

# Research in Outdoor Education

---

Volume 3

Article 4

---

1996

## Outdoor Education and the Schools

Bert Horwood  
*Queen's University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/reseoutded>



Part of the [Environmental Education Commons](#), and the [Leisure Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Horwood, Bert (1996) "Outdoor Education and the Schools," *Research in Outdoor Education*: Vol. 3, Article 4.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.cortland.edu/reseoutded/vol3/iss1/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Cortland. It has been accepted for inclusion in Research in Outdoor Education by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Cortland. For more information, please contact [DigitalCommonsSubmissions@cortland.edu](mailto:DigitalCommonsSubmissions@cortland.edu).

## OUTDOOR EDUCATION AND THE SCHOOLS

Bert Horwood

Professor Emeritus  
Queen's University

The research reported to gatherings sponsored by the Coalition for Education in the Outdoors has had relatively little connection with school-based outdoor education. In this paper, I will explore the potentially fruitful interface between education in the outdoors and the schools. The exploration is influenced by the uncertainty of our times, and I have organized this report to reflect two views. One is that the social ferment of the mid-1990s is normal and that we can continue to conduct research in the way that Kuhn (1974) characterized as "normal science." The second view is that the social fabric of the West may be undergoing revolutionary, paradigmatic changes which are hard to recognize from inside and that to carry on as usual may be futile.

By outdoor education, I mean any attempt to educate people out-of-doors. Thus, a mapping exercise in the school yard and the practice of building trades while framing a house count as outdoor education. For the purposes of this paper, "school" is taken to mean any public or private institution with a mandate to educate people over a reasonably long term. Public and private schools, colleges and universities are included, but I have excluded agencies with short term encounters (like Outward Bound Schools) and those with a primarily therapeutic or rehabilitative practice, like programs for persons who are imprisoned or addicted. These exclusions are not meant to devalue such agencies, but only to acknowledge the need to limit the scope of this inquiry and to recognize that such programs have already been the subject of considerable investigation from the outdoor education research community.

Under these definitions, outdoor education could be interpreted as dealing with the school subjects—mathematics, English, sciences and

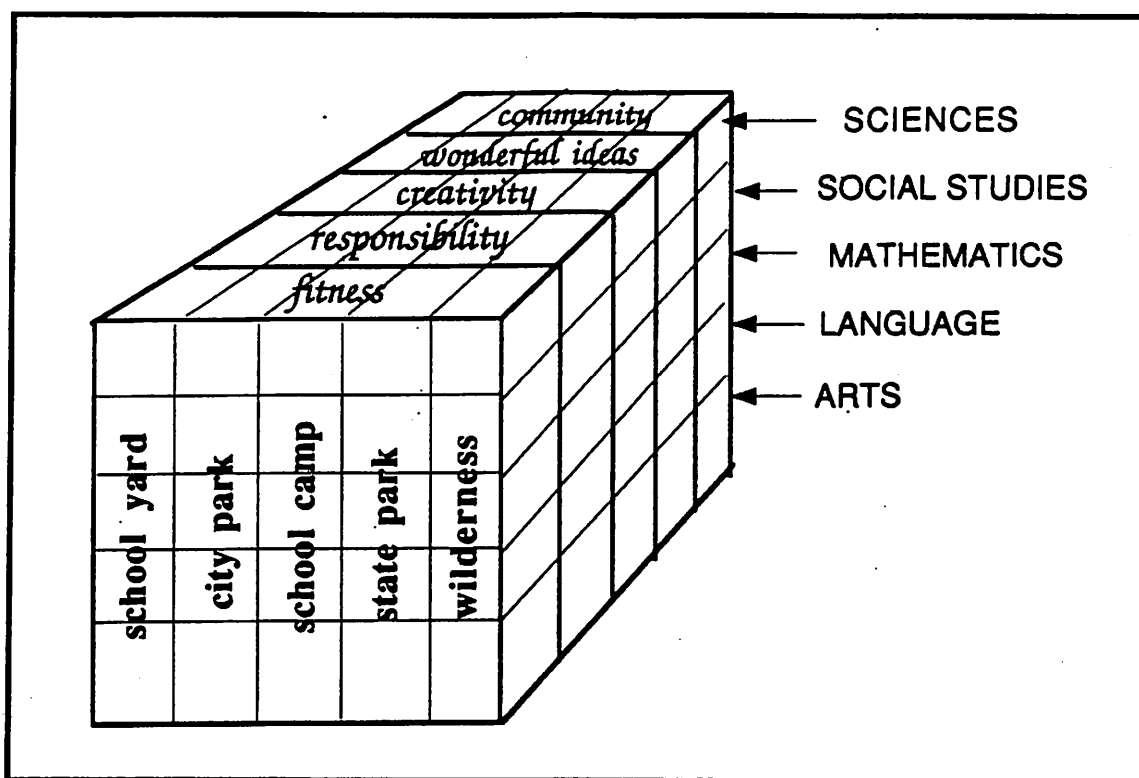
the like. Alternatively, it could be interpreted as including characteristics of education that cut across all subjects. Examples would include cooperation, creativity, fitness, craft-ship, community, and so on. Both interpretations provide many researchable questions. The numerous possibilities of setting, subject and characteristic are illustrated in Figure 1.

