

Outdoor Activities and Natural Environments for Young Children
in Saudi Arabia

by

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Abstract

This Masters' project examines the lack of outdoor activities in Saudi Arabia and demonstrates the need for support of these activities in the education system. Through this project I have explored academic literature related to outdoor play experience in early childhood education. I was interested in how the information that I found about how the outdoor play experience in Canada connected with my home in Saudi Arabia.

I recognized five main challenges when applying approaches to life in Saudi Arabia. Of particular interest is understanding the term "outdoor activities", the different education systems, the extreme environmental and weather conditions, being unacquainted with the importance of outdoor activities, and significant changes which need to be made in the outlook of individuals and communities. Important understanding from this small-scale project indicated that there are many challenges which face the Saudi Arabia Ministry of Education which could account for the lack of support of outdoor activities in schools. The common consensus was that the first step in solving this issue was to inform the Ministry of Education, teachers, and parents about the importance of having outdoor activities and to suggest the necessary steps to support these activities. It will require concerted effort, time, commitment, and patience, nevertheless, transformational change in the Saudi Arabian education system is a conceivable notion.

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Finally, I would like to dedicate this project to my parents and brothers. They always supported me unreservedly and have wanted the best for me.

Dedication

الى رمز الرجولة و الوقار, الى من كلت يده لي أقدم لي أجمل حياة, الى من أحمل اسمه بكل افتخار
الى من دفعني الى صروح العلم و المعرفة, الى من أستمد منه شجاعتي و قوتي, الى القلب الكبير
والذي العزيز

الى رمز الحب و بلسم الشفاء, الى ينبوع الحب و الحنان, الى شمعتي التي تنير درب حياتي
الى القلب الحنون والدتي

الى منهم أقرب لي من روحي, الى من شاركني حزن الام وحبها الى من شاركت معاهم
كل تفاصيل طفولتي, الى سندي و قوتي الى أخوتي

الى من آتسوني في دراستي وسرت برفقتهم على دروب العلم و المعرفة الى اخوتي التي لم تدهم امي
الى صديقاتي العزيزات

الى من سارت على ترابه قدمي الى من يحمل لغتي و تاريخي الى من تركت نصف روحي على أرضه
الى وطني الغالي

My Parents

Thank you for the unconditional support with my studies. I am honoured to have you as my parents. Love you.

My Brothers

Thank you for your understanding and support and thank you for believing in me. Love you.

My Friends

Thank you for your support, you were great motivation.

My Country

I hope my project highlighted an important issue that all of us can work on in order to help create a bright future for our education system and our society.

Chapter One

Introduction

“Let us leave the life free to develop within the limits of the good, and let us observe this inner life developing. This is the whole of our mission.” Maria Montessori

Throughout our history we have been deeply embedded in, and utterly dependent upon, the natural environment. We live in a world where everything is connected to the natural environment which, in turn, plays a very significant role in our life, learning, and culture.

The natural beauty of Canada has inspired me through my learning journey. I observed how people and animals behave when they are surrounded by the woods or on the top of a mountain. There was an immense difference in their behaviour when they were in an urban environment as opposed to a natural environment. Nature is inspiring, relaxing, and reenergizing. It was from this observation that I started thinking about how important it is for children to be engaged with nature. The main way in which children can connect to the natural environment is through outdoor activities at their school: “The importance of outdoor learning for young children was first recognized by the pioneers of nursery education. Froebel devised the word ‘kindergarten’ meaning ‘children’s garden’, and Margaret McMillan continued to establish what were generally known as ‘open-air nursery schools’ ” (Watts, 2013, p.1).

Outdoor activities are unique in how they engage young children. Children behave differently outside than inside the classroom. For instance, they become energetic and very enthusiastic about gaining new information and experiences. “Studies of different outside play spaces found that a mixture of manufactured materials and natural materials made children more active” (Blanchet-Cohen & Elliot, 2011, p.759). Several

skills that teachers set out to teach children formally occur naturally in the outdoor environment.

When I think back to my childhood, I remember that I spent my free time inside the house. Even when I was in kindergarten, children did not have the chance to go to the beach, or to a garden. I think the reason is directly related to my country's climate. In Saudi Arabia, the average summer temperature is about 47° C. The heat becomes intense shortly after sunrise and lasts until sunset. Saudi Arabia is a desert country and there are virtually no rivers or lakes in the country. I never had the opportunity as a child to discover and explore the natural environment, but this project will try to find solutions to this problem in my country. We cannot let the children in kindergarten in Saudi Arabia lose the amazing opportunity of connecting with Mother Nature. "The natural world provides a wonderful circus tent for children's play" (Lester & Maudlesy, 2007, p.14). My aim in this project is to explore the reasons for the lack of outdoor activities in kindergartens and schools in Saudi Arabia and to try to find the best resolutions for this issue.

The kindergarten education system in Saudi Arabia must be improved and provide the children in the future the chance to engage with, and learn through, the natural environment, "Experiencing the outdoors can be a powerful stimulus for learning. Being deep in a forest, feeling alone on a hillside or just sharing a cup of tea around a fire can set us off on a path that changes the way we think about ourselves, our relationships and way we live our lives" (Rogers & Smith, 2012, p.8). The four years that I have spent in Canada have allowed me to experience the positive effects of outdoor activities for students in kindergarten. I noticed that children enjoy their time with their peers and

teachers. In addition, I observed how their relationship with their teacher is strengthened. Academic research in the field of Early Childhood Education demonstrates that by changing the learning environment, the students can improve in many ways. In order to examine this issue in depth, I have talked with Saudi Arabian mothers. The locations I chose to consider are the cities of Jubail and Dhahran, in the eastern region of Saudi Arabia.

Outdoor Environment

"Since the big bang 13.7 million years ago, the 'outdoors' was created. Then about 600 million years ago, the first life forms began learning about how to live with the forces of nature"(Neil, 2004). We have a chance to look into the nature and evolution of human beings, "which is the basis of a psycho-evolutionary theory of outdoor education, the essence of which is that it seems not unreasonable to suggest that the early hominids were the originators of outdoor education" (Neil, 2007). Throughout extensive periods of human development, learning and training were primarily conducted in the outdoors. "Only recently were permanent walls constructed -- dramatically in the last 100 years of Western civilization" (Neil, 2007). Outdoor activities, open-air activities, outdoor education, and outdoor recreation each serve a psycho-evolutionary need within Homo sapiens, "to collectively maintain some form of psychological and physical contact with natural processes and environments which are relatively untouched by post-industrial 21st century human lifestyle" (Neil, 2007).

England had what were called "open-air" schools in the 1930's. The main reason for this kind of school was primarily for health. The schools were completely open-air, there were no walls. The idea of "outdoor school" derived from the sanatoria that sprang

up in Europe in the latter part of the 19th century. In the sanatoria, fresh air and sunshine as much as medicine were used to treat tuberculosis (TB), with mixed success. This idea was extended in Britain during the first half of the 20th century, with the focus on improving the health of children who were seen as sickly and susceptible to TB" (Neil, 2007). However, by the 1940's, the British opened 155 open-air schools and all of the schools were aimed to improve both children's health and academics.

