

ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

## OUTDOOR EDUCATION AND OUTDOOR LIFE EXPERIENCE OF STUDENTS OF THE LATVIAN ACADEMY OF SPORT EDUCATION (LASE)

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### Abstract

*Outdoor life – outdoor activities, outdoor education and gaining experience are becoming more and more significant in different education programs and for different target groups. What is outdoor life, outdoor life experience? In the world scientifically-methodological literature the notions “outdoor life and education” are defined as, for example, outdoor environment education, out-of-door education, education of outdoor life experience, outdoor classes.*

*The aim of the research is to investigate theoretical aspects of outdoor education – outdoor education tendencies in Latvia and to define what outdoor education is, as well as to analyze outdoor life experience, based on students’ studying at the Latvian Academy of Sport Education outdoor life experience during the summer camp process.*

*Taking the investigation of the literature sources and outdoor life education tendencies in Latvia as the basis, the theses defining outdoor education are given. It was also concluded in the research that the summer outdoor camp has increased students’ outdoor life experience of living in outdoor environment, adapting to nature and environmental conditions, communication, attitude and understanding about the protection of environment and nature, gaining also emotional satisfaction.*

**Key words:** *outdoor education, outdoor life experience, tourism and orienteering studies.*

### Introduction

Outdoor life – outdoor activities, outdoor education and gaining experience are becoming more and more significant in different education programs and for different target groups. Different outdoor life training

centers and organizations, for example, scout and guide organizations, children and youth interest education centers, children camps, and others work actively in Latvia, and their action directions are environment education, the studies of outdoor life skills and experience. The students of the Latvian Academy of Sport Education (LASE) are also acquiring outdoor life skills and experience in the summer outdoor camp and in the framework of the orienteering study program.

The aim of the research was to investigate theoretical aspects of outdoor education and to analyze outdoor life experience. The research tasks were as follows:

1. To investigate outdoor education tendencies in Latvia and define what outdoor education is.
2. To state students' outdoor life experience during the process of the summer camp.

Such research methods as the analysis of the literature sources and inquiry (questionnaire) were applied in the research.

The classes of tourism and orienteering study courses at LASE mostly involve student practical activity when students learn the best by practicing skills. One of the organizational forms of the classes where the necessary life skills are effectively learnt is the summer tent camp. During this camp students not only acquire knowledge and skills of tourism and orienteering, and take tests, but also learn outdoor life skills and abilities, that is, gain outdoor life experience.

What is outdoor life and outdoor life experience? In the world scientifically-methodological literature the notions "outdoor life and education" are defined as, for example, outdoor environment education, out-of-door education, education of outdoor life experience, outdoor classes.

In our opinion the most precise definition which combines and integrates all these categories is *outdoor education*. Outdoor education is linked with environmental education, with ecological education, with health improvement, with learning of outdoor life skills, with rest and adventure. Outdoor education, especially in recent years, is associated with the therapy of problem children and youth. Different authors consider the notions "environmental education", "outdoor education" and "outdoor experience education" as synonyms (Ford, 1986; Liedtke, Lagerstr-m, 2004).

In outdoor education most of authors, not rejecting the importance of formal education, emphasize more informal teaching, the teaching based on experience. In experience education informal education approach which is more dynamic, active and allows supplement the acquired knowledge and skills is prevailing (Kravale, 2006).

Learning based on outdoor life experience, that is learning by doing, facilitates not only application of definite knowledge in outdoor life conditions, but also develops problem solving skills, cooperation skills and the development of positive attitude towards each other, and, of course, one of the most essential real life skills – environment skill (Adkins, Simmons, 2002; Henderson, 2004; Higgins, Nicol, 2002; Liedtke, Lagerstr-m, 2004; Resnis, 2007; Turcova, Bartunek, Martin, 2007; Turcova, Neuman & Martin, 2004).

Simon Priest from the United Kingdom defines outdoor education as an experience based learning process following the principle “learning by doing” which mostly takes place being out of rooms. In outdoor education when learning a theme relationship between people and nature resources is emphasized (Priest, 1986).

Learning based on experience focuses on an individual’s experience in common learning process when every participant acquires the necessary essential cognitions to be applied later in life, and every participant can express and self-realize grounding on previously learnt knowledge.

Outdoor skills form an essential part of a many-sided personality, as they give the greatest experience and challenge, the most proper understanding about oneself and others, and what happens around. Outdoor occurrences – bruises, mosquito bites, rain – these are only some examples, which seem insignificant, but they have some importance in different situations.

Health specialists are worried and they warn us that our children will not live longer than their parents, as nowadays there are serious health problems. However, today farseeing and thinking education specialists have not put aside the questions linked with outdoor education and learning, and lead new generation back to ancestors’ life customs and traditions.

