

## OPPORTUNITIES OF IMPLEMENTING OUTDOOR EDUCATION IN YOUTH WORK: ON THE EXAMPLE OF TALLINN YOUTH CENTRES

**Maarika Veigel**

MSc, Tallinn University School of Educational Sciences, Estonia

**Triinu Reedik**

Tallinn University, Estonia

**Abstract.** *Nature as a natural living environment is important in the development of young people, but their lifestyle doesn't support it. Youth workers have a major role in guiding young people to interesting activities in nature and outdoor, sharing relevant information as well as being an example. The research problem: what kind of opportunities were given to the youth, spending time in Tallinn youth centres, to participate in outdoor activities in the youth workers opinions and how to improve them? The aim of the research was to map the opportunities and needs to implement outdoor education in youth work in order to arouse interest in outdoor activities among the youth.*

*For qualitative data collection semi-structured interviews were carried out (in February, 2015) in nine Tallinn youth centres out of ten. Therefore, the results can be generalized to all Tallinn youth centres. It was found that different opportunities for implementing outdoor education were used in Tallinn youth centres, but a large part of the potential is still unused. The workers in Tallinn youth centres feel the need to receive training about the methods, games and use of technical and interactive devices in carrying out outdoor activities for the youth.*

**Keywords:** *outdoor education, natural environment, non-formal education, youth, youth work.*

### Introduction

The eight objectives set in A Renewed Framework for European Cooperation in the Youth Field 2010-2018 (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2014) can be associated with outdoor learning activities and opportunities. Youth work is based on non-formal and informal learning outside the formal education system. It has been organized for young people in collaboration of young people and youth workers (Euroopa, 2012; Sprecht, 2011, 2014; Siurala, 2013). According to the Youth Work Act (2010) youth work content is the social, cultural and health education. Outdoor learning is suitable for diverse non-formal learning in youth work. So far, it has been more considered in the context of formal education.

Today we talk about “going to nature” as though such activities required some extra effort. Lack of contacts with nature leads people to fear and avoid it (Brügge, Glantz & Sandell, 2007). Moving away from the natural way of life alienates people from the natural cycle of life (Keskkonnaministeerium, 2008), leaving young people without the benefits offered by the nature and leading to adverse consequences: health disorders, lack of physical activity, changes in acceptance of values and demographic behaviour (Uibu, 2013). In recent decades the lack of physical activity has been a problem in many countries (Harro, 2001; Hannus, 2015). The majority of European and Estonian children are not physically active enough. From the 2-10 year olds, only 13 % of girls and 27 % of boys have the optimum amount of physical activity (Tervise Arengu Instituut, 2016).

The research problem: what kind of opportunities were given to the youth, spending time in Tallinn youth centres, to participate in outdoor activities in the youth workers opinions and how to improve them? The aim of the research was to map the opportunities and needs of implementing outdoor education in youth work (among youth workers in Tallinn youth centres) in order to arouse interest in outdoor activities among youth. The research questions were: which opportunities of implementing outdoor education are used in Tallinn youth centres? How much interest do the youth have in taking part in outdoor activities? What do the youth workers lack to improve the opportunities for the youth to participate in outdoor activities in Tallinn youth centres?

For qualitative data collection semi-structured interviews were carried out (in February, 2015) in total with nine youth workers from nine Tallinn youth centres out of ten. Therefore, the results can be generalized to all Tallinn youth centres. It was a targeted sample in which all interviewees were using outdoor learning in their everyday work.

Outdoor learning is mostly addressed as a method of enriching the curriculum and as a complementary method in formal education (Kungus, 2008; Kaljuläte, 2006). Studies highlight educational concept, the awareness of the youth or sporting opportunities (Kaljuläte, 2006; Dreger, 2013; Espada, 2013). Youth workers have many different ways to guide the youth to nature and outdoor learning.