The Statement of the Problem

Throughout the history of human beings, outdoor activities have played essential roles in everyday life, however, currently children spend more time indoors than ever before: "Young people today spend most of their free time indoors engaged in structured activities under adult supervision, to the point that experts are considering it a public health issue" (Demers, 2012, p.1).

In the last decade, there has been an extensive amount of research conducted on the benefits of outdoor learning environments for children in some western countries. For example, Dickson, Gray, and Mann, 2008 have conducted research on the benefits of outdoor adventure activity in Australia.

Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this project is to explore the issue of the lack of outdoor activities for children in kindergarten in Saudi Arabia and to propose solutions to this problem. In addition, a key objective is to gain understanding of how Canadian schools work to strengthen outdoor activity programs. This information could then be presented to the Saudi Arabian government and the Ministry of Education in order to illustrate its importance for future generations.

Literature Review

Chapter two will begin with a definition of outdoor activities, explore some concepts and terms that are related to outdoor activities, and discuss its importance in having it as a main program in the education system. After, we will discuss the benefits of outdoor activities for children. The next point in this chapter will discuss the Saudi Arabian climate and some ideas or solutions will be introduced that can help schools provide students with the opportunity to learn outdoors. The last point in this chapter will discuss how the country of Sweden has developed its environmental education in schools.

Process of Inquiry

Philosophical beliefs about research are based upon social constructivism. Creswell (2009) defines the qualitative approach as “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2009, p.4).

I thought back on conversations I had with my friends about their own perspectives on the lack of outdoor activities and what the best solutions to solve this issue are. My friends are mothers and like myself have had a good experience with the education system in Canada. Creswell (2009) notes that interviews that involve “unstructured and generally open-ended questions that are few in number and intend to elicit views and opinions from the participants” (Creswell, 2009, p.181) are often the most adequate. Thus, conversation with my friend has influence my understanding of the perception of mothers about the lack of having outdoor activities in the home, school, and society.

Significance of the Project

This project will provides me with insights of what I saw as a gap in the literature on the subject of outdoor activities in kindergarten, specifically, in Saudi Arabia, as there are currently no studies that discuss the lack of outdoor activities. This project is also important because it will demonstrate the significance of children learning through the natural environment and how children in Saudi Arabia can transfer this knowledge and these skills back into their society and country.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

The merit of learning and teaching through the natural environment and outdoor activities can no longer be ignored in the educational domain. Outdoor activities have received a great deal of attention recently, in particular, from educators around the world. There were a lot of research studies conducted on outdoor learning in United Kingdom “150 studies in the period 1993-2003 in UK”. (Rickinson, 2004). Today, outdoor activities in nature play an important role in providing information to children in an effective way. “Contact with nature supports identifying, classifying, naming, sorting ideas and giving meaning to natural objects and spaces” (Lester & Maudsley, 2007, p.49). Children observe and gather information more efficiently when they are not surrounded by walls in schools, or in homes. As mentioned in Chapter One, in the 1930's, the British opened what was called an “open-air” school for students because children naturally liked the feeling of freedom in an open area. Outdoor activities should be included in school programs for this could help improve educational standards in school. Outdoor activities are basically a way of learning and gaining new information by connecting the learners to the natural environment and the outside world. In addition, outdoor activities is a way of thinking too, but "it is not all of the process of thinking" (Moon, 2008, p.25). It plays a vital role in the educational system. The benefits of outdoor activities are manifested in various domains, such as curiosity in nutrition and a sense of discovery, and additional benefits that will be discussed in this chapter: “The evidence suggests that viewing, interacting with, and living in natural environments can have multiple effects on reducing stress, increasing patience, increasing self-discipline,

increasing capacity for attention, increasing recovery for mental fatigue, or from crisis and from psychophysiological imbalance,” (Russell et al., 2013, p. 482).

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Definition of Outdoor Activities

The concept of outdoor activities and knowing the components of outdoor activities will help educators and families have a more in-depth understanding of the importance of outdoor learning. At first glance, the concept of outdoor activities is "developed through a discussion of its characteristics, objectives, and experiences" (Plummer, 2009, p.13). Outdoor activities are connected to some key ideas or concepts such as leisure, recreation, and sport. Since outdoor activities are connected with these concepts, we will define these concepts in order.

First, leisure is being able to do what you want. "Leisure experiences are often accompanied by a special feeling of transcendence, in which an individual experiences "oneness" with an activity or environment" (Plummer, 2009, p.14). Furthermore, "leisure" is a more appropriate term connected with outdoor activities rather than the

term “recreation”. Plummer mentioned in his book *Outdoor Recreation* that in the outdoors, "leisure experiences often occur while interacting with the natural environment." (Plummer, 2009, p.14). Therefore, outdoor activities are strongly related to the concept of leisure.

Outdoor activities give children free time and a variety of choices and this is similar to the concept of leisure which is "typically associated with free time or situations in which individuals have the luxury of choice. This association between leisure and free time is so strong that the terms are often used synonymously"(Plummer, 2009, p.14). In summary, leisure defined as “external activities exclude consideration of important internal or subjective factors" (Plummer, 2009, p.14).

The second concept connected to outdoor activities is recreation. However, sometimes, people connect the concept of recreation only with the outdoors instead of outdoor activities. Yet, Plummer had a different approach on how to define recreation, "the term recreation is often interchangeably used with the term leisure" (2009, p.15). However, regardless of the interchangeability between recreation and leisure, we have to focus on their relation in general to outdoor activities. For this purpose, recreation is defined as "voluntary non-work activity that is organized for the attention of personal and social benefit including restoration and social cohesion" (Plummer, 2009, p.16).

The third concept is sport which is "Characterized by physical activity (strength, agility, speed), structure or rules concerning space and time, competitiveness or goal orientation either among contestants or with oneself, and uncertainty of outcomes" (Plummer, 2009, p.16). Sport, as we can see from its definition, has an important connection to outdoor activities. Sometimes some people do some activities which are

part of sport, therefore, the definition that Plummer mentioned is "organized activity in which physical effort is related to that of others in some relative measurement of outcomes with accepted regularities and forms" (2009, p.16).

The concepts of leisure, recreation, and sport are related to outdoor activities. Accordingly, now we can define the meaning of outdoor activities as "voluntary participation in free-time activity that occurs in the outdoors and embraces the interaction of people with the natural environment" (Plummer, 2009, p.18).

In addition, there is another meaning of outdoor activities defined by Florida's statewide comprehensive outdoor recreation plan which states that it is "any leisure time activity conducted outdoors. Within the vast range of that definition lie an almost unlimited number of activities, from wilderness camping to neighborhood playground use, organized sports" (Florida's statewide comprehensive outdoor recreation plan, 2013, p.2).

Outdoor Activities in the Educational System

"In recent years, the widening gap between children and the natural world, and the benefits of nature for young and old, have come into sharp focus. Children today face unprecedented barriers to daily, meaningful experience in the natural world" (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012, p.vii). It is strongly suggest that outdoor activities be a main component of the school curriculum because the curriculum is the heart of the learning and teaching experience at any school for it "involves teachers and students interacting with one another with the central aim of acquiring certain skills, values, knowledge, and understanding" (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012, p. 16). Generally, the curriculum is "thought of as the subjects and content comprising a course of study, and as such, is a key

interface between the educational establishment, the teacher, and the student" (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012, p. 16). As know that the natural world has many benefits for human beings. Godbey said, "There is increasing evidence that closeness to the natural environment is healthy" (Godbey, 2009, p. 3). Taking children outside of the classroom to learn in a natural environment, it provides both the students and the educators with a valuable experience.

