
Inclusion and Social Justice in Outdoor Education



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Introduction

Issues of inclusion and social justice in outdoor and environmental education (OEE) mirror the struggles in larger society to embrace equity in a world where historical, structural, and institutional forces impede equal access and opportunity. The early history of outdoor education as a white, male, class-privileged domain still influences the administration and practice of outdoor and environmental education programs and classroom teaching. A single and monolithic world view of the theory and practice of OEE has emerged and persists from these narratives of power and privilege. This paradigmatic view too often fails to include the participation and voices of marginalized people and communities. For example, while women and people of color are making inroads in outdoor program participation, gaining increased entry into mid-level employment, and exercising some influence over educational policy, the major decision-making power and high-level administration positions in outdoor and educational organizations still tend to be the domain of white

males. Issues of land colonization, the inequitable siting of environmentally destructive infrastructure (e.g., dumps, power plants, pipelines) in marginalized communities, and the class-privileged history of conservation and preservation movements further call for social justice in environmental education.

The goal of this entry is to review the current state of social justice and inclusion in the fields of outdoor adventure, outdoor education, and environmental education and provide some ideas for teachers and practitioners to address these issues.

Defining Key Concepts

For the purpose of this entry, the term social justice will pertain to issues of social privilege and oppression involving examination of race/ethnicity, culture, gender and gender identity, age, ability, socioeconomic status, and religion. Privilege refers to those special rights, advantages, or immunities that are available to a particular person or group of people based on the aforementioned historical, structural, and institutional forces that impede equity. Privileges are unearned and something that people have gained based on those historical forces. Finally, social justice theory and pedagogy embraces the idea that social identities do not exist independently. Rather, race, class, sexuality, skin color, and gender (among other identities) exist in intersectionality, conceptualizing a person, group

of people, or social problem as affected by multiple discriminations and disadvantages.

Outdoor Education Justice

Long-held beliefs about the individual, heroic nature of outdoor adventure, often propagated by media messages of the outdoor conquest of man vs. wild, have been critiqued by social justice scholars as prioritizing rugged individualism over community to the detriment of oppressed communities that find value and safety in communal time in nature. Being alone in the woods for people in oppressed groups can bring up memories of historical or actual violence or threat of violence that limit their experience. Educational and facilitation practices that support individualism could be replaced by community-based program designs favoring oppressed communities.

Hegemonic interpretations of concepts such as adventure and risk can also alienate participants from marginalized groups from interacting with outdoor experiences. Physical risk and challenge as an organizing principle for enacting growth for participants has been scrutinized by social justice advocates and deemed a contested concept in the outdoor adventure field. For example, the traditionally constructed adventure narrative is problematic for some, particularly for women who might seek a more integrated rather than adversarial relationship with nature (Gray and Mitten 2018).

While intersectionality results in a constellation of discriminatory factors limiting people of various marginalized identities access to OEE, issues of race, gender, and ability frequent the OEE literature and will be presented here.

Race

The viewpoint that the outdoors is a place of sanctuary, a notion commonly promoted by dominant ideals and values, may not be pertinent to black, Indigenous, and people of color (BIPOC). Wilderness areas are preserved as part of national identity, but this identity doesn't match the experience of people of color where the collective

memory of lynching, genocide, and forced labor is more their reality (Finney 2014).

Lack of visual and textual representation of people of color in outdoor and environmental pursuits and careers is a constraint that limits involvement and transmits an impression of the wilderness as a white space (Finney 2014). Teaching materials that show the contributions of environmentalists and outdoor leaders of color can interrogate racialized perceptions of who belongs in OEE. Unpacking the invisible knapsack of white privilege that educators and participants in the outdoors carry with them can challenge deeply rooted assumptions and encourage cultural competency (Breunig 2019).

Gender

Gendered messages about the outdoors in media and other social institutions continue to create a double bind for women in OEE (Gray and Mitten 2018). Gender role incongruity results when white, middle-class, heterosexual stereotypes of beauty are a site of resistance for women outdoors while, at the same time, traditional models of what is acceptable for women in physical and natural spaces are reinforced to induce conformity. Strides in the development of gender-sensitive outdoor leadership and pedagogy have promoted questioning of traditional models of teaching and leading in the outdoors (Warren et al. 2018). Feminist outdoor leadership includes the valuing of personal experience and identity, shared decision-making processes, recognition of power dynamics in group participation, decentralized leadership, collective problem-solving, and honoring student choices. The inclusion of feminist values as well as challenging gender binaries and heteronormative views in outdoor pedagogy can lead to a more promising social justice orientation in OEE.

