

Essay

A Story of School and Nature

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Abstract

When I founded a small democratic school in New York City 12 years ago, I was not aware of the term *outdoor education*, let alone how to offer it in the middle of Manhattan! All I wanted was a place where children were trusted to direct their own learning in pursuit of their own happiness. We simply provided a loving, peaceful space for the children to be and intentionally left it for their brilliant minds and bright souls to chart our course. I share our story of how, and possibly why, the children turned their school into an outdoor school, with the hope that it inspires the creation of more such programs and that, in turn, they serve to challenge the prevalent disconnect between school and nature.

KEYWORDS: *Outdoor education, alternative education, child development*

Small Democratic School in New York City

I have spent the past 12 years listening to children who taught me what no formal degrees in education have. The children took me to nature, where I saw their connection deepen to all living things and, most importantly, to their own true selves and abilities. I witnessed an inborn peace with nature revive and nourish the whole being of my child and more than 170 other children—and that made it my mission to advocate that all children have regular access to nature, because it is a basic child right.

As a professor of education, I have lectured about how our current education system was failing our children. When my daughter was born, I took leave of absence to be next to her in the first year of her life. During that year, I saw over and over that children are born perfect—born with an immense and intact curiosity to grow and thrive. For many years, I visited classrooms in schools that were selected as the best in New York City, a recognition they received mostly because of measures that related to curriculum or academic performance. The sparks of light I often saw in my child's eyes discovering the world day by day made the classrooms I visited, and despite the recognition, lifeless and devoid of joy. This hit too close to home. It cemented my concern about the way we school our children. I wanted none of that for my child. That was when Pono was born.

I created Pono, a democratic learning center, to provide my daughter and other children a loving environment that protected their innate genius, wonderment, and unbeatable drive to grow. I wanted a healthy environment for them, one in which *Pono*, a traditional Hawaiian concept denoting harmony and equilibrium, exists. I wanted the children to be surrounded by adults

who trusted them to initiate and direct their own learning in pursuit of their own happiness, and to grow in a community that believed that there was no limit to what they could or wanted to be or become.

Since the beginning, it has been the children's brilliant minds and bright souls that have shaped what Pono is and what it offers. I share our story of how, and possibly why, the children turned Pono into an outdoor school, with the hope that it inspires the creation of more such programs and that, in turn, they serve to challenge the prevalent disconnect between school and nature.

The Pull of the Woods

Nothing could have communicated to us just how strong the pull of the woods is to children like our first Pono day. I was very pleased with myself for organizing a trip to a beautiful garden in the Bronx, where the kids would be learning with a naturalist about the interconnections between the anatomy of flowers and birds. About 5 minutes into the lesson, the kids started leaving our circle, one by one, and walking toward the wooded part of the garden. As the adults followed them, the children walked deeper and deeper into the woods, picking up as many sticks as they could, climbing rocks, touching bright mushrooms, smelling wild flowers, while being inquisitive and in awe about all they found on the forest floor. They kept going until they were too tired to take another step. We had to carry them all the way back to our bus.

After that first day, whenever we asked the kids what they wanted to do, they responded, "Walk in the woods!" To a complete novice in outdoor education like me, the woods seemed too far from Manhattan. But to stay true to the core principle of Pono, we had to make these walks happen!

So we took our kids to the woods on the northern tip of Manhattan island and northwest Bronx and watched them dash through the tall trees on what they described as "magical paths from wonderland." They navigated the woods with confidence, excitement and ease, from playing with pebbles they found on the trail to balancing on fallen tree trunks. We were surprised by how, without much instruction, they paid attention to the textured floor, engaged their observation skills, and relied on their spatial and directional awareness—skills that teachers struggle to teach in a classroom setting.

We also watched them work on testing themselves and their limits at their own pace, all while taking in the surrounding beauty and comfort of nature. A recurrent observation is that a child would stop in the middle of a hike, amazed and surprised to notice something like a huge fallen tree trunk, but wouldn't get closer. The second time there, he would go to the same trunk and examine it closely with his eyes and hands. The third time, he climbed the trunk. A few times later, he balanced along its length with much ease and confidence, all the way across the creek.

By the end of our first year, we dedicated 2 days a week to being outdoors. Yet, even on indoor days, it was typical of our children to choose to spend their time in the park across the street, with their imagination fully engaged in all possible ways. A stick, for example, continued to shape shift to fit the ever-changing parts of their story. They turned into rockets racing in outer space on the open grass fields, and Peppa Pigs while jumping in muddy puddles. Needless to mention the absolutely endless possibilities for a pile of fallen leaves!

We watched the children become more empathetic, peaceful, and autonomous in the outdoors. A child who typically found sharing challenging in the classroom setting, would willingly share all of the pinecones she collected. A child who exhibited aggressive behaviors indoors, seemed much more relaxed and open to his experiences outdoors. The children collaborated and cooperated with each other and relied on themselves to solve conflicts, simply because the teachers are not as close as in a classroom setting and, naturally, no child wants to waste any of their precious play time.

