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Many countries and cities have outdoor places where schools can take children to explore (Denver, for example, has a tremendous trail system that includes a canal and a river, with wild birds and animals). Children can be taken to parks, 1850s outdoor museums and demonstration farms, community gardens (a class could have a garden plot), river embankments and outdoor botanical gardens with trails, ponds, and various environmental zones.

Two important aspects of life are shrinking in children's lives: nature, in all its transcendent, powerful glory—unpredictable, mysterious, untamed, infinite—and nearly as absent, open spaces and physically challenging spaces, places to literally take off, scale and explore" (Greenman 1993, 36). The basic environment for many young children

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Alternatives . . .

Bruderhof Education: Outdoor School

Francis Wardle

has dramatically shifted over the past years, from exploration of space, nature, neighborhoods, and rivers, to an environment dominated by passive TV watching, fear of kidnapping and gang violence, and parent fatigue (Wardle 1987).

While this is the reality for many American children, it definitely is not the case for children at the Hutterian School in New Meadow Run, Pennsylvania. I had the privilege of teaching 15 kindergartners at the school for one school year.

The Hutterian Brethren School

The Hutterian School serves children living in the New Meadow Run Bruderhof, one of eight Hutterite communities in the United States of America and Europe. Started in Germany in 1920 as an outgrowth of the German Youth Movement, Hutterian Brethren is a religious organization with a philosophy based on the New Testament, the Anabap-

tist writings of the 1500s, and writings of its founder, Eberhard Arnold (Arnold 1984; Eggers 1988). Beliefs include communal ownership, pacifism, importance of the family, total separation of church and state (they don't vote), personal sacrifice, and a commitment to children (Wardle 1986).

From the community's inception, communal child care was created to enable mothers to engage fully in the physical and spiritual life of the community and to teach the children community values. New Meadow Run Bruderhof's early childhood program is heavily influenced by Froebel because of its German heritage and because one of the early members is related to Froebel and was raised at a Froebel boarding school (Arnold 1986). Froebel's stress on play and natural development during the early years is also consistent with the Bruderhof's philosophy.

All adults in the community work on site—in the toy factory (producing Community Playthings and Rifton Equipment), school, children's house, kitchen, garden, housekeeping, laundry, and medical departments, and as

housemothers (distributing clothes, toothpaste, etc., to all members of the community). Children as young as 6 weeks old spend time in children's programs every day of the week, almost every day of the year. Children of all ages also engage in a variety of community-wide activities: festivals, hikes, work projects, and game days.

During the time I taught at the New Meadow Run School, I had many interesting experiences. My family lived in the New Meadow Run Bruderhof and participated in many of the communal activities, and my children attended the community school. It was fascinating to be in a place with such an emphasis on children and where as many as four generations of a family live (Wardle 1974).

While all of the children in the school were White (except children from a Peruvian family and my family), they were exposed to a variety of cultures and issues through visits to the community and to their classrooms by people from places such as India, Nigeria, Native American reservations, South America, and Hungary. Our class sang and performed folk

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dances at a nearby home for the elderly, and older school children visited Washington, D.C., to repair inner-city homes.

Bruderhof life is a radical alternative to the mainstream American lifestyle. Traditionally European in composition (now also Nigerian), New Meadow Run School is one of many distinctive religious schools in this country—including Amish, Mormon, Hutterite, Quaker, and Jewish schools—that contribute to our diversity.

New Meadow Run Bruderhof was founded in 1957. It is situated among the wooded hills of the southwest Pennsylvania mountains. Three hundred people live in houses scattered around the central area of dining room, school, children's house, and ball fields, and the community is surrounded by 220 acres

of wild woods of oak, maple, hickory, pine, wild flowers, huge rock formations, rushing streams, ponds, deer, and a variety of wild birds (Hutterian Brethren 1991). The settlement is also rich with man-made environments: vegetable gardens, a small farm for educational purposes, toy

factory, swimming pond, and miles of paths and trails.

Educational use of the outdoors by New Meadow Run School

One of the most fascinating aspects of the school is its extensive educational use of the outdoors. I believe we can all learn from this approach. Immediately outside our classroom we had a sandbox, swings, trike paths, and a climbing structure. But, as with most small playgrounds, the children soon became bored with this area and eventually explored the outside environment. The more time we had, the farther we would go, including visits to a sawmill, a post office, a fire station (where several of the children's fathers volunteer), a farm at milking time, and a maple syrup enterprise.

