

Understanding Life in School

Understanding Life in School

**From Academic Classroom to Outdoor
Education**

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Foreword

In the rush to prepare young people for a competitive, globalized world, the importance of developing both the mind and the body can be lost. The dominant focus on employability and economic outcomes in contemporary Western societies works against a holistic approach to education. Knowledge has become a commodity; something to be sold, traded and consumed in the same manner as other goods and services in a marketplace. Cultures of performativity have become entrenched, and there is an obsession with measuring almost every form of human endeavour. In institutions such as schools and universities, time always seems to be in short supply, with relentless assessment and little space in the curriculum for anything new. Under such conditions, outdoor education, where bodies as well as minds become central, can be construed as a luxury – something superfluous to the main aims of an education system.

The ancient Greeks believed otherwise, and so does the author of this volume. This rigorous, insightful book allows us to see why the experiences students gain through outdoor education can be so pivotal in their growth and development as human beings. As a philosopher of education, John Quay brings a distinctive perspective to bear on questions relating to the nature and value of outdoor education. The theoretical heart of the book lies in its original and thought-provoking synthesis of ideas from Dewey and Heidegger. Drawing on the work of these two great thinkers, Quay makes a case for a shift in emphasis from epistemology to ontology: from a preoccupation with *knowledge* in schools to a serious examination of *being*.

The complex process of moving from childhood to adulthood is investigated via an absorbing account of the contrasting experiences of life within school grounds and life at school camp. Quay's integration of empirical data (from participant observation, interviews and photographic evidence) with philosophical analysis is one of the key strengths of the book. Adapting Heidegger's view of time, Quay distinguishes between *line-time* (regular, forward-marching, clock-based time) and *life-time* (a form of living in the present). From Dewey,

Quay adopts the idea of life being lived through “occupations,” which can be regarded as ways of being. Through life-time, we live occupations. Quay’s intention in his work with the participants in his study was to allow the students to see their experiences, their occupations at school and at camp, as life-time.

This book has far-reaching implications not only for outdoor education but also for the school as a whole. If, as Quay maintains, outdoor education permits being to be more readily seen, an alternative picture of the school emerges. School subjects function as occupations or ways of being, not as specialist studies in discrete domains of knowledge subject to periodic testing. This encourages all involved with schooling – teachers, administrators, students, parents and others – to reconsider what this critical institution can achieve. The experience of outdoor education sharpens the sense that whatever the specific area of study, there is something deeper going on: a process of human formation is underway, and this can have a profound influence on how young people come to see themselves, those with whom they interact and the world around them. Life-time as shaped, encountered and enacted during these formative years paves the way for the future not in a linear, causal, predictable fashion but in a manner that defies all attempts at definitive measurement. “Past” and “present” become inseparable as the experience of being continually unfolds.

Within the international community of educationists, battle lines are sometimes drawn between “theorists” and “practitioners,” with relatively little communication between the two groups. This book helps us to break down such barriers. It will be of value to school teachers, principals, academics and outdoor educators, among others. Against the spirit of our age, *Understanding Life in School* focuses more on being than having, more on community than competition, more on uncertain possibility than all-too-certain performance. John Quay’s close attention to both the lives of the students in his study and matters of theoretical detail allows one more group to experience life-time: those who pick up this book, immerse themselves in it, and in so doing find new ways of seeing and being in their educational activities.

Peter Roberts
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