Children should be an intimate part of nature, and to achieve this goal, families and educators have to let them have contact with the natural environment and help them understand its mechanical construct. David Suzuki mentioned that "if the cosmos is an immense mechanical construct, then by focusing on the parts of this machine—the cogs, wheels, and springs—one might be able to understand how the machine works; like a giant jigsaw puzzle, all the parts could be fitted together to explain the whole" (2003, p. 1). Children could understand the mechanical construct of nature if they have meaningful contact with it. In general, outdoor educational programs should be an important part of school programs because they focus on personal growth, skill acquisition and other benefits which will be discussed in the next point.

Benefits of Outdoor Activities

Children are full of curiosity since the moment that they are born. Curiosity is the main starting point of learning. "For children, curiosity provides the incentive to investigate the world" (Herman, Passineau, Schimpf, & Treuer, 1991, p. 1). Curiosity will lead children to a small stream, they will touch the water, squeeze it, splash it, pour it, and drink it. Through this activity, they will learn about water and can acquire vast amounts knowledge in a short period of time. Wherefore, we have to drop all of the

boundaries between the children and the natural world and fan the flame of curiosity and let them follow their instincts and interests. Curiosity is the invitation to explore, learn, and gain information. Moreover, outdoor activities are an important way to explore the world. "Exploration is an investigation of the world. It is looking at new things and new places. It is also seeing the old in new ways. Exploration is doing. It is active, playful and dynamic" (Herman, Passineau, Schimpf, & Treuer, 1991, p. 29).

The more children explore, the more questions arise. For example, questions such as what role did the water play? Where did the water come from? Why was the water transparent? Exploration invites children on a journey that can lead them in many directions and the only obstacle is the lack of opportunity in the school program to explore these new worlds. When schools provide opportunities for children to go outdoors, this activates their curiosity and their desire to explore. The difference between these two capacities is that "curiosity arouses your interest in something—such as a stream bed. Exploration is the activity of taking the time to pursue the answers to the questions that your curiosity raises" (Herman, Passineau, Schimpf, & Treuer, 1991, p. 29). Furthermore, the outdoors also leads to the benefits of discovery. "Discovery is a natural outgrowth of exploration, but the moment of awareness distinguishes discovery from exploration" (Herman, Passineau, Schimpf, & Treuer, 1991, p. 71).

Outdoor activities provide unique challenges, frontiers to cross, and new things for children to invent. An infinite number of discoveries still remain in the outdoors because every day children will find something new. For instance, when teachers teach children about how spiders incubate their eggs, this fact will not be fully relevant or profound for children until they actually see it for the first time and experience for

themselves the wonder of that discovery. In a moment of awareness, children will make the connection to their other experiences and ideas, and their world will expand. Each discovery contributes to children's development as an individual. Each discovery has an influence on who they are. Children are the sum of all their discoveries because they shape them, change them, enable them to grow and see their world anew. The moment of discovery in the outdoors opens children's eyes to higher truths or wider perspectives.

"Discoveries are associated with a strong impulse to share. The bridge between individuals, cultures and generations is fostered by the sharing of discoveries" (Herman, Passineau, Schimpf, & Treuer, 1991, p. 71).

"Sharing is the affirmation of discovery. By sharing a discovery about the natural world with another person, the experience is enhanced " (Herman, Passineau, Schimpf, & Treuer, 1991, p. 109). Children are usually outdoors discovering new things with their friends. After they have discovered something, they like to share it with their friends. Through sharing, children grow in self-confidence and self-discovery. Sharing is a skill that can be learned so let children practice, take them outside, let them share with their friends the new things that they learned and discovered. Perhaps share stories, drawings, or songs from the trip. Teachers should take into consideration that "teaching with a sense of wonder is more than imparting knowledge. It is revealing an attitude toward the discovery "(Herman, Passineau, Schimpf, & Treuer, 1991, p. 109). Subsequently, when they take children outside they have to design experiences that will encourage the sharing of memories, perceptions, and the discoveries that they have made about their world.

Passion is another skill that outdoor activities provide to children. "Passion begins with the excitement associated with newness" (Herman, Passineau, Schimpf, & Treuer,

1991, p.143). For example, the joy a child experiences when seeing a spider or other insect for the first time. The earth nurtures children. By embracing the earth, children will gain insight, wisdom, skills, and spiritual growth. By nurturing a sense of wonder for the earth, children will experience curiosity and know the pleasure of exploring. Children will discover the rhythms and intricacies of the natural world. However, passion is more than an intense feeling, it extends to caring. Passion develops in children when they are willing and able to give back, and there are endless and diverse ways to give back to the earth. "Passion, like the seasons, is an ending as well as a beginning. It is caring and being cared for. It is answering and questioning. It is giving and receiving. Passion is an embrace that leads to commitment to love and be loved by the earth" (Herman, Passineau, Schimpf, & Treuer, 1991, p. 143). Schools should open the doors for children and let them experience passion toward their world and the earth.

The outdoors will help develop children's physical, mental, and social health. Furthermore, more time spent in the natural world can be a good way to strengthen physical and emotional fitness. Dr. Munos said, "Exercising outdoors, therefore, has been linked not only to positive health benefits from the physical activity but also associated with greater overall levels of well-being derived from conducting the exercise in spaces that facilitate contact with nature" (Munos, 2009, p.6). In fact, being in nature is not only healthy for children, but also for parents, educators, and patients, "nature-based therapy has had success healing patients who had not responded to treatment. Studies show exposure to natural environments enhances the ability to cope with and recover from stress, illness, and injury" (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012, p.vii).

The natural environment seems to stimulate children's and adult's ability to pay

attention, to think clearly, and to be more creative. Taking children outside during class time will help them understand their environment and related issues of sustainable development. Moreover, it encourages physical activity. When children are surrounded in the natural world and they spend time in green spaces, it promotes good health and well-being. It also provides various opportunities for them to learn how to evaluate and manage risks.

Sustainable development is another remarkable benefit that outdoor activities provide to children. What is sustainable development? It is the "developing and understanding of the global implications of our daily actions (e.g. energy and resource use) and taking responsibility for these" (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012, p. 8). When teachers and families let children use natural products, this is one way that teaches them how not to harm the environment. When they are connected directly to the natural world, the teacher can also give them feedback about how they can take care of their planet. It is not easy to develop these skills, but it is very important to help children foster their own personal ethics toward sustainability. Taking children outside to the natural world will help them develop a strong relationship with the environment. "Research indicates that playing in natural spaces is important for developing environmental awareness"(Lester & Maudsley, 2007, p. 49).

Additionally, outdoor activities offer interesting adventures outside the classroom and can provide children with the opportunity to take responsibility for themselves, their friends, and the natural environment. Children will learn effectively when they are "in situations that require them to consider different courses of action and then make decisions, the consequences of which will directly affect themselves and others"

(Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012, p. 9).