J. Neill has classified outdoor education definitions and divided them into two groups: the first – psychosocial definitions linked with a personality and social development; the second – definitions linked with environment, environment protection and ecology (Neill, 2008). The definitions of outdoor education are various, and A. Brookes points out that they should be developed both in time and space (Brookes, 2004).

Education specialists of different other fields – biology, ecology, medicine, sociology, pedagogy, psychology, also geography, sport and tourism, a.o., are linked with outdoor education, so it is interdisciplinary field education.

Having analyzed research literature and the tendencies of outdoor education in Latvia, it can be said that:

- outdoor education is a teaching and education process involving a set of activities corresponding to the education degree and target groups to acquire outdoor knowledge and skills (environment skills, outdoor basic skills, development of an individual and a group);

- the result of outdoor education is such a personality which in the situation of choice could critically analyze the situation and make adequate decisions facilitating staying of an individual and a group in outdoor conditions, create estimating attitude towards environment, teaching to live and do together with others;

- outdoor education in its broadest meaning cannot be imagined without learning based on experience and actually it is lifelong education where informal education plays the greatest role.

Why is life experience needed?

Firstly, because the most part of inhabitants in Latvia live in cities (69% – in cities, 31% – in the country), but at the same time many people strive to leave a city environment and gladly relax near nature, however it requires some skills and preparedness.

Secondly, outdoor life and staying in it give an individual values, understanding about the interrelation of the nature and people.

Thirdly, outdoor life experience gives an individual cognitions and findings about oneself (what I can do) in individual activities and participating in a group and team work.

Fourthly, when overcoming different hardships (the weather conditions, mosquito bites, bruises, overcoming obstacles, getting lost and various difficult tasks) an individual is forced to motivate him/herself more for action and getting solutions in overcoming hardships, at the same time getting moral, physical and emotional satisfaction, and confidence.

Fifthly, when acquiring experience directed towards outdoor knowledge, skills and abilities, every individual gains many valuable and essential cognitions, and he/she can interpret and use them in one's life more effectively than general applicable knowledge.

The summer camp program implemented at the Latvian Academy of Sport Education includes the development of essential knowledge and skills in real outdoor conditions with a definite aim to be able to apply the acquired knowledge and skills in one's further professional activity. It is important for future pedagogues. This process is linked with students' physical, emotional and mental experience, as:

1. It involves unusual physical load (hike for six hours, tourism rally race for four hours, moving in definite area and execution of various tourism technical elements, orienteering, tourism obstacle competition) where it is

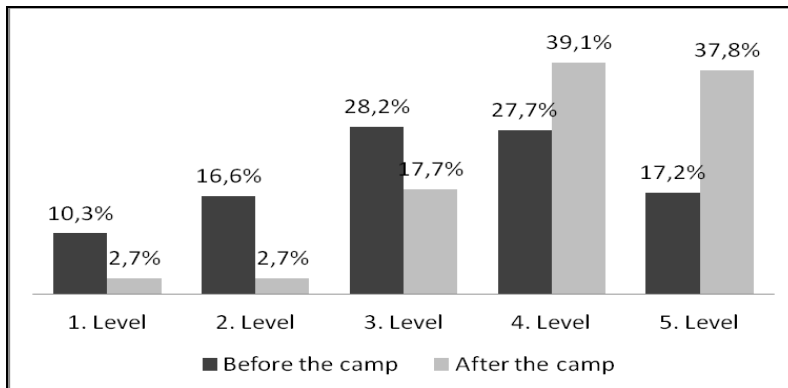
necessary to express both an individual and team's knowledge and skill resources;

2. The process itself is very emotional involving uncertainty, excitement, even fear from individual up to the whole group and team participants' emotional feelings;

3. It involves staying (for five days) in outdoor conditions, and therefore it is significant for everyone's mental growth, as it helps a student be aware of the coexistence of environment, man and whole society, as well as it helps to cope with various more or less difficult changes associated with staying in nature.