In the fall we collected a brilliant variety of colorful leaves, picked the last tomatoes from the community garden, dug up treasure, pretend-fished in a wooded pond, went on long hikes through the fall sunlight, and jumped into piles of leaves.

In winter—and the winters are long, cold, and wet in that part of the country—we slid around on the ice of the wetlands, tobogganed down the huge community toboggan run, fed the wild birds in the deepest recesses of the woods, tracked wild animals, and observed deer rubs (places where stags had rubbed their



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Gardening is a great activity for building team spirit, developing physical fitness, and encouraging self-esteem, as well as for learning a great deal of science—with related math and literacy experiences.

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antlers against small trees). We also built snow people, collected huge icicles, and started caring for 100 laying chicks (chickens that will become hens that lay eggs). Trudging through 12 inches of virgin snow and marveling at the sun glistening through the ice-encased branches was an unforgettable experience.

In spring we caught crawdads and tadpoles, dammed every stream we could find, scrambled over and under huge rock formations, picked wildflowers, planted a garden, watched Canadian geese

build a nest and hatch their young, and explored the rapidly changing woods and wetlands.

Educational philosophy of Bruderhof schools

The extensive use of the outdoor environment by New Meadow Run School is a central part of the community's educational philosophy. "Instead of having to accumulate facts and learn them by heart, the child discovers the inner meaning and connection of facts" (Arnold, Arnold, & Arnold 1990, 10). The educational philosophy stresses unstructured risk taking in the wilds; knowledge, love, and observation of nature; the importance of play; joy in creation; use of physical activities such as gardening, games, and hiking; and being involved in activities that support the community (caring for a garden, feeding the animals, etc.) (Arnold 1987; Arnold & Arnold 1989a, b; Hutterian Brethren 1991; Arnold, Gneiting, & Zumpe in press).

This educational philosophy also stresses the Froebelian concept of the development of the whole child, and the importance of outdoor exploration and observation to balance the more ordered academic pursuits and to reinvigorate the child. "It (use of the outdoors) is therefore a very important part of the

whole life of the child" (Arnold, Gneiting, & Zumpe in press).

Experiencing all of the seasons

Many of these outdoor activities were pure, child-directed exploration, wonderment of nature, fun, and play. But we also integrated them into more traditional learning. We displayed at our science table objects we had collected on our hikes, from old toilet seats and car parts to animal skeletons, bird nests, red efts (salamanders), and bird feathers. We graphed daily temperatures and egg counts. Boats made at the work bench were tested at the dams we built. We identified all the birds that came to the feeder outside the classroom window and recorded our explorations in pictures, journals, and murals. We also toted a small tape recorder around to record familiar sounds: trucks speeding along the wet highway, water dripping from the gutter pipe, chickens being fed, sewing machines humming in the sewing room, the tat-a-tat of a father using a ratchet in the toy factory, and pigs greeting us at the pig sty.

During the year we experienced all the seasons (Greenman 1993); rain, snow, ice, and sunlight; growing and dead materials; textures, from slick ice, smooth eggs, and slimy salamanders to rough stones and abrasive asphalt; sounds, including spring birds singing, water rushing, chickens feeding, and saw mills roaring; and smells, from sweet, bakery, and pungent, to foul and rotten. Our playground was a true replica of the real world (Dattner 1974). The children observed horses being shod, cattle being milked, 100 men building a roof, bread being



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Many new school and child care playgrounds made of plastic and shiny metal are more like new car dealerships than challenging outdoor environments. They lack the unpredictable, mysterious, untamed, and infinite, and the open spaces where children can take off and explore.

baked, a red-tailed hawk attacking a chicken, and the logging of woodlands.

As my 15 kindergartners progress through school and engage in more rigorous academic activities, they will use this wealth of rich experiences as a solid foundation. Unfortunately, many children do not get this important foundation.

The need for outdoor education

The need for quality, multifaceted play and exploration is greater than ever, yet opportunities continue to decrease (Wardle 1990; Greenman 1993). Many of our children no longer enjoy the opportunities to experiment, risk, experience nature, learn about the physical layout of neighborhoods and towns, and be an explorer (Wardle 1987; Greenman 1993).

We need to deeply understand that children cannot acquire the foundation of knowledge they need for successful schooling from classroom experiences alone (Mitchell 1951). Children don't know where milk comes from, how clothes are made, what materials are used to construct buildings, and the concept of the cycle of life. As we rely more and more on computers, TV, videos, and packaged classroom presentations, we deprive children of the kind of real experiences my 15 children enjoyed.

