

# Outdoor Education

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Although not as prominent as the more traditional lifetime or “carry-over” activities (e.g., golf, tennis, bowling, and badminton), outdoor activities are increasingly appearing in public school physical education programs. Although the major purpose of this chapter is to discuss outdoor curriculum, before proceeding, it is important to note our conviction that curriculum (what a student experiences) and instruction (how the experiences are presented) are inextricably woven together. Although curriculum is often discussed as detached and distinct from instruction, the reason for doing so is more often one of practicality than reality. Good content that is poorly delivered, and good intentions with weak or inappropriate content, will produce similar unfavorable results. This is especially true in the outdoor realm. Associated with the natural environment are a considerable number of safety issues (Dougherty, 1998) that, in turn, demand unique qualifications and experience on the part of the teacher. Thus, although our emphasis will be on curriculum, we cannot ignore instructional considerations, and will occasionally include them throughout this chapter.

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## The Appeal of Outdoor Activities

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Activities that provide excitement, challenge, and sometimes a degree of risk appeal to many youngsters. Children also favor activities where winning or losing holds little importance compared to cooperating and facing the challenges of a natural environment. Outdoor activities that incorporate these elements include backpacking, rock climbing, orienteering, cross-country skiing and snowshoeing, winter camping, white-water paddling, and mountain biking, among others—all of which may involve making choices with sometimes weighty consequences.

As illustrated throughout this chapter, it is easy to imagine how outdoor activities can address each of the physical activity content standards as a basis for curriculum development. For example, the vigorous nature

of many outdoor activities requires a health-enhancing level of physical fitness. Outdoor activities also call for acquiring and applying new and enjoyable skills, often leading to increased participation in physical activity. Furthermore, successfully navigating and enjoying the outdoors demands a responsible and tolerant attitude. That is, individuals must be concerned about their own welfare as well as the welfare of others and their surroundings, and also must become tolerant of the adverse and uncertain conditions that sometimes accompany forays into the outdoors. Finally, outdoor activities afford opportunities for successfully including a wide range of abilities in a supportive, inclusive environment. Coupled with occasions to practice leadership, to respect and nurture human differences and commonalities, and to make important choices, outdoor activities lend themselves readily to the broad outcomes expected in a quality physical education program. Most physical activity educators (Ziegler, 2003), including us, do not consider outdoor activities as a replacement for more traditional physical education activities. Rather, we view outdoor activities as a means of curriculum extension and enrichment.

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### Conceptualizing Outdoor Activities

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For the purposes of this book, outdoor activities are set apart from adventure activities, yet elements from one may appear in the other. As noted in Chapter 8, adventure programs typically emphasize communication, cooperation, trust, and group problem solving, most often in a developed setting (e.g., gymnasium, playground, challenge ropes course, nearby athletic field). This occurs by means of structured experiences, often simulating obstacles and situations that occur in everyday life. These structured experiences are presented in ways that allow students to deal with them in a manner that is enjoyable, creative, and productive. In an effort to gain new insights that can be applied to future problems and situations, students reflect upon and interpret these structured experiences. The responsibility of the teacher is to facilitate individual and group achievements, and to ensure that the entire process occurs in a physically and emotionally safe environment.

A similarity between adventure and outdoor activities is their focus on personal and group development. Indeed, concepts that are promoted in adventure activities (e.g., teamwork, trust) often precede students' visits to the outdoors. One important difference, however, is that outdoor activities occur in natural settings, with little to no control imposed on the environment, and where hazards may sometimes be beyond the participants' control. Though discussed in more detail later in this chapter, such hazards might include adverse weather (e.g., lightning), wildlife, insect bites, contaminated drinking water, and uneven or wet terrain. Therefore, teachers and students must understand possible hazards in

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the natural environment, and they must exercise appropriate judgment in attempting to minimize such hazards.