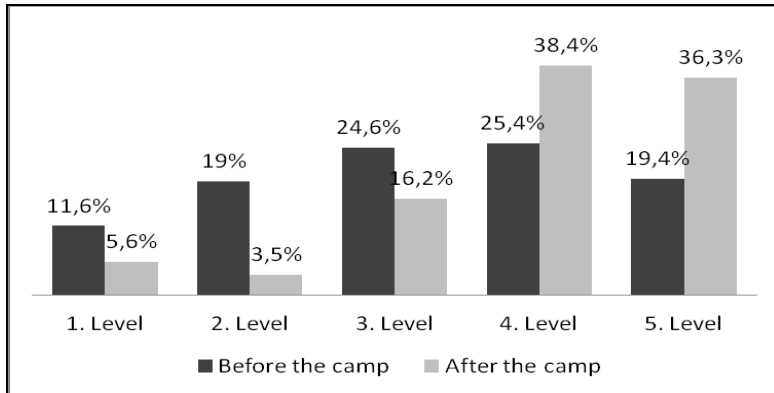
An inquiry was carried out during the summer camp of the academic year 2010/2011. 71 students (40 male, 31 female) took part in the inquiry. The inquiry included 15 questions which according to outdoor experience acquiring were divided into four groups (parameters): group 1 – *Life in outdoor environment* (choosing the equipment and food, making a fire, cooking a warm meal); group 2 – *Adaptation to nature and environment conditions* (overcoming natural obstacles, the weather conditions, mosquitos, orienteering in a definite area, observing of individual hygiene); group 3 – *Interaction, communication and leadership* (the ability to survive and share with others, to undertake initiative, the ability to cooperate in a group or team); group 4 – *Understanding about the nature protection* (interrelation of a man and nature, understanding outdoor life in general).

The results of the inquiry before the camp showed that the least participants' outdoor experience was in the parameter *Life in outdoor environment* (according to the levels correspondingly 10.3%, 16.6%, 28.2%, 27.7%, 17.2%) (Fig. 1).



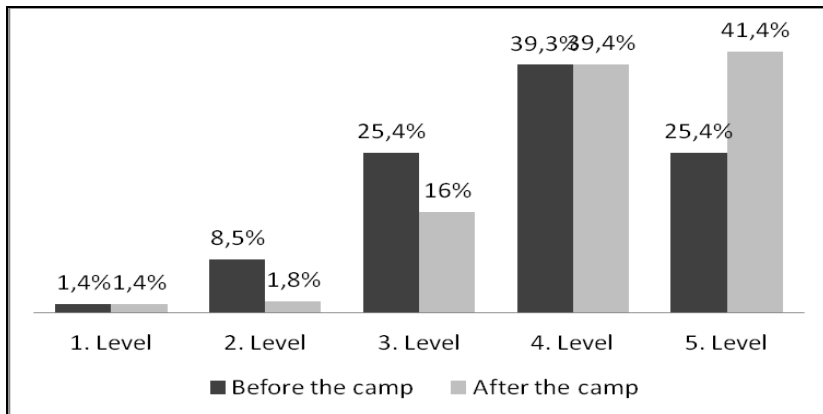
**Figure 1.** Life in outdoor environment (choosing individual and group equipment, choosing food, making a fire, cooking a warm meal)

In *Adaptation to nature and environment conditions* (according to the levels 11.6%, 19.0%, 24.6%, 25.4%, 19.4%) (Fig. 2).



**Figure 2.** Adaptation to nature and environment conditions (overcoming natural obstacles, the weather and nature conditions, orienteering in a definite area, observing of individual hygiene)

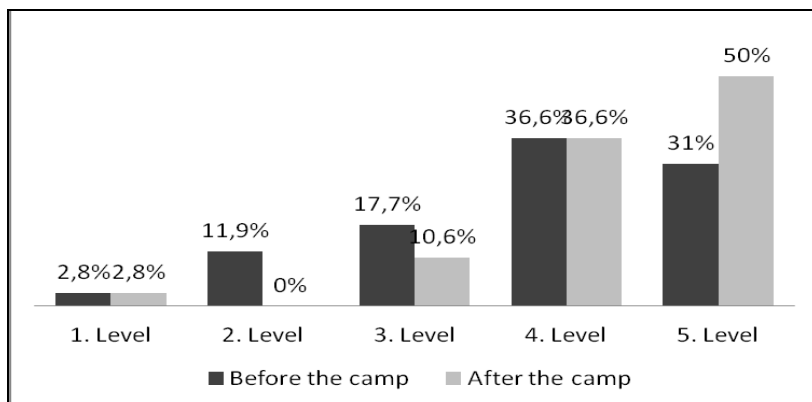
In comparison with the parameter *Interaction, communication and leadership* (according to the levels correspondingly 1.4%, 8.5%, 25.4%, 39.3%, 25.4%) (Fig. 3).



**Figure 3.** Interaction, communication and leadership (the ability to survive and share with others, to undertake initiative, the ability to cooperate in a group or team)

The parameter *Understanding about the nature protection* (according to the levels correspondingly 2.8%, 11.9%, 17.7%, 36.6%, 31.0%) where

the participants assessed this experience (in per cent) less on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> level, but higher on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> level (Fig. 4).



