

Connecting the Gifted Mind to Nature: Engaging Outdoor Exploration

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Getting Our Gifted Students Outside

I love to see students who are passionate—not just about their education, but about the world around them, too. Developing a passion for nature comes from spending time outside. As educators, we need to provide activities that will encourage our students to get outside—for their own benefit and for the benefit of nature.

There are many problems facing our planet that, without action, will cause irreversible harm. We often spend time teaching our students about the environment and ecological issues in science classes, but we don't always expose kids to nature. While increasing knowledge about the environment isn't always enough to produce action (Hungerford & Volk, 1990), fostering a passion for conservation is important. To effectively address conservation, sustainability, and global climate change, there needs to be great passion for the environment and innovative strategies to address these issues. One population of individuals who may be in a unique situation to address these issues is gifted students. McHardy, Blanchard, and de Wet (2009) explained how gifted students often express high levels of concern for ecological issues and, given the right exposure and guidance, can influence change. "Green issues are especially appealing to gifted learners as they are sensitive to

the world around them and often long to engage in projects that touch on issues facing their communities" (Thompson, 2017; p 14). Because of their unique traits, gifted students should be encouraged to learn about these issues so they can create unique solutions that lead to positive change in their communities and on a global scale.

Students are typically identified as gifted if they meet criteria including high levels of creativity, above-average general abilities, and high commitment to task completion (Renzulli, 2011). These traits lend themselves to understanding and solving environmental problems. Although not every gifted student will develop a passion for protecting the environment, they may be more likely to do so if they have had exposure to the natural world and they have been afforded the opportunity to inquire about nature.

Outdoor Classroom Activities

As a school counselor, I look for ways to incorporate the outdoors in my classroom guidance lessons and counseling groups. Flom, Johnson, Hubbard, and Reidt (2011) describe a number of physical and mental health benefits of spending time outside. They cite evidence of the correlation between time outside and lower levels of anxiety, depression, diabetes, obesity, and vitamin D deficiency. They provide ideas about how school counselors can utilize out-

door activities to improve outcomes for our students. Gifted students often have increased affective and social-emotional needs, and often are particularly sensitive to external stimuli. Their tendency for being high achievers can also lead to increased stress. Because of this, the benefits of time outside may be particularly powerful for them. Students love to be outside and, if we can find creative ways to make that happen while still learning, their experience at school will be enhanced.

One outdoor experience I gave my gifted students was an exploration activity prior to the Thanksgiving holiday. Since it can often be difficult to keep students engaged prior to a school break, I wanted to allow students a chance to do a fun activity while still encouraging them to engage their minds. For this activity, students had a chance to explore the natural surroundings of their school. Students were able to use inquiry while they participated in one of five activities:

- **Close Up:** Students were given a two-foot long string and a magnifying glass. They were instructed to find a place outside to form their string into a circle and use a magnifying glass to explore the area inside of that circle. They were able to take photos using the magnifying glass and their personal devices to share with the class later.
- **I Spy:** Students were given a list of

adjectives (colors, sizes, shapes, textures, patterns) to find in nature. They were instructed to find as many objects that matched those adjectives as they could during their time outside. They could make a list of the objects they found and/or take photos of the most interesting objects.

- **Sound Map:** Finding a quiet place away from the rest of the class, students were given a piece of paper on which to draw a map of the natural sounds they heard around them. After drawing themselves in the middle of the map, they were asked to close their eyes and, each time they heard a sound of something in nature, they could write it or draw a picture of it on their map.

- **Story Time:** After picking an object in nature (living or nonliving), students were asked to create a fictional story about that object's history. They could describe situations that the object has encountered throughout its history, challenges it may have faced, people or animals it may have encountered, etc. Alternatively, students were also given the option to create a poem or a song about that object.

- **Ten Minute Nature Expert:** Students were asked to pick a living thing in nature (plant, tree, flower, animal, or insect) and become an expert on it in a short amount of time. First, they needed to identify the species. Then, they had about ten minutes to research as much as they could about that species using their own device (e.g., tablet; laptop) to share with the class later.

After completing their outdoor activity, students went back to the classroom and spent time in small groups with classmates discussing their findings and sharing their stories, sound maps, research findings, or photos. Then they shared their findings with the entire class. Since gifted students typically have high levels of task completion and creativity (Renzulli, 2011), many had a desire to continue exploring on their own after this activity. At the end of class, I gave students an optional challenge that allowed them to continue exploring the environment and developing a curiosity and passion for the natural world.

For example, using a smartphone scavenger hunt application called GooseChase (www.goosechase.com), I

created a game with a number of nature missions. Students had the entire week of their Thanksgiving break to complete these missions in a photo/video scavenger hunt. The missions include activities such as taking the best photo of a sunrise or sunset, taking a selfie of themselves and some friends cleaning up a park or playground, spending ten minutes outside in their favorite spot in silence, and recording a video explaining their favorite experience outside or explaining why it is important to spend time outside. The GooseChase app is a great platform for this scavenger hunt because educators can apply for a free license to use it for school-related purposes. It allows photo and video submissions and keeps track of points and has a feature that allows you to easily download all of the submissions from students. Additionally, students are able to see submissions from their peers throughout the challenge.

After the Thanksgiving holiday break, I revisited the two science classes to congratulate the winners of the scavenger hunt and I showed a slideshow compilation of their photos and videos. Many of the students' submissions were creative and inspiring. In response to the question about the importance of spending time in nature, one student found a research study about how exposure to nature improves recovery times for hospital patients. Another student described the benefits of vitamin D. Several described how spending time outside improved their mood. The challenge to spend ten minutes outside in silence also generated many great responses. One student described her experience this way:

"Those 10 minutes felt amazing. While I was out there, I really began to notice how nature affects everything around it. Every single thing I saw had to do with nature. The bushes beside me were homes for spiders. The trees above me were teeming with birds. I just felt relaxed and not stressed."

As educators who work with gifted students, it is important for us to continuously look for ways to engage our students. Allowing our students to explore without prescribed outcomes gives them the opportunity to find novel solutions to complex problems. At the same

time, students are allowed to explore the benefit for their physical and mental health.

Whether you are a classroom teacher, a gifted resource teacher, a school counselor, psychologist, or social worker, there are many ways to incorporate outdoor experiences into your curriculum. Our gifted students have the potential to create positive change in our communities. It is our job to foster the passion in them to do so. **THP**

References

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- Hungerford, H.R. & Volk, T.L. (1990) Changing learner behavior through environmental education. *The Journal of Environmental Education, 21*(3), pp. 8-21.
- McHardy, R. J., Blanchard, P. B., & de Wet, C. F. (2009). Ecological stewardship and gifted Children. *Gifted Child Today, 32*(4), 16-23.
- Renzulli, J. S. (2011). What makes giftedness? Reexamining a definition. *Phi Delta Kappan, 92*(8), 81.
- Thompson, T. (2017). Sustainability/environmental science investigations that promote gifted children's learning. *Gifted Child Today, 40*(1), 14-42.

Additional Outdoor Activity Resources

- Moving the Classroom Outdoors: Schoolyard-Enhanced Learning in Action, Herbert Broda
- Schoolyard-Enhanced Learning: Using the Outdoors as an Instructional Tool, K-8, Herbert Broda
- Get Out! 150 Easy Ways for Kids & Grown-Ups to Get Into Nature and Build a Greener Future, Judy Molland
- Sharing Nature with Children: 20th Anniversary Edition, Joseph Cornell
- Vitamin N: The Essential Guide to a Nature Rich Life, Richard Louv
- Project Wild, Association of Fish & Wildlife Agencies