

## Discovering Sense of Place: Application through Education

By P.J. Aucoin

Over the past three decades, environmental issues have been on the global forefront and continue to affect our daily lives. Although the need for environmental attention is at an all-time high, outdoor and environmental education (OEE) plays an insufficient role in our school systems. Its minimal representation in curriculum is not due to the shortage of information or resources but instead the lack of acknowledgement it has received in fostering the development of the whole child. During the late 20 and early 21 centuries, traditional education has predominantly been focused around teacher-centred instruction and a curriculum segregated into subjects of narrow-minded focus. This divide has not only drawn a line in Ontario Ministry of Education-developed handbooks but also at the classroom door. In a period of youth when students' imaginations soar well beyond what any adult could ever wish for, education systems have historically restricted them to

evenly divided rows and enabled diminutive opportunity for experience.

As technology continues to contribute to advancements in every sector of our modern world, there is a dire need for education to find its way back to its roots. In achieving this, the ministry, school board members, principals, teachers and parents need to acknowledge the importance of experiential education and creating a sense of place for students during this important developmental stage of their lives. Sense of place can have many individualized meanings; common goals relate to the basics of individuals' developed relationships and understanding with nature, the environment, wildlife, community, and, most importantly, each other. To this I suggest the days of

endless textbook work, learning for the purpose of regurgitation and standardized testing

have long passed their

welcome. It is time

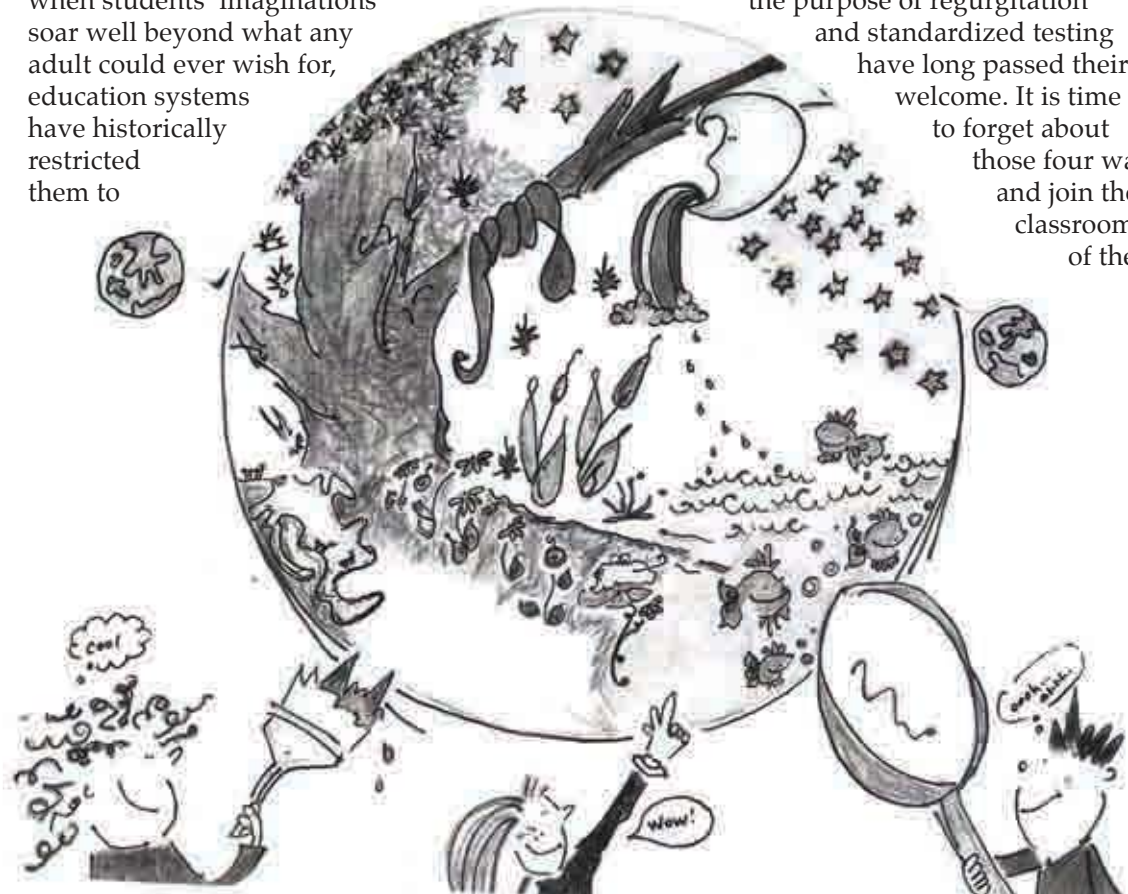
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future—the outdoors. The emergence of an OEE program in elementary curriculum would be ideal for those who study in the field, but, taking a step back, this article will discuss a new direction for teaching methodologies, the importance of creating sense of place, and the potential in working with the traditional curriculum through integration of environmental and outdoor education.