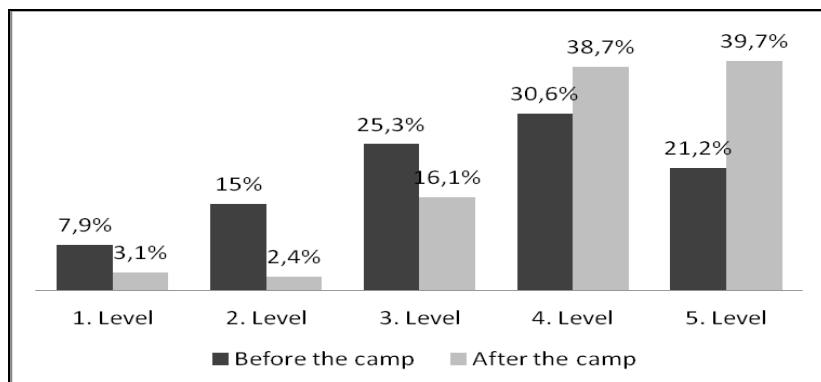
**Figure 4.** Understanding about the nature protection (interrelation of a man and nature, understanding outdoor life in general)

It is understandable, as the outdoor life skills and knowledge and adaptation to natural and environmental conditions mostly form and develop in practical activity, in real outdoor conditions, and only small number of students before the summer camp has the experience of sleeping outdoors, making a fire, cooking food on the fire, that is to live outdoor life. The interaction and communication skills are necessary for students not only in outdoor life, but also in other everyday activities (in a study group, training team, social life). Students have already acquired understanding and attitude about the nature protection while learning at general education schools and in general study courses at the Academy.

After the camp the indicators improved almost in all parameters and a greater number of students gave their assessment on higher levels, accordingly on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> (Fig. 1, 2, 3, 4): *Life in outdoor environment*, correspondingly 2.7 %, 2.7%, 17.7%, 39.1 %, 37.8%; *Adaptation to nature and environment conditions*, correspondingly 5.6 %, 3.5%, 16.2%, 38.4 %, 36.3%; *Interaction, communication and leadership*, correspondingly 1.4 %, 1.8%, 16.0%, 39.4 %, 41.4% and *Understanding about the nature protection*, correspondingly 2.8 %, 0%, 10.6%, 36.6 %, 50.0%. The participants have given comparatively similar assessment on the levels and in parameters.

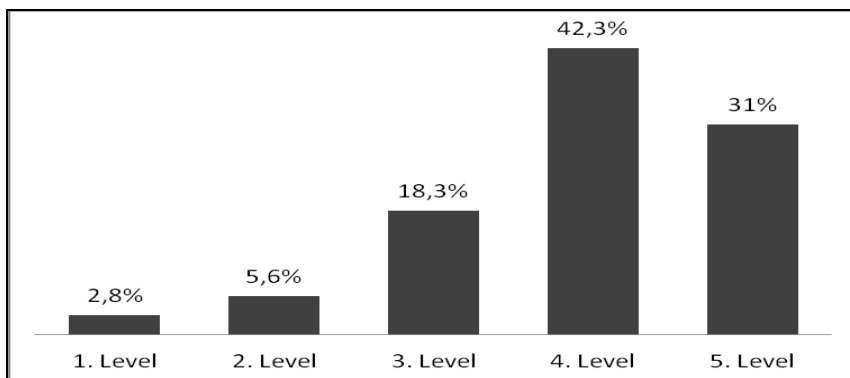
The participants' assessment about outdoor experience in general according to all parameters (Fig. 5) testifies that the summer camp process has succeeded students' acquiring of outdoor experience.

After the camp the indicators improved almost in all parameters and higher assessment was on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> level.



**Figure 5.** LASE students' outdoor experience before and after the camp

Before the camp 7.9 % of the participants have assessed their outdoor experience (Fig. 1) as corresponding to the 1<sup>st</sup> level, but after the camp the percentage was 3.1%; correspondingly 15.0 % and 2.4% of the participants have assessed their outdoor experience as suitable to the 1<sup>st</sup> level, 16.1% and 25.3% – to the 3<sup>rd</sup> level, 30.6% and 38.7% – to the 4<sup>th</sup> level and 21.2% and 39.7 % – to the 5<sup>th</sup> level.



**Figure 6.** LASE students' assessment of emotional and mental renewal

The participants of the inquiry assessed also emotional and mental renewal after the camp (Fig. 6): level 1 – 2.8%, level 2 – 5.6%, level 3 – 18.3%, level 4 – 42.3% and level 5 – 31.0%.



## Conclusions

Grounding on the investigation of the literature sources and outdoor education tendencies in Latvia the theses defining outdoor education are given.

The summer outdoor camp has increased students' outdoor experience of living in outdoor environment, adaptation to natural and environmental conditions, communication, attitude and understanding about the environment and nature protection, at the same time gaining emotional satisfaction.

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