### BUSINESS AS USUAL

Let us suppose that globalization and related social, economic, and environmental changes do not create a sufficiently serious set of uncertainties to cause us to change our basic ways of looking at the world of outdoor education. In short, let's assume that it's business as usual. On that basis, I examined the ERIC database, current teachers' periodicals, and selected theses in order to construct a picture of the state of research into outdoor education as it relates to schools.

Most of the literature is comprised of uncritical program descriptions: see Sattler and Zalkin (1989) and Grantham (1995). There are a few overviews. For example, Ford (1986) gives a now somewhat outdated account of the range of meanings of outdoor education, and Knapp (1992) contrasts conventional and post-modern ways of knowing in the practice of education outdoors. In a similar vein, Strano (1995) offers a compilation of research relating outdoor education and curriculum in Ontario, and, to extend the international theme, New Zealand outdoor educators have conducted a survey of research needs and promulgated it on the Internet (Lynch, 1995). One of the main conclusions from this literature is that schools are heavily involved with outdoor education. Another main conclusion is that there is relatively little high quality research and relatively few critical

Dr. Bert Horwood is Professor Emeritus in the Faculty of Education, Queen's University, 269 Blenheim Terrace, Kingston, Ontario, CANADA, K7M 4C8, (613) 389-2620; fax (613) 545-6584; horwoodr@educ.queensu.ca



*Figure 1.* A three-dimensional matrix showing the relationships among examples of curriculum concerns (school subjects and human growth and development) and outdoor education settings at the outdoor-school interface.

perspectives in the field. The lack of well articulated theory and epistemology is particularly evident.

There are some exemplary research reports. Amongst these are Gough's (1993) critique of the readings used in outdoor education, Brookes's (1993) theoretical argument about the purposes and nature of outdoor education, and several theses. I emphasize the theses because in my small sample I found excellent research that is not well disseminated. For example, Raffan's (1983) thesis brought new methods and insights to the study of the curriculum tensions experienced by school teachers teaching outdoors; Henderson's (1995a) thesis is a remarkable synthesis of innovative method, education and environment. There is also evidence that scholars at the interface of schools and outdoor education are paying attention to the need for re-

search agendas and an extended view of research methodologies. O'Rourke (1995) and Robbins (1995) are examples of the former; Henderson (1995b) provides a readable example of the latter. It is not to detract from the value of these efforts to observe that there is little evidence that such research has any influence on practice as portrayed in program descriptions. Indeed, it seems to me that there is a persistent gulf between the communities of practice and of research that requires urgent attention.