American philosopher John Dewey (1938) wrote:

What avail is it to win prescribed amounts of information about geography and history, to win the ability to read and write, if in the process the individual loses his own soul: loses his appreciation of things worth while, of the values to which these things are relative; if he loses desires to apply what he has learned and, above all, loses the ability to extract meaning from his future experiences as they occur? (p. 49)

Dewey's (1938) book, *Experience Based Education*, outlines the need for a revised outlook on education within the Western world; an education system where students are removed from their desks and become an active part of the learning experience. Through philosophies and models such as Kolb's (1983) "experiential learning cycle," we begin to acknowledge the direction in which integrated education should go to most benefit upcoming generations of students. Adopting these theories and models is the Child Study Laboratory in Toronto, Ontario. A program implemented through a partnership with the University of Toronto, it is based on the following philosophy of education:

Savouring information instead of swallowing it whole, digesting it instead of regurgitating it before its intrinsic nourishment can make itself felt. . .exploring something deeply and thoroughly, learning how to learn, how to ask questions, how to understand, how to apply that understanding to

other areas of study. (Mitchell, 2003, p. F1)

The Child Study Laboratory's philosophy portrays the whole-child approach that many, such as Dewey and Kolb, suggest should be implemented in traditional elementary schools. As schools like this continue to be the testing group for the majority, it is necessary to acknowledge the effect of cross-curriculum integration and student-based learning where the means to assessment is not a standardized test but, rather, emphasis on the development of understanding and knowledge.

### **Integration of Environmental and Outdoor Education into Elementary Curriculum**

Subjects within curriculum are often extremely topic-specific and rarely discuss cross-curricular integration let alone integration with regards to the outdoors. This section discusses the opportunities to create sense of place within traditional curriculum using the outdoors as a medium to foster learning and reunite current and future generations with the outdoors through integrated education.

#### **1. Social Sciences**

Growing up in Southern Ontario, one of my most memorable and beneficial experiences came within an integrated program of outdoor education and social science. In the small town of Port Rowan sits the heritage conservation area of Backus Mills. Integrating the outdoors and a re-enactment of the War of 1812, my classmates and I took on the roles of the British and American troops, learning about weapons and the lifestyles that required us to forage for food and create soup out of whatever items each student brought. Protecting our domain and strategizing to capture the flag of the opposition created a simulated experience of the soldiers during the War of 1812. Using the outdoors and environment, we were subconsciously developing a sense of place with our surroundings, developing an understanding of the usefulness, beauty, and appreciation for the outdoors; to this

