Research in Outdoor Education

Volume 2 Article 17

1994

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CAMP PEREGRINE RESEARCH: AN INVESTIGATION OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL EMPATHY

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In our work with school children at Mohonk Preserve, a nature preserve in New York's Hudson Valley, we have found that today's children lack one of the most important elements of ecological literacy, direct experience with the environment. Direct experience has been cited as one important step in the development of environmental empathy (Carson, 1984; Orr, 1991; Wilson, 1984). In our experience, this problem seems attributable to both lack of motivation and lack of opportunity. Our research goal at Mohonk Preserve's Camp Peregrine during the past five years has been to discover better ways to give children opportunity to experience the environment that results in a deep empathy for the organisms and their physical habitats. Empathy for non-human characters involves the focusing of attention on the other and the assumption of the role of the other, as well as cognitive activities that lead to understanding of the other's situation (Hoffman, 1993). We link adventure, scientific inquiry, and storytelling to accomplish these goals. We have identified a coterie of experiences and activities that helps children feel at home in the outdoor environment, at the same time that it focuses the attention of the children on the creatures that live in this world. Our program, which is offered to children ages 7-12 during the summer, begins with adventure activities—hikes, rock scrambles, prowess challenges—to help children achieve an awareness of *self-in-place* as a basis for exploration and the development of empathetic understanding of the problems involved in survival.

An important tool in the development of understanding is observation. Children in this program were involved in daily observational activities that sometimes helped the children to remain focused on an organism for five minutes or more. The children were encouraged to explore their feelings of empathy through role playing. This play activity was strongly associated with the local environment through the building of shelters and habitats. Scientific inquiry arose from both play and observation. Children were encouraged to express their curiosity in the form of answerable questions. These questions were investigated in informal mini-experiments as well as more formal and longer term investigations. Discoveries from these investigations were shared in stories. We encouraged the children to become storytellers by modeling the process in many ways. The storytelling process is designed to help the children internalize their experiences (Paley, 1981). As a culminating activity, we asked the children to select a character, develop a character profile (name, life stage, habitat, family, greatest wish and greatest fear), and then write a story where the character tries to get something and either succeeds or fails. This final story served the same purpose as the role playing activities: helping the children identify with and take on the role of the chosen character.

Our working method included daily evaluation and planning meetings. Discussions at these meetings generally led to the conclusion that our program was meeting our goals. We were interested in determining whether the stories 1) demonstrated that the children had developed environmental empathy as a result of their experiences at the camp, and 2) were useful vehicles for the children to help them explore their own relationship with the environment. In order to answer the first question, we looked for two aspects of empathy, identification with the other and the development of cognitive understanding of the needs of the other, and then drew connections between these manifestations of empathy and the children's ex-

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periences. We dealt with the second question by analyzing the content of the stories.

Analysis of character selection for the stories did not initially indicate that the camp was instrumental in increasing the development of a personal relationship or identification with environmental characters. Most of the characters selected were *non-contact* characters (i.e., organisms with whom the children had not had direct contact with during the camp). We found that the children tended to choose dramatic animals that they might have been most familiar with through television, movies, or books, such as pythons, tigers, panthers, and baboons. Of the 28 characters selected, only four could be directly attributable to experience at the camp. These characters included two salamanders and two frogs. These results were at odds both with what we had expected and what we found when we examined character selection in another form (i.e., the selection of a daily name or totem). The names overwhelmingly related to significant experiences with environmental characters, confirming our feelings that the children were identifying with these characters. We felt that the reason for this discrepancy might be that our selection activity was too divorced both in time frame and in conception from the direct experience.

We asked one group of children to make a second selection based on an immediate pond experience. All of the children except one selected local pond characters. Many of the stories contained ecological complexity that demonstrated cognition about the inner needs of the other. These included stories that demonstrated the following ecological concepts: food chains, habitat needs, camouflage, predator/prey relationships.

We compared the amount of other-focused empathy, a kind of empathy that depends on an understanding of the other's needs, found in stories written about contact characters to the amount found in stories about non-contact characters. We found that the one story written about an actual event did demonstrate a high degree of other-focused empathy. In analyzing the content of the stories, we found that the theme in almost all of the stories dealt with the relationship between humans and the environment, in most cases between humans and the character. In fact, the children seemed to be working out their own personal relationship to environmental characters. They created characters who were helped by humans, who were afraid of humans, who wanted humans to be afraid of them, and who tried to deal with environmental problems caused by humans. Many of the stories delineated the struggle of these children to establish a relationship with these characters. Others showed great empathy for animals and habitat that had to suffer at the hands of humans. The animals were afraid of hunters with guns, fire and bulldozers. Many of them had to become like humans to overcome the problems that humans caused. For example, the tree got the squirrels to steal the keys to the bulldozer in one story. In another, a Cheetah goes to an Indian chief to get magical powers to overcome the problems caused by humans.

Although the stories demonstrated both the development of a personal relationship with the environment and the cognitive understanding necessary to the development of an other-focused empathy, these demonstrations of empathy were weak. More empathy was displayed when the storytelling process was close in time and conceptualization to the actual experience. Secondhand knowledge seemed longer lasting and the children tended to draw on this information when they were not in immediate proximity to the character they were describing. We concluded that stories are a useful vehicle for helping children develop environmental empathy, but that they do not document fully the development of empathy that occurs. We have made plans to use parental surveys, an anecdotal/log account of oral storytelling, and children's art to better document the development of environmental empathy in the future.

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