

## School Outdoors: The Pursuit of Happiness as an Educational Goal<sup>1</sup>

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*Well known for his pioneering work on place-based education, David Sobel<sup>2</sup> (2004/2005, 2008, 2013, 2015, 2018) discusses the benefits of engaging adolescents in meaningful learning experiences through outdoor education. His case study focuses on a “Forest Fridays” nature-based education program developed by Eliza Minnucci, an elementary teacher in Vermont, USA. Sobel’s wife, Jennifer Kramer, adapted this pedagogy for her ‘challenging’ sixth-grade class, also in Vermont, and reports on her success in improving their writing skills and performance on math tests. The key here was to make the learning practical, through real-life applications in places more stimulating than ordinary classrooms. Drawing inspiration from youth testimony and anecdotal evidence from parents, Sobel argues that outdoor education of this kind addresses a fundamental goal of education in promoting happiness: a sense of well-being that really ought to matter more than instrumental aims of education like improved math tests or preparation for higher education and careers.*

“The very skilled educator knows when to offer an insight, a question or materials to support a child’s learning, but more importantly knows when to get out of the way.”

—Jon Cree, UK Forest School Association (cited in Sobel, 2015, p.17)

### EXPANDING THE GOALS OF EDUCATION

What would education look like if pursuing happiness was one the true goals of schooling? In his TED Talk<sup>3</sup>, thirteen-year-old homeschooled Logan LaPlante begins by saying that when you’re a kid, adults are always asking you what you want to be when you grow up. They want to hear something like “astronaut” or “neurosurgeon”. Logan’s response to the adult question is, “*When I grow up, I want to be happy.*” He elaborates, “*Adults expect you to go to school, go to college, get a job, get married, and, boom, then you’ll be happy. But it doesn’t work that way. We don’t seem to make learning how to be happy and healthy a priority in our schools. It’s separate from school. But what if we didn’t make it separate? What if we based education on the study and practice of being happy and healthy? Why is being happy and healthy not education? I don’t get it.*”

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<sup>1</sup> A substantially different version of this account appeared in the *Journal of Sustainability Education* (March 31, 2017), entitled “Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness: Reframing our Goals for Education,” [http://www.susted.com/wordpress/content/life-liberty-and-the-pursuit-of-happiness-reframing-our-goals-for-education\\_2017\\_03/](http://www.susted.com/wordpress/content/life-liberty-and-the-pursuit-of-happiness-reframing-our-goals-for-education_2017_03/).

<sup>2</sup> See Sobel’s website at: <https://www.davidsobelauthor.com/>

<sup>3</sup> Hackschooling makes me happy | Logan LaPlante | TEDxUniversityofNevada, 2013: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h11u3vtcpaY>

Instead, Logan cites the work of Dr. Roger Walsh (2011), one of many folks writing about the science of happiness, a burgeoning field.<sup>4</sup> The founders of the United States Constitution enshrined the pursuit of happiness as a core principle,<sup>5</sup> so doesn't it make sense to start turning schools into places where students learn to become happy, rather than becoming bored, or disaffected. Hartz identifies eight contributors to creating a realized, happy state of mind: **exercise, diet and nutrition, time in nature, contribution and service, relationships, recreation, relaxation and stress management, religion and spirituality.** Under the **Nature** heading, Walsh (2011, p. 583) writes:

For thousands of years, wise people have recommended nature as a source of healing and wisdom. Shamans seek wilderness, yogis enter the forest, Christian Fathers retreat to the desert, and American Indians go on nature vision quests. Their experience is that nature heals and calms, removes mental trivia, and reminds one of what really matters (Walsh, 1999). Romantic and existential philosophers echoed similar claims, and the romantic poet William Wordsworth (1807/1998, p. 307) famously described the absence of such a healing connection:

Getting and spending, we lay waste our powers: Little we see in Nature that is ours;  
We have given our hearts away ....

Drawing attention to the therapeutic benefits of time spent in nature, for both physical and mental health Walsh (2001, pp. 583-584), cites Berman, Jonides, and Kaplan (2008, p. 1207):

Imagine a therapy that had no known side effects, was readily available, and could improve your cognitive functioning at zero cost. Such a therapy has been known to philosophers, writers, and laypeople alike: interacting with nature. Many have suspected that nature can promote improved cognitive functioning and overall well-being, and these effects have recently been documented.

Along these lines, Logan goes on to illustrate how he does all of those things in his homeschooling projects. Creating a character for a Chataqua event, learning primitive wilderness skills, doing an internship in a local outdoor gear manufacturing business, skiing on powder days, developing a spiritual relationship with the natural world—an experience he hadn't anticipated.

*“All well and good for homeschooled kids,”* you counter, *“but is this really practical in public schools?”* Not only possible, I respond, but happening right now. I could discuss all eight of Walsh's principles, which would be *schoolish* and boring, so let me just provide a few examples of novel school programs that illustrate four or five of these intentions in practice.

