Woodhouse and Knappm [14] reached conclusions of a similar nature, although in another social and economic environment.

Question 3: What is the focus of your schools in nature?

- *on physical activities*
- *to discover nature and the environment*
- *to create art*
- *to improve interpersonal relations among pupils*
- *to adopt the principles of environmental education.*

The focus of outdoor schools organized by the interviewed educators was declared in question number 3. In the question, we gave our respondents a choice of several options, such as focus on physical activity, nature and environment, art, improving interpersonal relations among pupils or principles of environmental education. We have learned relatively interesting information on this issue through the subjects' responses. Each respondent could identify all matching choices in the replies. The most frequent answer to the question was the focus on improving the interpersonal relations among pupils, which was identified by up to 430 respondents (74.1%). On the basis of our own experience, we do not doubt that it is advisable to engage in the outdoor school as well as to improve human relationships. We can rather improve relations as a secondary element created by appropriately built activities in the program and the atmosphere created during the stay. Better and stronger relationships between peers and classmates can also positively influence their next stages of life, just as it was prior to the time we know today when cybernetic - Internet time is booming. However, the overall focus of outdoor schools on improving human relationships is controversial, as long as the school's interest in nature is derived from legislative sources where it is clear that priority is given to a healing stay in nature. A slightly lesser vote was given to the answer where respondents indicated that the focus of the organized outdoor schools is on the nature and the environment, with 250 responses (43.1%). Focus on physical

activity was marked by 210 respondents (36.2%). Aronsson et al. made similar findings [15]. Based on the above-mentioned legislative outcomes, we assumed a slightly higher success rate of this response, as we logically associated physical activity with a healthy lifestyle. Adoption of the principles of environmental education was marked by 170 respondents (29.3%). Only 90 respondents (15%) identified art creation as the focus of the realized outdoor schools.

Question 4: What are your expectations for the realization of schools in nature?

- *the transfer of theoretical information into practice*
- *the acquisition of new skills and knowledge*
- *the improvement of interpersonal relationships among pupils*
- *the improvement of the relationship to nature itself*
- *the acquisition of new knowledge on nature protection*
- *the acquisition of new skills in the field of human survival and protection.*

In question 4, we asked our respondents about their expectations after the realization of the outdoor school. Each respondent could identify all matching choices in the replies. In the questionnaire, we included options such as expectation of transferring theoretical information into practice, gaining new skills and knowledge, improving human relationships among pupils, improving the relationship to nature, gaining new knowledge about nature conservation, and gaining new skills in the area survival and protection of man and health. In the mentioned options, improvement in interpersonal relations among pupils was the most often marked option, chosen 440 times, meaning that 75.9% of respondents consider this option to be the greatest expectation of realization of the school's in nature. A total of 400 respondents (69%) identified an improvement in the relationship with nature as their expectation. As we reiterate from the legislative documents, improving the depth of the relationship has been the most frequent answer to this question under which, of course, we logically understand more frequent visits in nature after outdoor school. The third most frequently mentioned answer was the acquisition of new knowledge on nature protection; this option was selected by 350 respondents (60.3%). Nixon et al. [16] reached similar conclusions. The fourth place is the acquisition of new skills and knowledge, which was identified by a slight majority of 320 teachers (55.2%). We expected somewhat higher percentages of this option, as the outdoor school is, after all, an educational stay. In the fifth place there was an option in which the transfer of theoretical information was put into practice by 240 respondents (41.4%). Finally, the chance to gain new skills in the area of human survival was identified by 140 pedagogues (24.1%).

As mentioned in the in-depth analysis methodology, we placed a pair of confrontational questions in the questionnaire. This pair of questions is allowing us to get deeper into the bottom line.

1. confrontational question:

Does the selection of activities during the outdoor school program lead to the successful achievement of the intended goal?