Building community partnership is another advantage that outdoor activities offer people. "Effective outdoor learning involves working across social division such as age, ethnicity, and race — often through partnerships with community-based organization that exist to promote the well-being of people and the local environment" (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012, p. 9). Taking children outside with their classmates to discover, explore, and learn new things with their friends, and utilizing natural products will provide young people with genuine opportunities to learn about what it means to be an active person and how to contribute to society. Blanchet-Cohen & Elliot said, "By experiencing the connection to the natural world and elements, children acquire an understanding of their relationship and responsibility to the human and non-human communities" (Blanchet-Cohen, & Elliot, 2011, p. 759).

Children need to experience the joys of the natural life throughout their educational journey. The outdoors offers a lot of opportunities to learn things in a variety of ways such as "taste, touch, sight, sound, smell, as well as intellectually, physically, emotionally, aesthetically, and spiritually" (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012, p. 12). Moreover, outdoor learning can support "physical, academic, aesthetic, emotional, personal, and social development in schools, and in both the formal and informal curriculum" (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012, p. 15).

Outdoor learning can be fun and simple. For instance, children can learn mathematics by measuring the length, height, distance, area, volume, mass, and angles with objects in nature. It is the same case with physics and chemistry, children will feel motivated to learn through the natural world. Children can also observe the weather and

climate and astronomy/cosmology. A simple walk with their friends and teacher can provide many chances "to discuss principles of matter and motion — mass and density of objects, gravity, balance, friction, momentum, collisions; energy flow (e.g. from the sun, human bodies), adsorption, and reflection" (Beames, Higgins, & Nicol, 2012, p. 23). The subject of chemistry can be taught in the natural world by the measurement of pH in rain, water, and soil. Outdoor activities provide exciting ways to learn and gain new information. "One great strength of outdoor learning is that it is possible to provide opportunities for planning, decision-making, and responsibility-taking that transforms student leaning into a more active enterprise" (Beames, Higgins, and Nicol, 2012, pp. 23-24).

Learning outdoors can have a wide range of impact including "cognitive impacts, affective, interpersonal/social and physical/behavioral impacts" (O'Brien, 2009, p. 46). Children can use tools to create art work, or listen to a variety of stories in order to improve their language and communication skills. Children will also learn more about habitats, animals, and plants. Children will understand the cycles of nature and advocate the use of natural materials. Moreover, the relationship between instructors and children will improve and develop over time. In Blanchet-Cohen & Elliot study found "that educators appreciated being outdoors with children because of the improved quality of their relationships with children as well as the learning opportunities it presented" (Blanchet-Cohen, Elliot, 2011, p. 769). The children and educators will have conversations on a different level. Children will ask teachers more questions, even about their own families and personal life; personal questions that educators will not necessarily encounter inside the classroom. This means the communication skills between teachers

and children will strengthen and they will have a better understanding of each other. This is a significant benefit that teaching outdoors provides to children and educators.

Outdoor activities will improve young people's knowledge and understanding, and last, but not least, improve overall health and wellness. Learning outdoors can "potentially be an important factor in life-long learning, health and well-being and in ecologically sustainable societies" (O'Brien, 2009, p. 46).

Outdoor Activities and the Climate in Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia, also known as the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, is an enormous peninsula located in Asia, specifically in the Middle East, "the size of the country is approximately 2,150,000 km²" (World Weather and Climate Information, 2013). It is bordered by Jordan and Iraq to the north, Kuwait to the northeast, Qatar, Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates to the east, Oman and Yemen in the south. It is the only nation with both a Red Sea coast and a Persian Gulf coast. Saudi Arabia occupies about 80% of the Arabian Peninsula. However, due to the large size of Saudi Arabia, the country has a variety of climates and weather systems in its regions. In the southern part of Saudi Arabia, is the world's largest contiguous sand desert called Rub' al Khali (Empty Quarter). "Saudi Arabia has no lakes and almost no rivers" (Lipsky, 1959, p. 20), but valleys are numerous. Saudi Arabia is divided into four main geographical areas. First, the heart of the kingdom, which is Nejd, is a highland area. Second, al-Hijaz is "an elongated shelf region along the upper Red Sea coast" (Lipsky, 1959, p. 21). Third, Asir, located in the southern Red Sea and Yemen border, is full of mountain chains and hills. Finally, al-Hasa, or Eastern province, is a coastal area with a sandy ground. If we move to the western region (al-Hijaz) where the Red Sea coast is, this area is full of mountains,

which start from the north all the way to the border with Yemen. In the Eastern province where the Persian Gulf coast is, the land does not contain any mountains, just sandy and stony areas. In northern Saudi Arabia, there are small mountains and small hills, then in the middle region (Nejd) where the capital is, a desert surrounds the cities so the weather there is usually dry, extremely hot in the summer, and very cold and dry in the winter. However, in the southwest province of Asir, the climate and weather is entirely different from the other regions. In Asir, there are hills, forests, and mountains. In the summer, the temperatures are moderate and it is cool in the winter and there may even be snow and rain. Except for the southwestern province of Asir, "Saudi Arabia has a desert climate with extremely high day-time temperatures and a sharp temperature drop at night. Average summer temperatures are around 113 °F (45 °C). In the winter the temperature rarely drops below 32 °F (0 °C). In the spring and autumn the heat is temperate, temperatures average around 84 °F (29 °C)" (Weather Online, 2014). Annual rainfall is extremely low. The Asir region differs in that it is influenced by the Indian Ocean monsoons, usually occurring between October and March. "An average of 300 mm (12 in) of rainfall occurs during this period, that is about 60% of the annual precipitation" (Weather Online, 2014).

Dust Storm

In the southern part of Saudi Arabia is the world's largest contiguous sand desert called Rub' al Khali (Empty Quarter). Every year, Saudi Arabia experiences a sharp dust storm which will be another obstacle in addition to the heat. Dust causes a lot of problems for children who have asthma and are allergic to dust: "Dust allergies make it difficult to breathe and may trigger asthma symptoms, such as wheezing, coughing,

tightness in the chest and shortness of breath. Dust also just makes some people itchy” (American College of Allergy, Asthma & Immunology, 2014).

The Saudi Arabia Educational System and Outdoor Activities

Based on a review of the regions and climate in Saudi Arabia, we can understand why outdoor activities is not considered important in most Saudi Arabia kindergartens and schools. Generally, "during the day the air over the plateau is hot and dry but cools rapidly at night" (Lipsky, 1959, p. 20). Most of the schools do not have any outdoor activities in the summer and autumn. Even in the winter it is very cold so they keep the students inside the school. During my kindergarten teaching experience for five months, I noticed that if we decided to take children on a small field trip to a garden, or even a mall, the next day we would receive a lot of calls from the children’s families, asking us to take care of them, watch them carefully, and so on. It was so rare for children to participate in field trips that the families would panic and worry. Moreover, some families would let their children be absent from school on the day that we had planned a field trip or outdoor activities.