Using the outdoors as part of the early childhood curriculum is obviously not a new idea. Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Froebel stressed the use of nature as a critical learning environment, the importance of allowing children to explore, and the value of real activities that are meaningful to the child (Froebel 1901; Rousseau 1947; Pestalozzi, 1885,



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Wildlife refuges and bird sanctuaries are also excellent places to visit. All of these sites can be visited at different times during the school year so that children can experience the effect of the seasons and discover the rich variety of outdoor excitement. We must also make sure that our playgrounds meet all the play needs of children, including exploration, constructive play, physical challenges, different textures, and places to get away to.

1894). And Lucy Sprague Mitchell clearly recognized the tremendous educational value of the field trip for expanding the classroom, providing an integrated learning environment, and learning from the community (Mitchell 1951; Greenberg 1987).

Because most of our children today lack outdoor exploration and play, and because so many field trips to libraries, museums, and art galleries are little different from structured, academic school activities, we need to concentrate on visiting outdoor environments that allow children to explore, learn the marvels of nature, and experience some basic information about the world—in places such as parks, trails, wetlands, old quarries, streams, working farms, mountains, building sites, gardens, beaver dams, road construction sites, rock formations, etc.

Challenges of outdoor education

Clearly there are real obstacles to fully using the outdoors in school and early childhood programs, but making outdoor activities part of a program is a matter of priority and of creatively using the resources available in the community (Greenman 1993). Programs have to work closely with parents to effect this change. Children need a change of clothes for wet and cold weather, and teachers and parents must understand that exploration causes some bumps and bruises, so additional aides (or parent helpers) are needed. Urban and inner-city schools can take advantage of a variety of outdoor opportunities, depending on the local community. Some of these activities might be within walking distance of the



Classroom activities and academic skills can only be built on a vast foundation of experiential activities that are unpredictable, cannot be scheduled in the classroom, and require us to view the world as our educational stage.

school. Others will require transportation, like traditional field trips. Locations may include urban walkways (Denver has a tremendous trail system that includes a canal and a river, with wild birds and animals), parks, 1850s outdoor museums and demonstration farms, community gardens (the class could have a garden plot), river embankments and outdoor botanical gardens with trails, ponds, and various environmental zones. Wildlife refuges and bird sanctuaries are also excellent places to visit.

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We must also make sure that our playgrounds meet all the play needs of children, including exploration, constructive play, physical challenges, different textures, and places to get away to (Wardle 1988, 1993). Many new school and child care playgrounds made of plastic and shiny metal are more

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like new car dealerships than challenging outdoor environments (Wardle 1990, 1991). They lack the unpredictable, mysterious, untamed, and infinite, and the open spaces where children can take off and explore (Greenman 1993). The trend to create antiseptic plastic playgrounds with developmentally inappropriate "activity panels"—additions that teach spelling, numbers, shapes, and animal names—must be strongly opposed (Wardle 1994).

Conclusion

While we are used to early childhood and early school programs providing field trips to support and augment classroom experiences, we must now understand that many of the children attending our programs need a whole new set of experiences—ones we assumed they would receive outside the program (Wardle 1989). Classroom activities and academic skills can only be built on a vast foundation of

experiential activities that are unpredictable, cannot be scheduled in the classroom, and require us to view the world as our educational stage.

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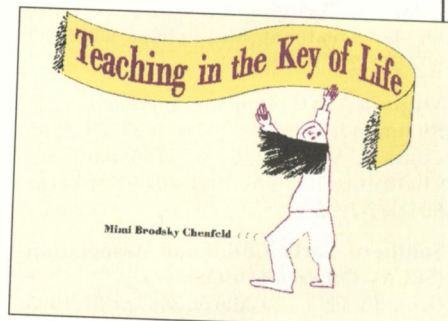
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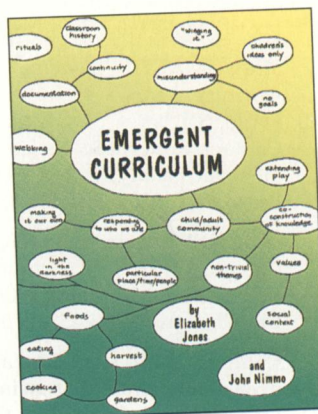
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