We began partnering with public parks, community gardens, and urban farms in Harlem, where the children planted, watered, weeded, harvested, composted, and got messy in nature. We heard them marvel at how big the cucumbers they planted were and how delicious the cherry tomatoes tasted. Their appreciation of nature grew along with their understanding of the role they play in maintaining it. They would carry their bags of veggies back to school with utter care and appreciation, desperate to share with their peers the fruits of their hard work.

The children inspired us to seek yet deeper, wilder, and more immersive experiences for them. A couple of years down the road we partnered with a sanctuary about an hour north of the city where we took the children on a weekly basis. The frequent hands-on explorations in nature provided them with a richer understanding of the ecosystem—whether it was catching frogs and tadpoles, walking on a frozen pond, or touching a blue jay that was caught in the bird banding net. According to the naturalist who has been working with our children for more than ten years, when compared to children who visit the sanctuary less frequently, Pono children are “more understanding of the uniqueness of discovery in the sanctuary’s ecosystem. They express joy and wonderment for the tiny things that often go unnoticed or are commonly seen as unimportant.”

The most requested activity at the sanctuary is going on a hike, even when the other options include a play house, tree swings, and petting animals. It is on those hikes that the children lose their sense of time by getting deeply immersed into the seemingly infinite possibilities of magical discoveries. If you ask them, we never let them spend enough time in the forest, even when we spend the whole school day there. We have witnessed what researchers describe, in study after study, as the mood-lifting effects associated with time in nature (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Louv, 2008; Williams, 2018). It instills a sense of peace and oneness with the natural world (Gilbert, 2019; Hoffman, 1992; Jones, 2021; Suzuki et al., 2007). While they always felt physically exhausted by the end of the day, our children consistently left the forest with much more peace, calm, and joy than when they walked in, as indicated by the energy and interactions on the bus.

In response to the children’s unceasing curiosity for the natural world, we found ourselves taking our 4- and 5-year-olds on more than 70 trips a year. Many of those were to nature preserves, farms, salt marshes, zoos, animal shelters, marshlands, conservancies, wildlife refuges, and beaches, most of which were in New York City. Sometimes we needed to travel outside of the city, but still within less than an hour from our space in Harlem. For example, their interest in shearing took us to an alpaca farm in Connecticut, and their fascination with wolves took us to a wolf conservation center in South Salem, NY. Such encounters in nature brought both excitement and knowledge. Over the years, our children knew nature. They loved nature. That they protect, conserve, and live harmoniously with nature will follow as the unquestionable matter of course.

Regular and close contact with nature helped nurture the innate joy that comes from exploration and learning. This, in turn, helped expand our children’s interests, beyond what is typical of children their age, and led them to be experimenters, designers, and young researchers. For example, a group of eight children, ages seven to 10 years old, designed, administered to over 420 children their age, and analyzed the results of a survey on politics and civic engagement. A group of seven children, ages 8 and 10 years old, tracked population fluctuations, animal health, and migratory patterns with the naturalists at our partner sanctuary. Accompanied by their mentors, a group of six children, ages 12 to 14, designed and built a wooden structure to be used as an outdoor education classroom. By the time they were in high school, and despite the fact that throughout their years of schooling they have spent only two days a week on academic lessons, their performance in academic subjects, as recently measured by standardized tests, was quite advanced.

While we can attribute myriad factors to our kids’ performance, many studies confirm that time in natural settings increases all executive functions, the set of skills critical to planning, organizing, and completing complicated tasks (Clay, 2001; Louv, 2011, Weir, 2020). Time in nature

improves focus, concentration, and productivity. Studies in public schools in Michigan found that kids who had views of trees and shrubs from their classrooms and cafeterias scored better on standardized assessments and were more likely to graduate from high school, even after controlling for other known factors such as class size and socioeconomic status (Gilbert, 2019).

Nothing is Perfect and Everything is Perfect

I will never forget how adamant one of our newly enrolled children was at renewing his group's mentorship with our partner sanctuary. His peers suggested doing something else since they had completed a whole year of mentorship there. In that conversation, he was no longer soft-spoken, hesitant to share his interests, or afraid of insects. He demanded another year of mentorship, declaring that before he started going to the sanctuary with Pono, he had "never seen anything like that in my life." He was 10 years old at that time.

Taking in nature rekindles that seed of wonder and awe in a child's psyche. It forces all of the unpleasant noise and disturbing imbalance out and helps engender a feeling of peace and harmony with all forms of life. Nature shows the children that they are part of nature and they belong in it. It shows them what they are connected to rather than what they are separate from. They, their true selves and abilities, are just like nature, where nothing is perfect and everything is perfect. No wonder they keep choosing to spend their time in the outdoors!

Let revered and honored poet Mary Oliver, who wrote extensively about the beauty and mysteries of the natural world, have the last word. In her book, *Upstream* (2019), she wrote:

Teach the children. We don't matter so much, but the children do. Show them daisies and the pale hepatica ... Give them the fields and the woods and the possibility of the world salvaged from the lords of profit. Stand them in the stream, head them up-stream, rejoice as they learn to love this green space they live in, its sticks and leaves and then the silent, beautiful blossoms. (p. 8)

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