Possible Solutions for Outdoor Activities in Saudi Arabia

In this point, some possible and practical ideas and solutions will be mention for outdoor activities in Saudi Arabia. If the government and Ministry of Education adopts these ideas, there will be a definite increase in the amount of outdoor activities; however, these will not be effective unless the government makes outdoor activities part of the main curriculum in schools.

There are three major cities in Saudi Arabia. The first one is in the eastern province, Dammam, the second one is in the province of Nejd, the capital city of Riyadh,

and the third one is in the western province, and it is called Jeddah. The first way to promote outdoor activities in each of these cities is that the government should build various types of museums. For example, the government could build museums to learn about sea life. Schools, and even families, can take children to these museums and visit the world of the sea. Children would be excited to be there learning about the various types of sea creatures. They would be able to look at the sea creatures up close and experience science and the environment in a different way than from inside a classroom.

The government could build various kinds of museums such as museum of art, science, and history and so on. Museums could be a very effective way to help promote outdoor activities for children. Museum exhibits are informative and there could be areas in the museum where people could learn about concepts hands-on.

The second way to help promote field trips and outdoor activities is by building indoor gardens. These indoor gardens will be structured like greenhouses, but the contents will reflect the ecosystems found in jungles or forests. This will give a chance for children to not only learn more about the ecosystems, but it will help them connect with nature in a more direct way.

The third way to motivate educators to utilize outdoor activities is called a snow park. The first time I heard about this idea was in Dubai. It is a large indoor park which is covered in snow. The students would feel like they are in a world full of snow and they could build snowmen, throw snowballs, try ice skating and go skiing. There are a lot of fun activities in the snow park that children could enjoy. This park would be a good way for children to physically experience an environment completely opposite from their own.

The final idea to promote outdoor activities would be a water park. Children could

connect with water by swimming, going on water slides, splash pads, lazy rivers, and spray grounds. Not only would children be entertained, but they would improve their physical fitness at the same time.

Although I know that all of these activities would technically be indoors, and they need to be when considering the extreme climates in Saudi Arabia, this would still be a vast improvement to the present teaching environment in schools. Teachers could leave the confine of the classroom, expand their learning objectives and utilize creative methods when teaching different subjects. In addition, if these locations are monitored by the government, then this could also solve parents' concern over their children's security.

Sweden and Environmental Education

Many western research studies have been conducted which explore the development of outdoor learning in the education system in their countries. For example, Bentsen, Mygind, and Randrup did research about outdoor education in Denmark. Jeronen and Raustia completed research about the environmental education in Finland. Last, but not least, Breiting and Wickenberg did research on the development of environmental education in Sweden and Denmark. We will look at the study of the development of environmental education in Sweden conducted by Breiting and Wickenberg.

Breiting and Wickenberg conducted a study on the progressive development of environmental education in Sweden and Denmark, however, this point will only be focusing on environmental education in Sweden. The beginning of environmental education in Sweden began in the early twentieth century when the National School Plan of 1919 was mooted. "The Plan stressed the need for education in nature conservation

and animal protection, in accordance with the social needs of the overwhelmingly rural, agrarian society of that time, and can legitimately be seen as forerunner to modern environmental education in Sweden" (Breiting & Wickenberg, 2010, p. 12). Sweden faced a lot of environmental issues between the 1960's and the 1980's. The environment was positioned like a battlefield for opposing interests and concerns. Throughout this period of time in Sweden there was a lack of broad, active, and democratic participation. Yet, at the end of the 1980's, environmental education was being practiced by a non-governmental organization called the Swedish Nature and Conservation Association. From the end of the 1980's to the mid-1990's, Sweden continued to develop its environmental education and, in 1989, Sweden established the first ministry for the environment.

In 1988, Sweden had an Environment Election and, in 1990, Swedish schools had a new mission by starting to provide education about the environment in the classrooms. Also, in the beginning of the 1990's, "the SNF started what they called *Milijöskola* (Environmental School), which offered teachers and students materials and in-service training on nature and environment education" (Breiting & Wickenberg, 2010, p. 15). Moreover, Sweden started to support local schools and councils, "offering in-service training on environmental education, producing teacher training textbook on environment and nature" (Breiting & Wickenberg, 2010, p. 15).

In June 1992, at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro, "Sweden was one of the 178 countries that adopted the Agenda 21 action plan on sustainable development" (Breiting & Wickenberg, 2010, p. 14). In 1996, via Denmark, the European environmental education initiative Eco-Schools

was introduced in Sweden. In 1998, there were 350 preschools and schools with green flags in Sweden, and the meaning of the green flag is the establishment of an environmental council of student and staff representation. In the winter of 2000-2001, there was a survey conducted by Uppsala University and Örebro University which reported tentative findings on the shift from environmental education to ESD in Swedish schools. Since the turn of the century, there have been five combined research network meetings with seminars comprising Swedish, Danish, and English environmental education by each country. The first one took place in Ven in Sweden in June 2003 and the last one took place in Bath, England in 2008.

Sweden has had many issues with the environment since 1919, but slowly, over time, it has become one of the strongest countries in Europe in the development of natural education. The government took the steps to develop their schools and connect them to nature by placing value to the environment in the school curriculum and school activities. Moreover, visitors who are interested in children's play provision in Sweden, cannot fail to observe "the frequency with which the pretty little symbol of the '*Parkleken*' (play park) occurs within the recreational spaces, on housing estates and at street corners" (Holme & Massie, 1970, p. 48). At the time of the study, there were about "sixty-two full time supervised play parks and sixty-five during the summer only" (Holme & Massie, 1970, p. 48) which meant there were enough playgrounds to cater to all the children of Sweden.

It is my sincere hope that Saudi Arabia begin to recognize the value of learning from the environment in its school curriculums and school activities. We can start from ground zero as Sweden did and end up being one of the strongest supporters of

environmental education in the world. Saudi Arabia is a wealthy country and can afford to develop the necessary administrative tools, it is just a matter of convincing the government of the essential role outdoor activities play, not only towards the education of students, but for the betterment of all society in general.

Chapter Three

History of Outdoor Activities in Saudi Arabia

After completing chapter two, there was a question on my mind. How were children spending their time in Saudi Arabia thirty or fifty years ago? I remembered talking with my grandmother about my project and how the outdoor activities play an important role in children educational life. I told her that the life in Canada and its educational system inspired me to focus on this subject which is “Outdoor activities in Saudi Arabai”. I know through my conversation with my grandmother (85 years old) that she did not have time to play or enjoy her life, she did not go to school, or have the opportunity to study. She got married when she was thirteen years old and did “wifely” duties such as household chores and cooking. When I asked her what kind of outdoor activities she had in her generation. I was surprised to know that there was not a word called ‘play’ in her generation

I also recall talking with my father (55 years old) about how he spent his childhood. His story was also depressing. He was twelve years old when he started taking care of his family. His father was a ship captain and he visited the family once every three months. As a result, my father had to take responsibility for his family, including his grandfather and mother. Sometimes he played with his brother in the desert and they hunted some animals. His playtime was very limited because most of his time was spent taking care of his family.

