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Exploring Environmental Education in the Schoolyard Habitat

One of the contemporary trends in environmental education is the belief that subjects and issues intrinsic in the study of our natural world can be explored within the surroundings in which a school is located. During the past two to three decades this belief has crystallized into the schoolyard habitat movement. In a recent article of *Early Childhood Education Journal*, Mary Rivkin outlined the schoolyard habitat movement and its importance to environmental education (1997). She noted that many older Americans still remember outdoor play as a treasured part of their early experiences, but most of today's youth have lost the natural habitat as a place to learn. Urbanization, industrialization, predominance of automobiles, deteriorated social conditions, and the side effects of technology have all contributed to the isolation of contemporary youth from the natural environment.

Benefits of learning in a schoolyard setting

The reasons for exploring natural habitats with children are many-fold:

- According to the 'biophilia hypothesis' humans have an inherent need for affiliation with natural environments, just as they have an inherent need for contact with other humans.
- Children are multi-sensory, physical beings and benefit physically, cognitively, and emotionally from an interplay with wind and water, sights and sounds, plants and animals, running and shouting.
- Research has shown that children who do not play in natural habitats are unaware of and possibly do not care about the plants and animals that live around them.
- Children have more positive social relationships and more creative play in natural environments.
- Nearly every major subject matter can be taught in a schoolyard setting and much of the learning takes on an experiential aspect.

The Schoolyard Habitat Movement

A number of schools have had grounds improvement projects since the resurgence of environmental activism in the 1970s. National environmental education programs such as Project Learning Tree and Project Wild have fostered these improvements. Learning through Landscapes, a highly successful national program in Great Britain, has inspired similar programs in Canada and Sweden, and has provided fresh impetus to the schoolyard improvement efforts in the US (Rivkin, 1997).

Many states and school districts in the United States have recognized the validity of developing and adopting curriculum for teaching in a schoolyard setting. Many schools establish or build upon existing surroundings that allow students to participate in ecosystem exploration and management. Organizations have been formed that are solely devoted to school grounds enhancement or related sponsoring programs, while more traditional wildlife conservation groups are now viewing schoolyards as places to directly inform children about their natural heritage and encourage them in its preservation.

Reference

Rivkin, M. (1997) "The Schoolyard Habitat Movement: What It Is and Why Children Need It". *Early Childhood Education Journal*, vol25 no1.

Where are the resources?

Following is a list of some resources available for educators on *Exploring Environmental Education in the Schoolyard Habitat* found in the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) and Eisenhower National Clearinghouse (ENC) collections. To read about these resources and learn where to get them, search the ERIC or ENC collections on line or at a local library or university. On line, the databases can be accessed by typing

<http://eelink.umich.edu>

Page down to EDUCATION AND INFORMATION directory, EDUCATION directory, ASKERIC or ENC, and click on either home page. You will then be able to search ERIC and ENC databases by following the

appropriate pointers.

Print Resources

From ERIC

Dunbar, Terry. Acting Locally: On Site Science. *Green Teacher.*, no 39 (Jun-Sep 1994) p 18-19. (EJ 516942)

Describes an innovative science program that focuses on elementary and secondary level students and trains teachers to use their own schoolyards as environmental laboratories

Gosselin, Heather; Johnson, Bob. Amphibian Oasis: Designing and Building a Schoolyard Pond. *Green Teacher*, no 48 (Jun-Sep 1996) p 9-12. (EJ 540032)
Building a pond in a school yard is a rewarding way to help boost local populations of amphibians, to increase the natural value of school grounds, and to serve as a locale for observing the life cycles of plants, invertebrates, and amphibian. This article outlines important considerations in designing and building a pond from siting through maintenance.

Krupa, Karen. The Abundance of Nature's Imagination: Schoolyard Naturalization as an Inspiration for the Arts. *Green Teacher*, no 38 (April 1994) p 16-17. (EJ 496879)

An artist and parent describes the potential for a schoolyard re-naturalization to be integrated into art curriculum and some art activities that have been inspired by planting in a schoolyard.

"Schoolyard Habitats - Learning Locally: Facilitator Training." *Proceeding of a workshop* presented at the annual conference of the North American Association for Environmental Education, Burlingame, CA, November 1-2, 1996. (ED 403127)

This workshop presented components of successful programming including forming a broad-based team, site inventory and mapping techniques, managing the site for diversity, project and program evaluation, and tips on working with schools. It also provides examples of real school projects and ideas for involving the community and other partners.

From ENC

Evergreen Foundation. The Evergreen Foundation. [Internet Resource].1996. Online address: <http://www.evergreen.ca/home.html> (ENC 002114)
This website provides users with information about the

foundation's efforts to connect people with nature by developing and enhancing healthy, natural environments in schools and communities across Canada.

Hogan, Kathleen. [Print Material]. 1994. *Eco-Inquiry: A Guide to Ecological Learning Experiences for the Upper Elementary/Middle Grades*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing. (ENC 008947)

This ecology curriculum guide is intended to build students' understanding of three fundamental ecological processes (food webs, nutrient cycling, and decomposition) in the students' local environment and to help them to understand the positive and negative effects of their own individual actions on ecosystems.

Slattery, B. E., and others. 1995. *WOW! The Wonders of Wetlands*. [Print Material]. The Watercourse: Bozeman, MT and Environmental Concerns, Inc.: St. Michaels, MD. (ENC 004983)

This activity book, designed for grades K through 12, provides hands-on learning experiences on wetlands. Some activities deals with establishing a wetland in a schoolyard environment with focus on the interaction between wetlands and humans including social and political issues.

BallBach, J. (Ed.). 1995. *Ohio Sampler: outdoor and environmental education*. [Print Material]. Environmental Education Council of Ohio: Newark, OH. (ENC 005882)

This book contains environmental and outdoor education activities that represent popular environmental and outdoor education activities used by practitioners. The activities are divided into classroom activities, schoolyard activities, and outdoor nature activities.

Earth notes: for educators, grades K to 6. 1992. [Print Material]. US Environmental Protection Agency: Washington, DC. (ENC 003824)

This journal provides an open forum for exchange of ideas, comments and brief essays. It also features an article on the Urban Ecology Education Project, a program which solicits community support of schoolyard ecology projects.

This information sheet was prepared by Mark A. Miller, Sabiha S. Daudi, GRAs, and Joe E. Heimlich, Ph.D, EETAP Resource Library

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