Ability

Disability rights legislation enacted in many countries worldwide has promoted inclusion and integration in some educational sectors; however, people with disabilities are less likely to have

access to outdoor education generally. Inclusion is an attitude and approach that seeks to ensure that every person, regardless of ability or background, can meaningfully participate in all aspects of life. Integration is the act of combining individuals to make a unified whole, for example, wilderness experiences including persons with and without disabilities. “Person first” language, adaptations in outdoor equipment, and universal design have been adopted in OEE programs. Universal design takes into consideration environments, facilities, equipment, programs, policies, curriculum, and other resources, with the goal of inclusion for all people to the greatest extent possible. Universal design thus aims to enable all people to have equal opportunities to participate in every aspect of OEE.

Assumptions and norms about body and “size” also represent impediments to access for people of all abilities. Outdoor education continues to divide people into strong/able and other. Weight-based oppression in outdoor/environmental education and the dominant conceptions of how ability and fitness are most often viewed are components of this (dis)ability narrative (Breunig 2019).

Intersectionality of Oppressions

Intersectionality is a framework that identifies how multiple identities and unacknowledged privilege contribute to oppression and injustice. For example, a low-income, queer woman of color would likely face discrimination more profoundly than a white, upper-class female. Intersectionality provides insight into the complex interplay of identity experiences, privilege, and power, illuminating the effect of overlapping oppressions. Certainly identities of socioeconomic class, age, religion, and sexual/gender orientation influence the outdoor education experience of participants, yet less has been written about the intersection of these in the outdoor literature (Warren et al. 2018).

Outdoor educators must consider this framework in their practice. Scheduling courses during the fasting period of Ramadan or neglecting to

consider appropriate trip food that aligns with individuals’ religious or cultural beliefs are often overlooked aspects of outdoor education programs. Combine these aspects with the aforementioned racial and gender messaging inherent in many outdoor education programs and it becomes strikingly apparent how intersectional oppression functions to marginalize individuals and groups. Inclusive outdoor education must take this into account, beginning with avoiding assumptions about participant demographics. And, in fact, regardless of participant demographics on any given course, all programs should be inclusive and social justice-oriented through deliberative consideration and intentional design.

Environmental Education Justice

Ideas about wilderness and leisure developed in the United States from a class- and race-based perspective. The forced relocation of Indigenous people from their homelands to develop wilderness areas for public recreational consumption sanctioned racist genocide in interest of wealthy white people’s leisure. Early preservation advocates viewed wilderness for its sublime and aesthetic qualities rather than utilitarian uses, representing a classist interpretation in light of the subsistence lifestyle of more marginalized people. The development of leisure activity in outdoor settings depended primarily on access to free time and resources to recreate. Issues of land colonization are also prevalent in marginalized communities where power plants, dumps, and other environmental risks exist. Inadequate access to healthy food, air and water pollution, and sub-par public transportation systems in marginalized communities all contribute to social and environmental injustice.

As one decolonizing act, educators can preface lessons with thanks to the people who previously resided there, moderating white settler and Eurocentric beliefs about the history of outdoor spaces and schools and acknowledging the inequities. Acknowledgments of the Indigenous peoples who lived on the land currently used for outdoor pursuits are becoming more recognized as an

educational technique to understand the deep lineage of land use and the colonization that forced native cultures from territorial homes. Actively acknowledging the ways in which curriculum and educators engage in territorial sovereignty over land and enacting “real” change is core to decolonization – the act of divesting colonial histories. In addition to land acknowledgments, this change includes developing an increased awareness about the ways in which white settlers have historically marginalized communities and people, inadvertently contributing to current environmental injustices. Decolonial land education shifts thinking from purely anthropocentric understandings to include nonhuman inhabitants of any territory as well (Breunig 2019). Eurocentric hegemonic assumptions and viewpoints relevant to nature use, community and land colonization, and anthropocentrism are all examples of the hidden curriculum in OEE.