The first pairs of confrontational questions are Questions 1 and 4, where in question 1 we wanted to know selection of activities suitable for the outdoor school program, and in question 4 we found out what expectations the teachers have after the outdoor school's realization, so we focused on the objectives achieved during outdoor school. In question number 1, most of the respondents identified the answers of the outdoor games (520), physical activity (500) and activities focusing on orientation and movement in nature (490), making these activities

logically the most suitable for the outdoor school program. On the other hand, the least-mentioned options on this issue were water games (140), activities with a focus on survival in nature (230), activities focusing on the development of social skills (350) and board games (380) suitable for the program of the outdoor school. In Question 4, we focused on the expectations of teachers following the realization of the outdoor school, focusing on the objectives achieved after the outdoor school itself, where the most clearly identified answer made it possible to expect in particular the improvement in interpersonal relations among pupils (440). If we assume that the selection of activities in the program represents a means of achieving the goals of our outdoor school's intention, we see that there is a lack of a direct relationship with the most often marked activities - sports and physical activities in nature and the most often marked expectation - improvement in human relationships. Zink and Boyes [17] reached a similar conclusion, though in a slightly different school environment. Improving interpersonal relationships undoubtedly belongs to the expectations and goals of the outdoor school's realization, but as a secondary goal, which can be achieved by a suitable selection of activities and by adapting the program to individual classes or groups. If we look at the answers to question 4, and question number 3 at the same time, where up to 430 respondents and 73.1% of teachers report that the outdoor schools are aimed at improving interpersonal relations among pupils, our results point to teachers' insufficient experience and their weaker orientation in legislative documents related to outdoor schools where the outdoor school is clearly included in the healing stays according to the collection of laws of the National Council of the Slovak Republic no. 279/1993 § 8, which state that an outdoor school is an educational facility that enables children from schools, pre-school facilities and special educational facilities to stay in the nature without interruption of school attendance and educational work in a health-friendly environment. Its mission is to recover and consolidate their health and physical fitness.

According to Act no. 355/2007 of 21 June 2007 on the Protection, Promotion and Development of Public Health and on Amendments to Certain Acts, the National Council of the Slovak Republic has adopted the following regulation: "In § 25 recovery event is an organized stay of at least five children and young people under 18 years of age for more than four days, whose purpose is recreation of children and youth, strengthening their health and increasing their physical fitness".

CONCLUSIONS

As we respond to the ever-growing trend of outdoor schools, we were interested in the current state of realization of these outdoor stays. From the analyzed results, we can see that 81% of respondents realize outdoor schools in primary education and up to 91.4% of respondents consider the realization of outdoor schools to be important for the educational process and for the all-round development of the young generation. The administration and program creation is the most challenging part for teachers to fulfill this process. The fourth year of primary education teachers is the most suitable year for the realization of the outdoor school. The focus of outdoor schools organized by respondents was mostly to improve interpersonal relationships as we consider the lack of information or experience of teachers with the organization of these priority healing and educational stays. We also found what is the required equipment for organization of outdoor schools, where the most desirable are the dayroom, healthy eating, sports area, suitable and safe natural environment and the pool,

whose selection does not have a logical use in outdoor school programs, since only 24.1% of the respondents consider water games as appropriate activities. In the questions in which we were interested in organizing outdoor school we found out that the interest from both pupils and parents is about 25% higher than the interest shown by educators. This reduced interest in the organization of outdoor schools is attributed to high-level administrative work, demanding program design, and difficult choices for the program during the stay, where one way to eliminate this reduced interest is by creating a non-existent methodological manual for the organization of outdoor school. Consideration would also be given to expanding cooperation with colleagues who are graduates in the field of sport or with an external environment (leisure time animators), making implementation of kindergarten schools for primary education facilitators easier and the program of the school would be more varied. Interestingly, despite the fact that pedagogues consider the distance to be decisive in their choice, up to 60.1% of them would be willing to travel more than 100 km to the ideal accommodation.

The processing of the contribution allowed us to provide information that could be helpful in solving the current situation in the area of realization of stays in primary schools. It is clear from the results that the interest in the implementation of outdoor schools is both on the part of pupils and of parents. This makes it a prerequisite for establishing these activities in the education system of the school. Also, most teachers assume the realization of outdoor schools is important in primary education at elementary schools whose teachers have just underlined the importance of implementing outdoor schools. It is only a matter of completing the competencies of the individual educators who are involved in the preparation and realization.

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