The two solitudes of research and educational practice persist because research findings are not perceived as meaningful or accessible to practitioners. Practitioners are rarely partners or contributors to research. (Ants don't have much truck with entomologists.) In addition, significant research is rarely followed up. This is especially true of master's and doctoral research. In

the recommendations to follow, I will make some suggestions for improving this situation.

#### CONSIDERATIONS FOR UNSTABLE TIMES

Let us now suppose that "business as usual" is an unsupportable assumption and that the social, economic and environmental orders are changing rapidly in uncertain directions. There are clear, sound voices that articulate our common experience of drastic changes in the social contracts that have, in recent decades, been the stability of our times. Writers like Berman (1981), O'Brien (1994), Waks (1995) and Saul (1995) paint a chilling picture of social, economic and environmental degradation that makes normal educational research pointless. The force of these disturbing views is enough to suggest that an entirely new and radical research program is warranted.

Thinking about a research agenda for uncertain and unstable times provides an upbeat antidote for the pessimism that can ensue from too much apocalyptic reading. For example, the stunning discoveries of Prigogine and others in self-organizing systems suggest a promising evolutionary future for societies that choose to allow the natural processes of self-organization full play (Jantsch, 1980). Similarly, Gregory Bateson's thought, as explicated by Berman (1981), represents another, related promising future direction. But there is no research in outdoor education that investigates how these radical world views might take shape in either our programs or our research. For any person who thinks that outdoor education and the schools will not be able to continue along their present lines for much longer, there is an urgent and exciting body of conceptual and developmental work to be done.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

There are two sets of recommendations. The first involves extending and expanding practices that already exist but are too limited. Ewert (1996) has urged strategies that extend and deepen the connection among outdoor education researchers and workers in related fields, and his ideas are particularly cogent in relation to

the schools. There is a growing body of research at the interface of outdoor education and the schools. That literature needs to be comprehensively and critically reviewed. This is especially true of the excellent work that is buried in unpublished theses and dissertations. The standards for dissertation writing in many universities, paradoxically, tend to make very dull reading. Somehow, the insights and discoveries of graduate students need to be coherently and interestingly brought into the light.

Researchers in outdoor education who are based in departments of recreation or physical education should seek collaborators within schools of education. There is much to gain and to give. For example, it is clear from numerous program descriptions that outdoor education is often delivered by recreational leaders to school children with minimum involvement by the classroom teachers (for an exception, see Smith, 1995). The two worlds of outdoor recreation and school may have mutual admiration, but they have little real communication and little sense of shared purpose and common professional language (Horwood & Raffan, 1988). Outdoor leaders need to be trained to better understand teachers and teaching, and teachers need to be better educated to make maximum use of outdoor education opportunities. These changes in instructor training and related research can happen only by expanding collaboration.

Why is collaboration lacking? There is a need to study the variety of barriers and inhibitions to collaborative work, both in program delivery and in research. And there is a need to study the efforts to overcome them. Among the most serious inhibitors are school personnel's discomfort in the outdoors, the systemic demands of the curriculum for high test scores in the schools, and the system of academic rewards in the research community. All of these point to disciplinary isolation and to the tendency for evaluation, or the fear thereof, to drive our every action. There is a need to critically assess evaluation in the context of outdoor education and the schools.

The second set of recommendations involves breaking nearly new ground. An old barrier exists between the communities of research and professional practice in education. Researchers, for good reasons, tend to choose problems that are irrelevant to the concerns of practitioners, and publish findings in places and forms that practitioners rarely, if ever, explore. The gulf between research and practice needs to be bridged. Several existing trends could help. Theory needs to be exercised more as dialogue with practice and less as prescription. Teachers and outdoor leaders need to be recruited as coinvestigators with researchers. Outdoor education research should be presented at teacher conferences, and schools researchers should be invited to outdoor education gatherings. Multiple research perspectives—positivist, naturalist, and dialectical—need to be deployed.