I did not have any responsibilities when I was their age. I was a spoiled child, in comparison, but even in my situation I did not have the time to play outdoors. Outdoor activities did not exist in my grandmother and father’s generation, however, in my

generation, although there are outdoor activities, it is the lack of activities which is the problem. It was for this reason that I was talking with friends in Saudi Arabia about the issues surrounding the lack of outdoor activities in Saudi Arabia. In addition, I saw a connection with the purpose of this project, to explore the lack of outdoor activities and natural environments for young children in Saudi Arabia. For the purposes of this project I thought back my experiences and perspectives about outdoor activities.

Talking with friends in Saudi Arabia and with friends in Canada could impact the results of this small exploration project. My friends have heard of outdoor activities, were taught about outdoor activities, and had experienced outdoor activities. In this way they are educated and experienced in both Saudi Arabia as they have studied and lived in Canada for different lengths of time while completing academic degrees. Therefore, they already knew the differences in education and culture between Saudi Arabia and Canada. Further, they had children of different ages, from one year to six years of age so they not only talk of their own experiences at play, but also the experiences of their children. The variety of experiences which they have enrich this exploration project with valuable information.

Through my experiences in Canada and in Saudi Arabia I had many different perspectives and opinions of some Canadian friends and Saudi families toward outdoor activities. The information that I had before from different people in Canada and in Saudi Arabia were an interesting stage of this exploration project in terms of what they notice to be differences between Canada and Saudi Arabia.

I talked about the definition of “outdoor activities”, as I have come to understand it from course work and my inquiries. The information graphic of benefits (see Figure 1) of outdoor activities for children represents my understanding of the benefits of outdoor activities and how these outdoor activities provide more advantages to children’s health. Godbey “examines outdoor recreation as it relates to specific children’s health issues, including obesity and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, and how spending time outdoors can benefit children with these health challenges” (Godbey, 2009, p.21).

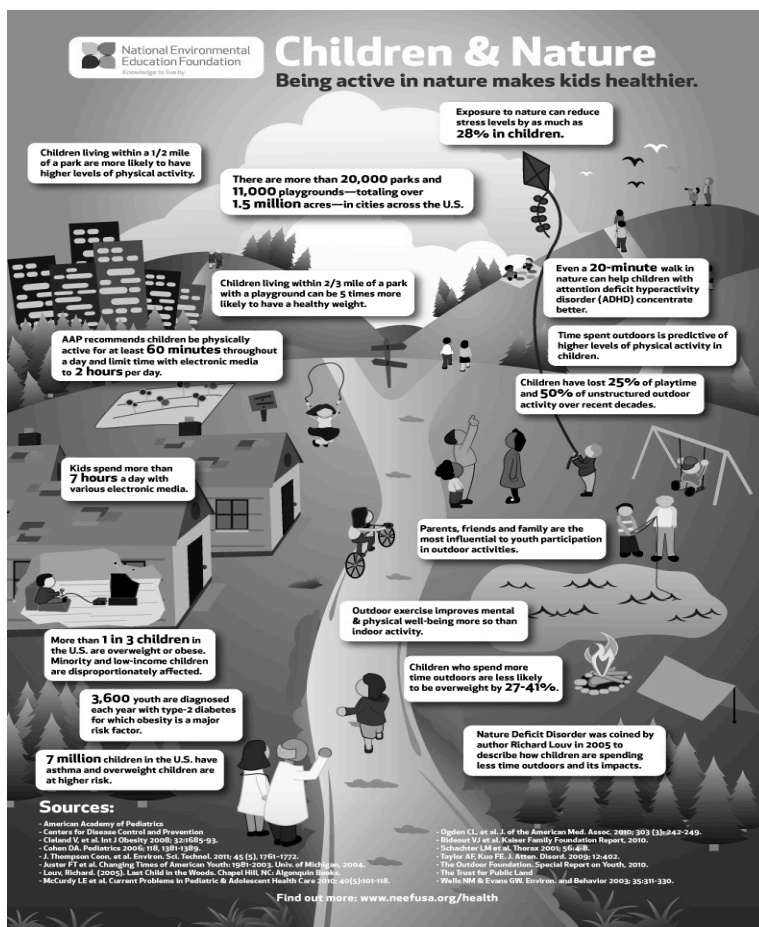


Figure 1 Children & Nature

Chapter Four

What I have learned

This chapter reports the outcomes of my inquiry, discusses some reasons as to why there is a lack of outdoor activities in Saudi Arabia, and proposes some solutions to this problem based on my learning and from my conversations with my friends. My interpretations attempt to underline the connections between my review the academic literature, my learning of around outdoor space in Canada, my conversations with friends and what I think the government can do in Saudi Arabia.

Five main challenges emerged from my investigation. The following factors account for the absence of instruction in outdoor activities in Saudi Arabia: understanding the term “outdoor activities”, different educational systems, extreme environmental and weather conditions, being unacquainted with the importance of outdoor activities, and significant changes which need to be made in the outlook of individuals and communities.

Perspectives of the Term “Outdoor Activities”

In talking with my friends in Saudi Arabia, some of them are not sure what outdoors play term mean exactly which an example of cultural differences. Before, when I was talking with my Canadian classmate about the term of outdoor activities they have different words to explain it but in the end they were on the right track. However, Saudi friends, when hearing the concept outdoor activities, think of any kind of sport that can be practiced in an open area. While other Saudi friends think that outdoor activities are those activities that are being practiced outside and not inside such as in parks, forests,

and woods. Most of Saudi people think that outdoor activities are those kinds of activities which help children to explore nature and connect with everything outside. Their understanding of the term aligned with my own and the focus of this project on the topic of outdoor activities.

Understanding the Lack of Outdoor Activities

The first step in solving this issue is to educate the government and the general public as to the meaning of the term “outdoor activities”. Some of my friends had commented that Saudi education had not introduced them to the concept of outdoor activities when they were students and that such concepts were not included within the educational system. Also, some schools in Saudi Arabia had outdoor activities, but these programs were very rare and poorly directed. Some people in Saudi Arabia did not have a perfect educational life in schools because of the shortage of educational materials and the ineffective teaching methods.

The two main reasons for the absence of outdoor activities in Saudi Arabia emerged. The first reason was related to the lack of quality educational systems and effective teaching methods in Saudi Arabia. The educational system in Saudi Arabia needs to be improved. The second reason was that traditional culture in Saudi Arabia was viewed as an obstacle; it means that some people are not open to new ideas and changes.

Recommendations that may help in solving the issue include: First, people in our society, including Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia, should be aware of the full meaning of the term ‘outdoor activities’. This is the first step in understanding and solving this issue. It has been also suggested that society plays a significant role in the problem: “Our culture is taking outdoor play away from young children through

excessive TV and computer use, unsafe neighbourhoods, busy and tired parents, educational accountability, elimination of school recess, and academic standards that push more and more developmentally inappropriate academics into our early childhood programs, thus taking time away from play” (Johnson, Christie and Wardle, 2005, p. 2).

The Educational System in Saudi Arabia

Despite the shortcomings of the educational system in supporting outdoor activities in schools, I, like my friends, acquired skills by independent means. We learned how to face challenges and solve problems. There were no outdoor activities in my generation educational life when I was a child. It was a boring daily routine in school. The only thing that I remember and that I enjoyed learning, was science. I still remember all the information in that subject because the teacher used to take us outside and explain the sun or clouds, which were related to the lesson of the day. Also, sometimes inside the class she brought us some fish and plants and gave us the opportunity to touch and feel them.