Also, taking students into an outdoor setting affords plentiful opportunities to inspire students to alter their outlook on the environment. For example, students in outdoor activities must be especially mindful of minimizing their impact on fragile habitats. How often when walking on a trail have we seen undesirable evidence of human behavior (e.g., litter, trail erosion, soap scum in water)? These and other patterns of behavior that ignore our impact on the environment may result in rapid deterioration of the "natural" character of an area, the quality of its natural resources, and its capacity to support recreational use. Teachers can help students acquire an appreciation of and concern for the natural environment, while also heightening their sensitivity to the impact of their actions on others.

Several other features of outdoor education distinguish it from other curricula. For example, in contrast to adventure education, outdoor education places greater emphasis on skill development. Whereas adventure education emphasizes symbolic activities such as challenge ropes courses and new games, outdoor education focuses more on explicit knowledge and skills that are pertinent to a specific outdoor activity (e.g., hiking, caving, canoeing, or snowboarding). Another feature of outdoor education, which differentiates it from most other curricula in physical education, is its instructional approach. Based on the century-old belief of John Dewey, that all genuine education comes through experience, much of the learning that occurs in an outdoor setting is experiential, with activity (the "do" aspect of learning) supporting more formal instruction. Yet another distinctive feature of outdoor education is its affective component.



of physical fitness. and enjoyable skills, furthermore, successful and responsible and tolerant of their own welfare also must become. Times accompany opportunities for inclusive environment and nurture choices, outdoor activities in a quality (Ziegler, 2003), environment for more traditional activities as a

from adventure activities in Chapter 8, operation, trust, and learning (e.g., gymnastics). This occurs by creating situations that are designed in ways that are safe, creative, and lead to future problem-solving structured experiential and group activities physically and

their focus on performance in adventure activities outdoors. One activity in natural settings where hazards are discussed in more detail is weather (e.g., wind, uneven or wet ground) and possible hazards in

Natural settings often provide a valuable backdrop for identifying and resolving real-life problems (e.g., talking behind someone's back, failing to respect classmates, avoiding work, having an excuse for everything, and blaming others), and for acquiring knowledge and skills with which to enjoy a lifetime of creative, physically active living, through wholesome outdoor pursuits.

### Instructional Considerations

Some outdoor activities can be physically and mentally challenging, occurring in an environment where weather, terrain, and group makeup can demand careful planning, communication, and teamwork. Teachers and students alike must be safe, competent, and responsible participants in the outdoor setting. Flawed judgment, poor planning, inadequate technical and medical skills, or misuse of equipment can quickly and easily jeopardize a venture into the outdoors. For teachers who regard outdoor activities as a possibility for their curriculum, several considerations may be worth contemplating. Depending on the extent and setting of an outdoor experience, additional training and expertise beyond that normally expected of physical activity educators may be necessary. At one end of the continuum, for example, urban orienteering (conducted in areas near a school) may involve acquiring some new knowledge and a few new skills (e.g., map reading, compass use, selecting proper clothing). Challenges and risks afforded by the natural environment and the use of outdoor skills are relatively unimportant for this activity. At the other end of the continuum, however, extended trips into remote wilderness areas offer an environment with a high degree of challenge and risk. This setting will demand more self-reliance and may call for a basic knowledge of backcountry medicine, land navigation, weather, hazard evaluation, trip planning, and other skills and experiences essential to creating safe and enjoyable learning opportunities for students. As one progresses along the continuum from an urban to a wilderness experience and setting, a teacher's need for technical skills, knowledge, and judgment increases. In an outdoor setting, the environment becomes more variable and less structured, programmatic time frames become more extensive (moving from hourly classes to days, perhaps weeks of continuous impact). The demands for general and specific instructional supervision become greater in an outdoor classroom, because students are less likely to possess skills and knowledge necessary for effective coping.

An outdoor curriculum can demand "extensive training and experience beyond that expected of" most physical activity educators (Stiehl, 2000, p. 68), and we would be remiss not to mention them here. Although few colleges and universities prepare students with all of the skills essential for developing an outdoor curriculum component, the following skills and competencies should be taken into account to assure an appropriate consistency between instructor qualifications and program goals:

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