If the social, economic and environmental fabric of the last quarter of the 20th century is unravelling, then the call for research into new concepts and relationships is pressing. For example, what has outdoor education in a school context to say to life after school? The conventional answer is that graduates use their educations for employment, and their outdoor education experiences should lead to appreciation of the natural world and recreational opportunities as refreshment from work. But as fewer and fewer people come to have jobs, there is a clear need to reconceptualize what we are about. The introduction of chaos theory into social systems raises further demands for basic conceptual research into its implications for outdoor education structures. We are living in interesting times.

#### REFERENCES

- Berman, M. (1981). *The reenchantment of the world*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Brookes, A. (1993). Deep and shallow outdoor education. Can we tell the difference? *The Outdoor Educator. Journal of the Victorian Outdoor Education Association Incorporated*, GPO Box 1896R, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, June 1993, 8-17.
- Ewert, A. (1996). Research in outdoor education: Our place on the porch. In L. McAvoy, L. A. Stringer, Bialeschki, M. D., and Young, A. B. (Eds.), *Coalition for Education in the Outdoors third research symposium proceedings*, (pp. 7-8). Cortland, NY: Coalition for Education in the Outdoors.
- Ford, P. (1986). Outdoor education: Definition and philosophy. ERIC Digest. ERIC-CRESS. ED-267941.
- Gough, N. (1993). Neuromancing the stones: Experience, intertextuality, and cyberpunk science fiction. *Journal of Experiential Education*, 16 (3), 9-17.
- Grantham, A. (1995). Think active, think green. *CAHPERD Journal*, 61 (2), 30-31.
- Henderson, B. (1995a). *Outdoor Travel: Exploration for change*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.
- Henderson, B. (1995b). Orienting oneself to research. *Pathways. The Ontario Journal of Outdoor Education* 7 (2), 27-31.
- Horwood, B., & Raffan, J. (1988). Recreation and education in the outdoors: Exploring the boundaries. *CAHPERD Journal*, 54 (3), 7-9.
- Jantsch, E. (1980). *The self-organizing universe*. New York: Pergamon Press.
- Knapp, C. E. (1992). Thinking in outdoor inquiry. ERIC Digest. ED348198.
- Kuhn, T. S. (1974). *The structure of scientific revolutions* (2nd ed.). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lynch, P. (Ed.). (1995). Outdoor Education Research Network Newsletter #8. Available on the outdoor education list: [outdoored@latrobe.edu.au](mailto:outdoored@latrobe.edu.au)
- O'Brien, C.C. (1994). *On the eve of the millennium*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press Limited.
- O'Rourke, T. W. (1995). Creating capacity: A research agenda for school health education. *Journal of School Health Education*, 65 (1), 33-37.
- Raffan, J. (1983). *Theory and practice in outdoor teaching: The indoor/outdoor dilemma*. Unpublished master's thesis, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

- Robbins, S. (1995). The status of school based research in Canada. *CAHPERD Journal*, 61 (3), 10-12.
- Sattler, E. D., & Zalkin, L. (1989). Get your feet wet—scientifically: A guide to water testing as a school science project. *Outdoor Communicator*, 20 (2), 26-32.
- Saul, J. R. (1995). *The unconscious civilization*. Toronto: House of Anansi Press Limited.
- Smith, T. (1995). An experiential adventure school for sexually abused adolescents. In B. Horwood (Ed.), *Experience and the curriculum* (pp. 217-234). Boulder, CO: Association for Experiential Education.
- Strano, D. (1995). *The importance of outdoor education in school curriculum: A compilation of research*. Toronto: Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario, 1885 Eglinton Avenue East, North York, Ontario, M3C 3C6.
- Waks, L. (1995). Citizenship in transition: Globalization, postindustrial technology and education. In S. Hills (Ed.), *Life after school: Education, globalization and the person*. Proceedings of the 1995 MSTE Spring Colloquium. (Available from MSTE Group, Faculty of Education, Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario K7L 3N6.