### **Outdoor education and nature activities in the context of youth work**

Outdoor education develops both general competences (self-determination, communication, entrepreneurial spirit, values, social skills) and special competences (art, sport, language, mathematics, technology skills) (Nurm, 2012). Outdoor education requires the use of knowledge gained through discussions and practical activities (Dahlgren *et al*, 2009). Outdoor learning can

be used for various objectives (health, personal and social development, teamwork). It is important that the learner is led by his curiosity and questions about life and the world around. Internal motivation provides a basis for more productive learning as personal experiences and observations raise issues which enable the learners to move on to important links (Dahlgren *et al*, 2009; Raadik, 2009). In order to make young people begin by themselves, their attention must be drawn to natural phenomena, so that he could himself ask, raise issues, explore and find answers (Raadik, 2009).

Brügge *et al* (2007) explains outdoor learning as the implementation of outside environment, natural and cultural landscapes and immediate outdoor adventure as a pedagogical method. Dahlgren & Szczepanski (2006) describe outdoor learning as action-centred learning, which is characterized by the holistic experience, thematic integration and instant exposure to the object being learned. The aim is to acquire knowledge with the help of outdoor activities and experiences and create a close relationship with nature, culture and society. These definitions are complementary to each other.

Outdoor learning is a relevant aspect of social education, encouraging the acceptance of personal responsibility, improving young people's capacity to work together and respect the needs of others and developing communication and problem solving skills (Institute of Outdoor Learning, 2003). In addition, outdoor adventure programs have a positive impact on young people's attitudes, beliefs, self-perception and the development of social skills (Festau & Humberstone, 2006). Moving away from nature also causes physical separation from one another, which is why it is difficult to create and maintain social relations (Louv, 2005). Movement in nature helps to prevent and avoid physical and mental disorders and to cope with stress (Dahlgren *et al*, 2009; Louv, 2005). The greener the environment, the lower the stress level of young people in case of various life events (Wells & Evans, 2003) and the slower the increase of their body mass index (Indiana University, 2008). More time outdoors can raise young people's levels of physical activity and helps to prevent the tendency to overweight in the future (Cleland *et al*, 2008). According to Louv (2005) the lack of nature in the lives of young people today can be associated with attention disorders, obesity, creativity decline, depression disorders, etc., as being in the nature is therapeutic and beneficial to mental health.

The eight objectives of A Renewed Framework for European Cooperation in the Youth Field 2010-2018 (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2014) can be associated with outdoor learning opportunities as follows: the goal in the health and well-being area is to support the health and well-being of young people in all aspects. As youth workers are potential outdoor supervisors they must be taught to consider risks and to give first aid.

In addition to the two above-mentioned competences supporting the environmentally sustainable way of life also belongs to the occupational competences for youth workers (SA Kutsekoda, 2012). The values conveyed through outdoor learning will help young people to take a position in relation to their lifestyle, creating a foundation for environmentally sustainable behaviour in the future (Brügge *et al*, 2007).

In the field of participation the importance of participation of young people in decision-making processes is emphasized. Outdoor learning voluntary work may include environmental and nature-related protection activities, such as work camps (Vabatahtlike Värav, 2014) or carrying out nature trips and hiking.

In the field of creativity and culture the aim is to support young people's creativity and capacity for innovation and to create opportunities for cultural self-expression, thereby encouraging the development of personality, improvement in the willingness to learn, intercultural skills etc. Through the ages the nature has inspired artists, craftsmen, musicians, and writers. Connecting manual activities in natural environment with historical background, will help young people to better understand the origin of culture (Brügge *et al*, 2007).

The goal of social inclusion is to prevent young people from social exclusion and poverty and promote equal opportunities for all. Mostly, the outdoor activities do not impose restrictions on the participants and are often free of charge. The development plan for the youth field for the years 2014–2020 (Haridus- ja Teadusministeerium, 2014), focuses on five general and specific goals. These relate to the creativity of young people, exclusion, participation in decisions and more effective youth work. Thus, it is generally similar themes, which can be performed through outdoor learning.

### **Implementation of outdoor learning activities while guiding young people to nature**

Outdoor education is closely intertwined with the objectives and trends of youth work documents. Youth worker who is familiar with the relevant knowledge and qualifications is able to carry out movement activities in nature (Kont, 2014). Nature activities can be linked to historical context when presenting any historical event (Ham, 2005). The mediator of the history can be a youth worker, but young people can stage themselves a short play about a historic place.