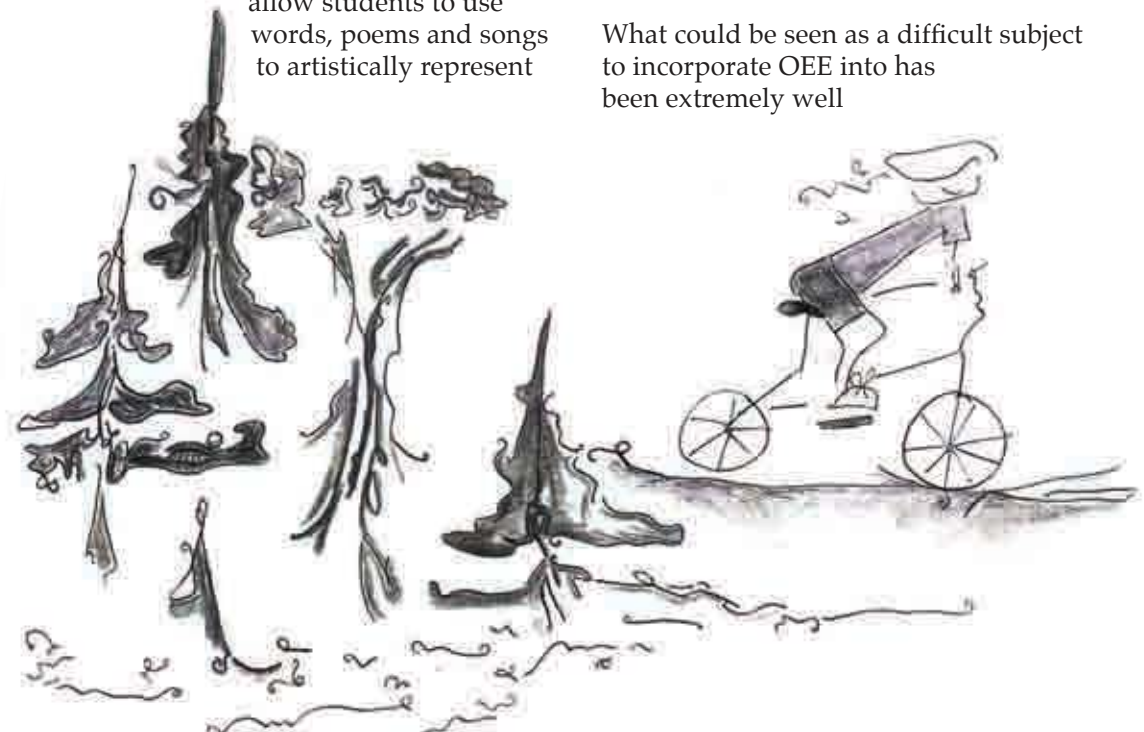
day this remains ingrained in my memory. Through role-playing we also became active learners in understanding what it was like to be a soldier relying on the outdoors for survival. Almost ten years have passed since this memorable field trip, and, although I remember very little from my elementary school days, I can still recall the major events of the War of 1812, and often think of that trip as the starting point to my love for the outdoors.

Using re-enactments, role-playing or adventure-based activities in the outdoors allows for geographical, historical and environmental issues to become involved in students' learning, which, in turn, allows them to open their minds and divulge what they have learned in whichever way they find suitable. Enabling students to use their imaginations and create their own sense of place allows them the opportunity to make connections to their material, creating a student-centred approach to learning, which I believe is extremely beneficial at all ages.

## 2. Arts and Language

Integrating the Arts and Language with OEE allows for students to create expressive and developmental understandings. Through journaling, reflection, observation and discussion, the Arts and Language subjects

allow students to use words, poems and songs to artistically represent



their experiences in nature. An example of this is in a case study by Bennion and Olsen (2002) where they explain the language development and OEE integrated process:

After coming down a steep slick-rock trail and wading through water narrows, we stopped under a natural amphitheater and wrote in journals. We then read from the journals and discussed what happened. This moved the experience beyond mere physical exercise and rush of adrenaline, to the realm of self-exploration, consideration of values, as well as emotional and mental growth. Close contact with the writing teacher produces a better work, as pre-writing experience teaches them the complete composing process. (p. 244)

This exploration process leads students to achieve sense of place within the outdoors and reflect on their experiences while developing literary devices. OEE integration allows students to capture their own perceived sense of place and, through self-expression, whether it be paintings, drawings, dances or plays, to make connections with the environment as a form of art.