If the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia changes its teaching programs and tries to make outdoor activities a part of the curriculum, it may produce positive results. For instance, it will help the students acquire new information and retain it in their long term memory and will also motivate them to learn more. Unfortunately, one of my friends, similar to my experience, did not enjoy her school life. School was a boring daily routine. The interesting part of learning was being outdoors, participating in activities families encouraged. Families, and relatives, once in a while would go swimming at the sea, for picnics and to play some games. These outdoor adventures brought families together in a fun environment. For some of my friends, they did not have any outdoor

activities in school life and the only way they might experience it was through their family. Outdoor activities provide students and children various ways of learning and gaining information. Staempfli's research has found that, "The physical diversity of the natural landscape has a functional impact on children's behaviour and play performance because it increases the opportunities for creativity, learning, and development" and furthermore outdoor environments offer more of these opportunities because of their diversity" (Parsons, 2011, p.8).

The Environment and Weather in Saudi Arabia

The weather and environment in Saudi Arabia can be a serious obstacle for outdoor activities. Hot weather is one of the reasons why there is a lack of outdoor activities. Personally, I know how hot the weather in Saudi Arabia can be, so I think some families would prefer that their children stay inside the school instead of going out to play. The weather is not very pleasant and if they have to go outside in the summer and do some activities, the average temperature is approximately 45-50 degrees which is very hot and can be dangerous for children to play outside. However, if we examine this issue closely we will see that hot weather is not a serious problem. *The Department of Early Childhood and Education* in Massachusetts stated: "A heat index between 80°F and 90°F means that children should be closely observed while outdoors, and outdoor play time should be limited. When the heat is above 90°F, young children should not play outdoors, and older children should only play outdoors for very short periods of time" (Commonwealth of Massachusetts, 2011, p. 2). Children can wear lightweight cotton clothing when playing outdoors and drink a lot of cool beverages like water because it helps the body maintain a comfortable temperature. The essential issue of the lack of

outdoor activities is not the weather, it is that there are no available places for it, there are not a lot of gardens, woods, or play spaces in neighbourhoods.

In terms of how the Canadian educational system deals with the weather and environment, some Saudi friends who had experienced the life in Canada described it in a positive manner. In Canada, the focus is on the education process itself, even in winter children still had activities. It does not matter if it is raining, or windy, or even snowing, children know how to adapt to the weather and its variability. However, in Saudi Arabia, most schools and families do not like to see children playing in hot or cold weather. In Saudi Arabia, the students just sit at their desks and do not know anything about how to adapt to different weather. Also, in Canadian schools, they have what are called summer classes. Every summer children come to the University of Victoria and play with their teachers and friends on the campus and do a lot of activities and participate in various competitive games related with math, science, computer, and literature. In Saudi Arabia, the children just sit at the table and learn which can seem a boring education for children. Beach and Bertrand stated: “Children do not come to an early childhood setting merely to do their “learning”. Rather, they “live” in these settings for several hours each week” (Beach & Bertrand, 200, p. 9).

I can noticed that the educational system in Canada is very effective because its goals are to encourage more activities and provide a diverse way of learning, compared with the Saudi educational system. Although not all of the schools in Saudi Arabia are ineffective, we need to explore further why some Saudi schools are working well and others are not.

The Importance of Outdoor Activities

One of the factors that affects the implementation of outdoor activities in Saudi schools is the lack of awareness of its importance and its benefits for students and children in general. Awareness is an important effective solution. If teachers, principals, and families learn about how physical activities are beneficial to the children and youth, they may consider it. In the United States many parents spent their childhood riding bikes and playing outdoor games like baseball or football on side streets and in neighbors' backyards. Seaman notes in his research that, "Forty-four percent of moms and 24 percent of dads said they had parent-child outdoor playtime each day" (Seaman, 2012).

Unfortunately, many children today spend much of their time indoors, playing video games or watching television. Demers stated that, "Children spend less time outdoors and have less contact with nature, thus missing out on associated benefits and knowledge. Some describe this situation as a "nature deficit" (Demers, 2012, p. 8). The American Academy of Pediatrics says lots of "unstructured outdoor play is critical to the health of children, though many have experienced a marked decline in the time they spend in free play" (Magher, 2014). Outdoor activities play an important role in improving children's health. Outdoor activities help to bring up healthy youth from the inside and the outside and develop good physical health. "Children engaged and active outdoors are involved in greater physical activity as youth and later as adults" (Cottrell & Cottrell, 2010).

Outdoor activities will give the children and students an opportunity to run, climb, jump, swim, and more. Moreover, outdoor activity strengthens the immune system and also improves vitamin D levels in their bodies: "Children who experience school grounds

with diverse natural settings are more physically active, more aware of nutrition, more civil to one another and more creative (Bell and Dymont, 2006). Some friends in Saudi Arabia were unaware of the benefits of outdoor activities before they came to Canada, but now they understand that outdoor activities give chances for children to see the life that surrounds them in a different way, discover things and examine it closely. This way will help them to love to learn because the educational process will be mixed with learning and enjoyment at the same time.

Families and schools should be aware that outdoor activities increase students' and children's ability to think creatively and improve problem-solving skills. Outdoor activities are good for children's development. Exposure to nature promotes intellectual curiosity, attention to detail, problem-solving skills. Sports also promote, physical strength, teamwork, confidence and facing challenges and it is fun.

Through experiences in Canada, some friends of mine who were unaware of the benefits of outdoor activities, now understand the importance. Outdoor activities in schools in Canada have helped children of my friends to build a confident and stable personality. Children became a social and interactive which would have been very difficult to develop these skills if they only learn at home. Playing outside offers great opportunities for children to develop social relationships by interacting with their friends. It is these opportunities to expand experiences and learning which people need to be aware of. Sharing information on the importance of outdoor activities would be a significant step in helping the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia incorporate outdoor play into the curriculum.

Personal and Societal Changes

From what I know from my friends and my learning, the role of outdoor activities is vital in schools. In order to make this change happen, it is important to change people's way of thinking toward outdoor activities and help them consider it as important and beneficial for their children, and for themselves as well. Second, it is important to reform the educational system and try and make outdoor activities part of the core program in schools.

In order to make personal changes, teachers should educate themselves more about outdoor activities and its benefits. They should read the books and articles which talk about it in specific details and focus on the importance of becoming self-educated, respecting new ideas and being more accepting of changes in society. It is important to not only try to educate families, but also educate teachers in order to guide the education system for the better and make the people rethink the topic of outdoor activities as part of a main program in schools and as enjoyable activities in houses.

If outdoor activities were approved from the Ministry of Education as a main program in schools, the students' skills will improve; as a result the society will improve. In my opinion, education is the direct way to build society and outdoor activities should be one of the main components of the educational system. My friend told me before that she feel more freedom when she is outdoors playing with her child in the park. This is exactly as Watts observed: "Being outdoors will enable children and adults to have more freedom" (Watts, 2008, p. 8). Personal education and improvements made to the educational system will lead society to change for the better.