Young people can be motivated by different adventure education activities, which would be linked to environmental education activities in different environments and teach sustainable behaviour in nature. Suitable activities are

hiking, mountain climbing, indoor wall climbing, orienteering, rowing, rope way (Veigel, 2012).

In nature the youth can do many exciting manual activities using the materials taken along or finding the resources from nature (tree branches, cones, stones, plants, coal). Youth can draw together, make wooden objects, jewellery and amulets. They can also make an orchestra with available materials, splice, etc. (Brügge *et al*, 2007).

In order to diversify the opportunities for young people to develop their creativity, information technology can be used in the preparation, implementation and analysis of activities. You can use either online animal, bird, plant or other identifiers or the corresponding applications for smart devices, such as *Key to Nature* to familiarize yourselves with trees, shrubs, grasses, lichens and amphibians (TÜ Ökoloogia ja Maateaduste Instituut, 2014) or *Walk & Learn* to observe birds, trails, fungi, lichens and amphibians (2015). The species met on the trip may be entered into the database (Keskkonnaagentuur, 2014). Interactive solutions can be used in nature games or functionally with GPS devices (Laanpere, 2011). Live broadcasting nature cameras (EENet, 2015), nature movies, programs and games are all popular ways of learning about nature. Interactive nature-themed quizzes and memory games can also be created.

Nature can be linked to the concept of mobile youth work. The success of the activities depends largely on the experience of the youth worker, his knowledge of the target group, as well as his fantasy. Many of the usual inside activities are applicable outdoors.

### **Methodology of research**

For qualitative data collection semi-structured interviews were carried out (in February, 2015) in total with nine youth workers from each Tallinn youth centre out of ten. Therefore, the results can be generalized to all Tallinn youth centres. It was a targeted sample in which all interviewees were using outdoor learning in their everyday work.

Based on the purpose of the study, several open-ended questions were formulated in the interview. Questions about outdoor education and its place in youth workers' daily practices, thoughts on the environment, activities and methods were handled as well as involving youth in the outdoor activities. Some questions were targeted to find out the youth workers' opinions on the importance of outdoor learning and their needs in the field of cooperation and training. The interviews took approximately half to one hour each and were recorded on tape. All interviewees agreed to participate in the interviews. The

interviews were transcribed and descriptive content analysis with extracts from opinions was submitted.

## Results and discussion

The study involved nine youth centres in Tallinn out of ten. Based on the interviews, it could be argued that: firstly, in terms of the opportunities arising from the location and territory, Tallinn youth centres are in a very different situation. It turned out that the apparent opportunities or lack of them are not always directly related to the actual use of them. In some youth centres situated in the near vicinity of supporting surroundings for outdoor learning activities, the opportunities have not been used in practice. On the other hand, there were youth centres that organized outdoor activities rather often, although they had no favourable environment for such activities near the youth centre.

Second, the study revealed that all youth workers considered outdoor learning very important. Despite that, in their opinion, the opportunities for the youth to participate in outdoor learning activities carried out in youth centres, are poor: *even if youth workers themselves consider outdoor learning necessary, they might not provide those activities for the youth in case they are not listed in the courses of action of the youth centre.*

Outdoor learning has received little attention in youth work and therefore, comparisons are hard to find. Kaljuläte (2006) has described the obstacles of students taking part in outdoor activities: lack of time, economic difficulties, the student's or parent's lack of interest, low physical activity and the need for using transportation. In Tallinn youth centres, *the youth worker's lack of time, the location of the youth centre, the passivity of the youth, the absence of outdoor activities as a priority in the youth centres' action plans, entanglement in customary activities and little support* were considered to be obstacles. The similarity in both cases is the passivity of the youth taking part in outdoor learning activities.

Third, it turned out that in several youth centres the youth who didn't seem to be interested in taking part in outdoor learning activities, became interested during participation. According to Raadik (2009) a young person gets interested in learning when he can find out, when, where and why he needs that knowledge and how to put it into practice.