## 3. Science and Technology

What could be seen as a difficult subject to incorporate OEE into has been extremely well

developed and integrated in the current Ontario Ministry of Education Curriculum for Science and Technology (2007). The ministry has not only adopted an environmental section into their curriculum design but expresses the importance of creating sense of place within students' understanding. This portion of science and technology exposes issues that students will face on a daily basis with regards to environmental justice in protecting our environment. The Ontario Ministry of Education (2007) states:

Throughout the grades and strands, teachers have opportunities to take students out of the classroom and into the world beyond the school, to observe, explore, and investigate. One effective way to approach environmental literacy is through examining critical inquiry questions related to students' sense of place, to the impact of human activity on the environment, and/or to systems thinking. (p. 35)

This curricular handbook thoroughly explains the importance of sense of place and environmental integration. It further discusses the practical application concerning issues surrounding the students' everyday lives in order to preserve and maintain healthy living standards for the future (Ontario Ministry of Education, p. 36). These topics may seem somewhat heavy for students ranging from the ages of 6 to 11, but, using developmental teaching models and proper discussion, students can slowly begin to develop increased environmental awareness.

#### 4. Health and Physical Education (HPE)

This subject has for a long time used the outdoors as a setting for lessons and program planning, but it has undergone immense change over the past five years. Major changes have come in the form of a new child-centred approach labelled Teaching Games for Understanding (TGfU). Stepping aside from sport-based Physical Education, TGfU allows new avenues for developmental

learning as teachers who are required to adopt the new curriculum try and create new lesson plans and course programming. Elementary HPE programs based around modified orienteering, scavenger hunts, nature adventures or environmental awareness lessons provide extremely valuable avenues in creating a sense of place and outdoor education for students.

The second opportunity for OEE and HPE integration is the introduction to the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2005) policy of Daily Physical Activity (DPA) in elementary schools. As Ontario Physical Health Educators Associations (OPHEA) point out, DPA is by no means limited to classroom activities. In their "Take it Outside! Practical Strategies for Being Active Outside" (OPHEA, 2009) article, they discuss the importance and opportunity DPA has to take students out of a cooped-up classroom and adventure to the outdoors, providing a wider range of physical activities that can be implemented outside of a school setting. Whether this takes the form of a nature walk or just simply playing games in the outdoors, DPA has the ability to apply the overall goal of OEE in giving students a sense of place. Students can un mindfully create a relationship with the outdoors using both unorganized and organized play as a tool in recognizing the beneficial opportunities the outdoors provides in their daily lives. (See also Ontario Ministry of Education, 2010.)

#### Future Outlook

The integration of OEE and the use of student-based learning do not come without challenges. Current teacher-based learning has developed the notion within our society that assessment should result in a formal grade, leading parents to track progress in terms of the marks students bring home. Whether it is a grade or a piece of artwork on the refrigerator, parents seem to have obtained the idea of an "end product" in achieving an overall understanding of lessons taught. This, of course, does not fit with the case for student-centred education. Kolb's (1983) "experiential learning cycle" gives reference to the ongoing learning that

may take weeks or months for students to fully grasp. The idea of an increased developmental process that requires time to learn and be revisited in order to apply across context has to be acknowledged and understood in the schools and homes of the students in order for longitudinal successes to be realized.

Marie Von Ebner-Eschenbach once stated, "In youth we learn, in age we understand." This quotation encapsulates the objectives of experiential-integrated outdoor education. Sense of place is not specifically about a single lesson, or experience, but instead about building relationships and understanding one's surroundings. Curriculum that integrates outdoor and environmental education not only opens the door for greater understanding but also allows students to develop an attachment to the environment that will hopefully result in raised awareness and action to preserve this environment in its natural forms. The concept of sense of place is not a singularly driven event but an overall opportunity for students to make connections and gain relationships with the environment around them. Providing a chance to obtain a sense of place within educational settings encourages environmental and place-based thinking over a broad context of subject areas, allowing students to make connections and apply these connections back to their daily lives. Experiential learning becomes a tool in developing social relationships, transferable skills and knowledge, and environmental awareness, and removes students from the confinement of their desks or classrooms to obtain experience that no textbook or test could ever achieve.

A lot of work is yet to be done with regards to student-centred education reform and integration of outdoor and environmental education, but, with increased understanding of the benefits they provide, the possibilities are endless and exciting. In order to "save" nature we have to first learn how to love it, and developing future generations into environmental thinkers should be a vital goal of our education systems in order to preserve and appreciate that which is all around us.

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