The Hidden Curriculum of Outdoor and Environmental Education

The hidden curriculum consists of the unspoken or implicit social and cultural messages that are communicated to individuals in any given community. This hidden curriculum is often unwritten and represents unofficial perspectives that individuals learn and then adopt themselves, often unintentionally. Aspects of the hidden curriculum in outdoor environmental education include valuing physical and technical skills over intellectual, social, emotional, and moral development and male outdoor leaders being viewed as superior to female outdoor leaders (Warren et al. 2018). Sex segregation and sex-differentiated recreational activities, spaces, and facilities are also examples of a hidden curriculum, marginalizing transgender and gender non-binary people.

Implications for Teacher Education in Outdoor and Environmental Education

Developing new understandings and pedagogical practices is key to becoming a proficient social

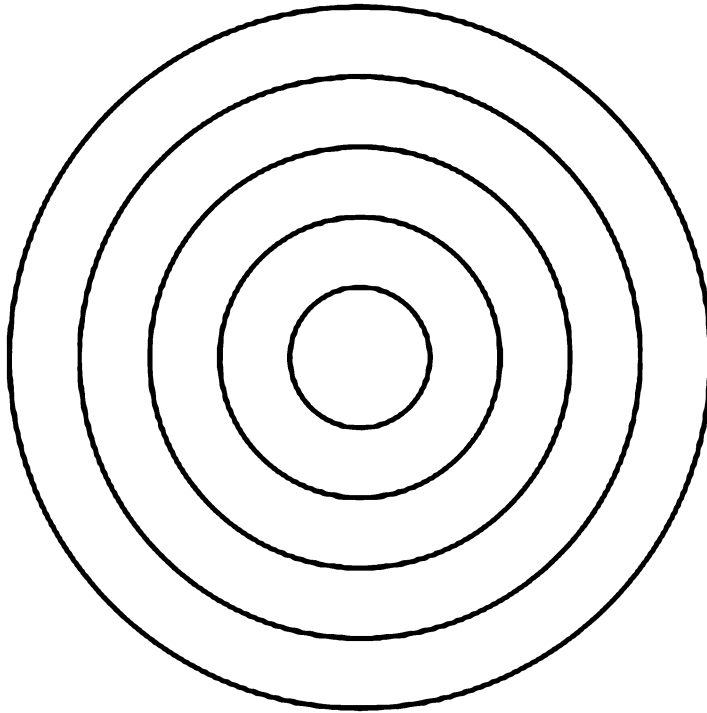
justice educator. Any teaching and learning endeavor should be inclusive, social justice-oriented, and anti-oppressive. Students no longer fit neatly into rigid categories of race, class, gender, sexuality, or national origin that have been used to make distinctions, create hierarchy, and use as comparators. Education needs to be responsive to these differences. The Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1993) writes about praxis, involving theory and practice, reflection, and action as activism resonant with experiential education theory. These frameworks for teaching and learning provide educators with the opportunity to engage the various and diverse learning styles of students with the aim of developing students’ critical consciousness.

A social justice classroom or outdoor program would demonstrate a curriculum and classroom practice that is grounded in the lives of students, critical in its approach to the world and itself, hopeful, visionary, pro-justice, and academically engaging and rigorous. Social justice-oriented experiential education holds emancipatory potential (Breunig 2019). With social justice training, teachers and facilitators of outdoor and environmental education can begin to understand how their own locations of privilege and marginalization can affect their teaching and how some of their students’ lived experiences may be absent in the dominant narratives of the outdoors.

Teaching Practices in OEE to Support Social Justice

All learning involves some risk including the challenges and rewards of adjusting previous thinking and seeing in new ways. This section will explore practices that teachers might use to support inclusion and social justice in OEE.