Fourth, the safety-issues of outdoor learning activities were not mentioned, although, in two youth centres it was pointed out that it is necessary to be familiar with the legislation that regulates activities carried out with the youth in natural environments.

Fifth, it appeared that almost all youth centres have organised urban camps. Most have also arranged one or more of the following activities: *hikes and/ or*

*nature tours, movement- and ball games, excursions and outings, orienteering, landscape games, instructed manual activities (painting, drawing, handicraft), extreme activities (visits to adventure parks), nature observations.* Five out of nine youth centres in Tallinn have participated in beach youth centres in summer. One third of the centres have taken part in working bees. Fewer have carried out outdoor learning classes/ workshops or arranged competitions or street tournaments. In one youth centre, the youth have made a movie and in another organized a bonfire night as an outdoor activity. In addition, in almost all youth centres, other activities have been carried out outdoors (*exhibitions, traffic city, courtyard cafe, night sky observation, outdoor cinema, picnics etc.*). During the time the interviews were carried out, there were no active hiking-, nature- or adventure clubs in the participating youth centres.

Sixth, the study revealed that youth workers not only need courses dealing with the methods for conducting outdoor learning activities but they would also benefit from practical well-working examples and new ideas from specialists as well as sharing experiences with each other. It would be possible to reduce the passivity of the youth, the main obstacle that prevents the youth from participating in outdoor learning activities, in case youth workers had better knowledge how to involve them in these activities.

With Brügge's outdoor learning modes (2007) in mind, the dominating as well as active adaption mode are popular in youth centres, while the passive adaption mode is not paid that much attention to. Taking a look at the initiatives in eight specific fields in the renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field (2010-2018), we can see that they are reflected in outdoor learning activities carried out in youth centres. It has been organized for young people in collaboration of young people and youth workers (Euroopa., 2012; Sprecht, 2011, 2014; Siurala, 2013). Outdoor learning is considered to be a connecting link between formal and non-formal education. It is considered important to introduce the eco mindset to the youth. According to the Youth Work Act (2010) youth work content is the social, cultural and health education. The lack of physical activity has been a problem in Estonia (Harro, 2001; Hannus, 2015). Health and well-being aspects of outdoor learning are valued. The youth are noticeably more active outdoors than indoors.

Outdoor adventure programs have a positive impact on young people's attitudes, beliefs, self-perception and the development of social skills (Festau & Humberstone, 2006). Taking part in various events (e.g. working bees) and voluntary activities enables young people to participate in community life. Social inclusion is also valued: free or low-charge activities are offered in order to prevent the marginalisation of economically less secured youth.

Moving away from the natural way of life alienates people from the natural cycle of life (Keskkonnaministerium, 2008). It is explained to the youth taking

part in the outdoor learning process, how their behaviour might impact on natural environment.

Nature activities can be linked to historical context when presenting any historical event (Ham, 2005). In our study outdoor-learning activities were also linked to creativity and culture.

## Conclusion

Acknowledging non-formal education among the youth and connecting it more effectively to formal education is a part of the initiative of the education and training field. Outdoor learning is linked to all important initiatives in youth field documents. Irrespective of location, most of the potential of applying outdoor learning activities is still unused. Youth workers feel the need to improve their skills in conducting outdoor learning activities.

As an outcome of this study, the following suggestions were made. First, to enable the workers of youth centres to take part in courses in outdoor education in order to gain experience and information about outdoor learning methods with the youth, information about thematic games as well as the use of different technical and information technological devices that can be used in outdoor learning activities. Second, to add outdoor learning to the priorities of youth centres' action plans and support it at the local level in the best interests of young people's health and diverse development issues. Third, to take into account the environmental opportunities of youth centres for applying outdoor education activities. The goal should be to carry out outdoor activities on a regular basis depending on the opportunities of the youth centre. Fourth, to build up regular cooperation between youth centres and other institutions engaged in outdoor learning (nature houses, hiking clubs, State Forest Management Centre, zoos, open air museums, botanical gardens etc.)

This topic should be explored in other areas of Estonia and the results should be compared to the experiences of other countries in order to get a holistic picture about applying outdoor education among the youth and about its importance in youth work.

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