

The Importance of Time Spent Outdoors

November 30, 2017 by Terry Bradley

When I attended the 2017 Colorado Association for Gifted and Talented conference in Loveland, Colorado, I went to a session that changed the way I think. It was “Connecting the Gifted Mind to Nature” by Scott Major, a middle school counselor in Evergreen, Colorado. I feel compelled to share with you what I learned from this session.

Major started his session by having us share a favorite memory of being outside during childhood. He then asked us to express some of the ways that experience made us feel when we were children. The feelings people shared included “adventuresome, free, happy, content, awed, independent.” He explained that we have an innate sense of wanting to be connected to outdoors, yet the average person spends 90% of their time indoors. Further disconnecting from nature, 92% of teens go online daily, and 24% of teens admit to being online almost all of the time.

Historically, play time outside has changed drastically since the 1970s. The radius of activity has decreased by 90%, meaning kids are only allowed to venture out much closer to home. Parents will tell their kids to go outside and play, but parents want to make sure their children can still be easily seen. We want kids to stay close, for safety reasons that weren’t as much on our radar 50 or even 20 years ago. But this shrinking play radius has resulted in our society having a “Nature Deficit Disorder”, says Major.

Aside from just getting fresh air, there are many benefits of time spent outdoors (for both children and adults), including:

- improved physical health
- improved memory, attention, concentration, impulse inhibition, and mood
- improved social skills, empathy, and affiliation with free play
- improved self perception

When we think about Overexcitabilities (OEs) and the gifted, Major asked us to consider how each of the OEs can be nurtured and satisfied in nature:

- psychomotor: moving around
- sensual: seeing, hearing, smelling, feeling, tasting
- intellectual: curiosity and wonder
- imaginal: play and exploration
- emotional: mood adjustment and comfort

In putting it all together, Major said that we need to provide more opportunities for our students to engage in the world around them. As a direct result of connecting with nature, students will be more likely to have the desire to protect nature, and to be concerned about our natural resources. This concern and awareness can then lead to the desire to educate others in conservation efforts. Conversely, if one rarely engages with nature, there will be less incentive to protect it.

Creative ways to get student outdoors

Major had suggestions for getting students outside, including a Goosechase app, which allows users to create a scavenger hunt online (such as “find something fuzzy, red, shop, beautiful”, etc.). Students can work on taking pictures in their own time, even from home. It also allows students to create a slideshow of all of their

submissions that can then be shown in class. Another suggestion was to go on a Nature Scavenger Hunt at school. I couldn't wait to get back to my high school seniors and do this the following week.

I decided to do an A to Z Scavenger Hunt. First, I divided my class of students into teams. I pre-selected the teams so they could be with classmates that they wouldn't typically hang out with. I remembered Major saying that when you're outside, the social and cultural dividing lines that separate students and groups of students into sub-groups in school tend to be lifted. Nature is so much bigger than we are. Nature helps break down barriers.

We went outside and the students spent time walking around the school and neighboring fields. Surprisingly, all of the teams brought back sheets that were filled with entirely different findings. Everybody saw something different because they were really looking. They were very creative with their answers. For instance, for the letter C, there was "Christmas tree", "cottonwood", "crazy fun", "carbon", "chlorophyl", "cirrus clouds", and "clover." This Nature Scavenger Hunt became a form of active meditation when the students were mindful about being in the present, feeling connected. Overall, it was a very successful activity, and they really liked being outside instead of in a classroom.

What's going on outside of your classroom?

If you are an educator, think about your classroom situation. What could you do with your students outside? Teach a class on the grass? Take a walk and have them talk with a partner about a particular topic you're discussing in class? Walk down to a nearby park and do a Scavenger Hunt? Throw frisbees or balls and bring snacks for a treat? Take a walk around the school property and talk with a student who is troubled in some way, as opposed to sitting in an office under fluorescent lights? Don't use "chilly weather" or "it's windy" as an excuse. We should all make an attempt to get outside, no matter the season.

I, personally, will make an effort to get students outside more. I have a brand new perspective on the benefits of providing opportunities for students to connect with nature. And not only do they benefit from being outside, I do, too!