Understanding privilege and social positioning is core to social justice pedagogy. It can be challenging to uncover privileges and biases and to adopt views that change and broaden previously held perspectives. Feelings of guilt, grief, accountability, and despair can emerge out of that process. The process of identifying one’s social positioning is not linear or easily or rigidly



Inclusion and Social Justice in Outdoor Education, Fig. 1 Epistemological lens

achievable through any one activity. One exercise that serves as a good teaching aid point is an epistemological lens exercise. Draw an image similar to the one below (Fig. 1), adding many more concentric circles to your illustration. Consider social identifying factors, including upbringing, family composition, education, neighborhood you lived in, sexual identity, current relationships, religion, and employment, among others. Working from the inner rings to the outer ones, write one identifying factor in each blank space, starting from birth (innermost circles) to present day (outer circles). These should be personal and influencing factors. For example, the innermost circles might include descriptors such as middle-class, nuclear family, and white. The outer circles might include queer, university educated, and business owner. There will be some co-occurring events that will likely be bundled into one circle. If done as a group exercise, individuals can be invited to compare circles. Either individually or collectively, reflect upon the ways in which your lens informs your world view and

your teaching practice. What strengths and capacities do you contribute to any teaching and learning endeavor because of your social positioning and which areas might need development? Which of those social identifying factors are ones that also carry unearned privileges? What biases might you hold stemming from those factors and privileges?

Adopting prosocial behaviors and attitudes is core to any teaching practice. People often say they are tolerant of others or tolerant of certain lifestyle choices. Tolerance is inadequate to the objective of inclusivity. Respect and understanding are far more desirable. Avoiding microaggressions contributes to a prosocial teaching and learning environment. Microaggressions are the small (and not so small) insults and slights that degrade socially marginalized individuals or groups. They often occur below the individual's (oppressor's) level of awareness. Common examples include: "Your English is so good! – Where are you from?" "Look me in the eye when I am speaking to you." "I had no idea you were gay. It's

okay it doesn't bother me. I just don't think you should bring it up with the students" (Breunig 2019). These microaggressions in many ways are even more treacherous than outright racism or oppression. Social justice pedagogy takes into account the psychological well-being of students in an effort to create "brave" learning environments. The concept of brave space acknowledges that learning environments, both inside and outside of the classroom, are risky; and rather than overlooking that, embrace that risk by encouraging students to give voice to difficult conversations. Such spaces acknowledge the role of privilege and oppression in teaching, learning, and leadership environments. Emphasizing choice and participation in brave spaces is vital to nurturing engaged, inclusive dialogue.

Challenge by choice is a common learning method in outdoor environmental education. It articulates an agreement relative to student agency, allowing individuals to determine their level of participation for any given activity. The premise of challenge by choice is to encourage individuals to move out of their comfort zone by engaging in new challenges. These challenges often involve an activity and physical engagement with others, thus carrying some degree of psychological risk. Educators applying the principle of challenge by choice must consider the varying levels of individual agency and power dynamics within any group before assuming others' positionality, personal comfort, and willingness to participate. Emphasizing any educational choice as a brave one and acknowledging these as contested, challenging, and privileged can help allay some of the repressive myths associated with superficial claims of agency and inclusion (Breunig 2019).

Taking into account that oppressed populations learn better in community settings rather than from individualistic situations, cooperative rather than competitive learning environments are an important part of social justice pedagogy in the outdoors. An outdoor curriculum based on withholding information, using failures to build character, and emphasizing stress and discomfort may not provide an effective way of learning for marginalized students (Warren et al. 2018).

Critically conscious use of language in educational environments can prevent the othering of students who self-identify outside normative boundaries. Asking all participants to share their preferred gender pronouns can prevent the misgendering of students. Mirroring the language that students use to name their identity allows the educator to advocate for inclusion. In a canoe trip for queer students one author recently led, participants were given an opportunity to self-identify if they chose to. Even within the queer community, there was a diversity of identity – gender non-binary, lesbian, questioning ally, and trans- and cisgender gay were some of the responses. Educators aware of the power of language to oppress by renaming, disnaming, and misnaming participants will consider adopting the words students use to refer to themselves (Breunig 2019).

Conclusion

Promotion of inclusion and social justice in the outdoor and environmental education fields requires that teachers examine their own biases and practices to ensure they are providing culturally appropriate education. Knowledge about the historical and cultural assumptions embedded in OEE will assist teachers to support inclusion. Proactive teaching to transgress repressive myths and praxis is essential to change in outdoor and environmental education.

The challenge is constantly daunting, but in the words of Dr. Martin Luther King, "the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice."

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