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<sup>4</sup> For instance, there was a wildly successful MOOC (2017) offered by two Berkeley professors on the science of happiness, in which they focused on the neurophysiology of happiness.

<sup>5</sup> Philosopher John Locke (1988, originally 1689), of course, had it differently than Thomas Jefferson, as “the pursuit of property” in his *Second Treatise on Government* (Sect. 87, 123, 209, 222). Happiness (*eudaimonia*) was considered a goal of life in ancient Greek philosophy, but philosophers differed on what brings happiness (self-flourishing, Aristotle; pleasure, Epicureans and hedonists; harmony with nature, Stoics; etc.).

## FOREST AND NATURE SCHOOLS

There's a new movement afoot in the education of young children—nature-based early childhood education.

The original kindergarten—the children's garden—conceived by German educator Friedrich Froebel in the 19th century, was a place where children learned through play, often in nature. That idea is fast eroding. Children aren't playing in the garden anymore; instead they're filling in bubbles on worksheets.

In the face of this indoor-ification, a cultural and educational movement is emerging—focused on new approaches to nature-based education. This movement offers us a glimpse of what childhood used to be, and still could be—the modern re-creations of the children's garden: the Forest and Nature School. (Sobel, 2015, p.5).

It's a commitment to having children outside in all weathers for a goodly chunk of the day. This flips most educational models on their head. The norm is indoors being educated 5 ½ hours a day, outside being frivolous ½ hour a day. Instead, let's think about the outdoors as a provocative learning environment, a place to learn to read, do math, develop grit and perseverance. This movement has flourished in Europe over the past four decades. In Germany there are more than 1000 Forest Kindergartens, many of which have no indoor facilities, but rather simply a tent, shelter or yurt for a fire and protection from the elements. The four and five-year-old children are outside for the whole of their three, four or six-hour day. And early research shows that they are healthier and have better physical and language development than their mostly indoor peers. Not only are they no worse for wear, they appear to be better off.

### *Forest Fridays*

In the spirit of this idea, public school Kindergarten teacher Eliza Minnucci<sup>6</sup> (2018) in Quechee, Vermont decided to implement a Forest Fridays program a few years ago. They mostly did regular curriculum four days of the week, and then were outdoors, in a forest classroom a 15- minute walk up into the woods, on Friday. Year-round. In true postman fashion. Neither rain nor snow nor hail (except in extreme circumstances) discouraged their going. Parents loved it. One mother commented,

*“We have noticed that she has become increasingly more responsible at home and is taking it upon herself to do jobs that will help out. She is more confident in knowing she can take initiative to help instead of waiting to be asked to do something. I really, really wish the school would consider adding forest curriculum to upper grades. I think that it would be great if all kids in the school could spend one-half to one day per week outside. This might provide an opportunity for kids in different grades to work together on projects out in the forest.”*

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<sup>6</sup> See Minnucci's profile here: <https://naturalstart.org/about/member-spotlight/eliza-minnucci> at, <https://naturalstart.org/bright-ideas/nature-based-early-learning-public-schools>.

What goes unsaid here, but is clearly suggested, is that Forest Fridays makes her child happy. And happiness emerges from the **exercise, time in nature, relationships, and recreational opportunities** that this program provides. Moreover, it engenders responsibility, initiative, and confidence in children. These are some the attributes that Paul Tough (2012) identifies as contributing to school success in *How Children Succeed*.

### *Case study in Forest Schooling*

Let's go a bit deeper into what this looks like. My wife, Jennifer Kramer, a 6<sup>th</sup> grade teacher in Guilford, Vermont took inspiration from this program and implemented it this past year with her 22 challenging students, a third of them with Individual Education Plans. The previous year, she and her students had been inspired by Logan LaPlante's talk and had spent a good chunk of the last two weeks of the year out in the forest and engaged in community projects. For this year, and for this particularly rambunctious class, she wanted a year-round experience. So out they went on Friday mornings, a mile-long walk down through the village to a little-known piece of conservation land, the Weeks Forest, along a beautiful stretch of Broad Brook. They'd eat lunch in the woods and be back at school for the last 1½ hours of the day. There's an interesting American Radioworks program about both of these Forest Fridays programs.<sup>7</sup> In the beginning, Jen said:

*"I thought it was going to be school in the forest. We'd tromp out there with measuring tapes and figure out the flow rate of the stream, or learn about forest management from the forester responsible for the property." But after a few weeks I realized there was something more important going on. They were learning, or in some cases relearning, to love being in the forest. And, to a person, they were happier. For some of them, this was the only day during the week they enjoyed school."*

What did they actually do? They waded in the stream, made crowns and bracelets, excavated a fire pit and cooked over the fire, made shrines for dead birds, built bridges, constructed forts. They'd go off on explorations to find the cellar holes of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Mineral Springs bottling plant. In the winter they sledded in hidden meadows, tracked animals, had snowball fights. In Walsh's terms, **exercise, time in nature**, and **recreation** became a regular part of their school week. When they got back to school they'd write in their journals and by the end of the day they were exhausted -- exhausted in that good, post vigorous exercise kind of way. Jen used the Map My Walk app on her smart phone a number of times—she and the students walked more than 5 miles on many of these Fridays

The forts became a village, the village of Guilforts, and each fort developed its own clan, in response to an ongoing fable-like story that Jen told. (Sixth graders are definitely not too old for stories.) The villagers collected quartz stones from the stream to serve as their currency. Peeled bark from fallen trees became a prized natural resource since it was an effective rain-proofing material for fort roofs. Children from hunting families brought in venison so they could have a lunch of deer stew and stick bread.