Outdoor activities will impact on developing every aspect of students' educational life, and a way to provide awareness to families and teachers is to hold lectures attended by parents and teachers to show why outdoor activities are important. Also, give examples of successful stories from foreign countries can convince them to accept it.

Society needs to be aware that incorporating outdoor activities in schools can help students develop a variety of skills and capabilities. In addition, they will learn how to deal with problems, make decisions, and learn from others.

A suggestion to help improve outdoor activities in Saudi Arabia is to build facilities in schools that enable educators to incorporate any outdoor activities or experiences. Moreover, provide teachers with the suitable materials which help them prepare for outdoor activities. This can help society in general to become aware that outdoor activities can be an effective educational method to develop problem-solving skills, physical strength, and health. Even though Saudi Arabia is a rich country, it is still not considered a developed country and we should work on that. Countries can develop and solve different educational issues by providing the new generations with advanced and sophisticated educational teaching methods and programs. I suggested that we need to apply what we learned in Canada within our society without waiting for changes to come from the government, but in order to achieve the goal, we need to understand that the process will take years, perhaps even generations.

Canada and Saudi Arabia

It is a common understanding in Saudi Arabia that children became more open-minded, more confident in making decisions and speaking up, and more independent in the Canadian educational system. I know one of my friend had her son in schools in

Canada, she felt that her son was far behind the Canadian students because they were missing a lot of the basic skills that they should have already learned in Saudi Arabia.

When in Canada, children had various outdoor activities in school and sometimes with the Saudi Club, which can be a little bit frustrating with the differences between the educational system in Canada and in Saudi. The way to approve outdoor activities in schools in Saudi Arabia is a long process because first we have to solve the problem of the shortage of technology in schools and then we will discuss the topic of the lack of outdoor activities. I know another friend who lived six years in Canada, through the course of those years, she saw the huge gap between the Saudi Arabian and Canadian education systems. Most schools in Canada had access to technology and very advanced materials to help in the educational process. The Council of Ministers Education in Canada stated that, "In 2006, virtually all schools in Canada had computers, providing one computer for five students. Ninety-eight per cent of schools had an Internet connection" (CMEC, 2008, p. 9). Changes in the Saudi educational system will take years, if not decades, but it is a matter of time, we should not feel frustrated or ashamed. A lot of countries were devastated because of the events of World War II but, after the war, they rebuilt their society and educational systems. Now, they are some of the most development, sophisticated, and strongest countries in the world. We have to try and do our best and then we will see our success. These were optimistic words, no matter what happens, we will try to improve the educational system in Saudi Arabia for the better and outdoor activities will eventually be part of the main curriculum in every school.

Impact of the Lack of Outdoor Activities in Saudi Arabia

There are consequences for the lack of outdoor activities in schools. Some of these include:

1. Children will miss the opportunity to see, feel, and learn from nature. Also, they will miss the opportunity to skip, run, climb a tree, and go cycling.
2. Outdoor activities encourage the development of self-confidence, self-awareness, and self-care. Without having outdoor activities they may not acquire these benefits. Children may appear less confident, move less and need more adult support and that is not what we want to see happen to our children.
3. Children will be less healthy, such as have a lack in Vitamin D and physical exercise.
4. Children miss the opportunity to spend time in nature and learn about its facts and the importance of preserving it if there is a lack of outdoor activities. Children may be less social, less communicative, and less connected with their teachers and peers.

These are some of the possible effects caused by the shortage of outdoor activities in schools. Children will miss the chance to, “Explore their environment, develop muscle strength and coordination, and gain self-confidence” (Alfano, 2014). In addition, the lack of playing actively outdoors will decrease flexibility, and not enhance fine and gross motor skills. They will miss the opportunity to have physical exercise and to be out in the fresh air and sunshine. Most importantly, children will miss the fun.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Throughout this project, I researched many articles and books that illustrate the importance of children having outdoor activities. Furthermore, I thought about significant issues my friends have commented on in the past, such as how the schools must support open-air activities; how the schools play an important role in supporting these kinds of activities; and how the schools have the power to achieve this goal if the Ministry of Education incorporates it in its educational programs. I also discussed the lack of outdoor activities in schools in Saudi Arabia.

Throughout my inquiry, I have found many challenges which face the Saudi Arabia Ministry of Education in supporting outdoor activities in schools such as an incomprehension of the term “outdoor activities”, an informal and ineffective educational system, and extreme environmental and weather conditions. If the Education Ministry in Saudi Arabia requires outdoor activities to be a part of the main program in schools, then this will help immensely. Outdoor activities should be a required component in all schools and the Ministry of Education should provide the schools in all districts with a professional development group to help implement the program. Moreover, the Ministry of Education should not let the challenges of the traditional culture, or weather obstacles be a reason to prevent the program from being implemented. There should be accessible and practical programs which create a curriculum that meets the needs of both teachers and students.

Sending nice brochures or booklets for parents that introduce the benefits of outdoor activities (see Figure 1) will be helpful. However, teachers and parents must

work together to create a positive educational environment for children. This relationship should provide an open line of communication and resources to help support those who want to have outdoor activities in the educational program. An open line of communication between parents and teachers will help develop a very positive and supportive learning environment for children.

Recommendations for Further Study

I believe that future research in Saudi Arabia should support having outdoor activities in schools. Future research could examine the types of outdoor activities which would best fit with Saudi Arabian culture, weather, and education systems. I understand that it may be difficult at first, and it may take years, but it is worth it. Furthermore, it would be very interesting to observe how these open air activities affect future educators and families' views on the paramount role that outdoor activities play in educating students.

This project has focused on my learning through the Masters course, my experiences in Canada and Saudi Arabia, and what I experienced in sharing my learning with others. A well designed, detailed, and profound study with a sufficiently large population size could contribute, discover, and explore this issue in much greater detail. Further studies on improving outdoor activities in schools could include educational authorities, principals, and teachers. Moreover, it is important to discover in greater detail how successful the curriculum could be by adding outdoor activities as a part of the main program. Educational processes in Saudi Arabia are already being reformed since the

new Minister of Education, Mr. Azzam, took the position in January, 2015. Hopefully, we will see positive changes in the education system in Saudi Arabia in the near future. As the Chinese philosopher Lao-Tzu said, “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step” (Smith, 2005, p.1).

This project has shown why I believe there is a lack of outdoor activities in some schools in Saudi Arabia. This project discussed the causes of the lack of outdoor activities and the importance of having outdoor activities in schools and in their children’s lives. I learned that there are significant gaps in support for outdoor activities in Saudi Arabia that need to be addressed in order for future students to become successful and effective in their society. The Ministry of Education, teachers, and parents should be educated about the importance of having outdoor activities in the students’ life and take the necessary steps to support these activities. I hope that future research continues to explore the educational, political and cultural complexities which account for the lack of outdoor activities in the Saudi Arabia education system.

Overall, improving education is possible with these three components: hope, unity, and action. Transformational change in the educational process in Saudi Arabia is conceivable. It will require concerted effort, time, commitment and patience. Above all, it requires powerful determination, sincere faith, and the belief that changes are possible, including transformational change in the educational process.

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