The eagle, moose, coyote and bear clans each devised their own face paint pattern,

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<sup>7</sup> Forest Schools (May, 2015) Emily Hanford and Suzanne Pekow,  
<http://www.americanradioworks.org/forest-schools/>

applied with a black paint made from fire pit charcoal. They crafted their own chants, made totem flags, shaped totem animal snow sculptures in the deep mid-winter to guard their forts. The creation of the clans led to the deepening of **relationships** that couldn't happen in the classroom. Students had to problem-solve, work out disputes, collaborate on technical innovations. And they had to contribute their labor to the service of the whole—collecting the tinder for fires, agreeing about how to minimize environmental impact, developing contracts for how to keep everyone safe. In these ways they were addressing the **contribution and service** aspect of Walsh's formula, they had to participate in shaping a social contract and then contribute to its maintenance.

This spring, after winter floods washed away their tree bridge across the stream, a dad came with his chain saw and worked with a group of boys to design and build a new bridge. Now this is real STEM education! And they were actually contributing to the life of the Guilforts community. The dad also taught whittling and so there was the need to create a set of rules and guidelines for when, where and how whittling could happen. (Isn't it sad that this inherent part of childhood, learning how to use a pocket knife, has become verboten? Some of the happiest moments of my life have been sitting around a fire whittling a hot dog stick or a spoon or a small wooden box.)

As an end of the school year project, all of the students in each clan wrote a Pourquoi story, a story about how the moose got its antlers, or how the coyote got its howl. Those stories have been turned into scripts and they will be enacted at the clan sites in the woods for younger students in the school during one of the last weeks of the school. These stories are truly place-based; they've emerged from the rocks, hemlocks and mud of Guilforts, have been shaped by the collective imaginations of the clan members, and capture the happiness of being immersed in the natural world.

## **WEIGHING OUTCOMES WITH OUTDOOR EDUCATION**

*"All well and good,"* you counter again, *"but can these children really afford to spend almost a day a week cavorting in the woods? Sure, happiness is a good thing but what about their math test scores? What about getting prepared for college?"* It's important to understand that it's not all fun and games in this 6<sup>th</sup> grade classroom. In fact, Jen is respected throughout the district as a demanding teacher, conscientiously aspiring to address the Common Core in her curriculum. They engage with chewy non-fiction text. Students writing improves significantly in her class. And because of the journal writing spawned by Guilforts, some students who labored at writing before are writing profusely now. Since Jen was previously a middle school social studies teacher, she teaches the Industrial Revolution and the Civil War as mandated in the district guidelines. She uses a lot of the Engage New York<sup>8</sup> math curriculum, as well as engaging the students in lots of home grown, sometimes multi-step problems.

*\*If it's a mile from school down to the trailhead and it takes us 20 minutes to walk there, how many miles per hour are we walking?*

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.engageny.org/mathematics>

*\*For snack out in the woods today, if each person is going to want 6 ounces of lemonade and there are 25 people going, how many gallons of lemonade are we going to need. And how many quart containers are we going to need to transport that down there?*

The results? The school uses AIMS<sup>9</sup> web testing to assess children's math skills at the beginning and end of the year. This class has been one of those groups with a bad reputation as they passed through the school. "Oh, wait till you get this group. Not like anything you've seen before." The children's math test scores have been remarkably immutable—21% of the students proficient at the end of 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, 27% proficient at the end of 4<sup>th</sup> grade, 26% proficient at the end of fifth grades, 71 % proficient at the end of 6<sup>th</sup> grade. What? 71%! That's a fairly substantial change. Yes, Jen is a particularly good math teacher, but could it be that one of the variables is that being out in the woods one day a week, (getting **exercise**, having **time in nature**, developing closer **relationships**) makes them better math students? At least we can say that these students are both happier and they have better math scores. And it doesn't appear that one day of happiness in the woods has detracted for their math learning. Seems like this is a win-win situation. Children are developing more grit, perseverance, confidence, sense of place, happiness and their test scores are improving. What's not to like?

In our headlong rush for global competitiveness, preparing students for college, increased rigor, we've lost our balanced perspective on educating for the head, hand and heart. It's all head, no hand and heart. But if we can keep their hands busy and make their hearts full, they'll be happier and smarter. It's time to revive the Pursuit of Happiness as an integral component of our national educational agenda.

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