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## **Outdoor education in the post-pandemic era – experience and needs of animators-practitioners in working with children and young persons on the example of Polish NGOs**

***Outdoor education w dobie popandemicznej – doświadczenia i potrzeby animatorów-praktyków w pracy z dziećmi i młodzieżą na przykładzie polskich organizacji pozarządowych***

### **Abstract**

**Introduction.** The starting point for the considerations undertaken in the article were the experiences of children and young persons in Poland related to the post-pandemic reality, such as social isolation, reduced engagement in social activities, and less time spent outdoors. In this context, outdoor education seems to be a valuable phenomenon, as confirmed by the growing interest of educators, animators, and teachers. In the first part of the paper, the author presents a definition framework for terms related to outdoor education that are important for further consideration, placing them in the context of counteracting the effects of a pandemic.

**Aim.** The aim of the article is to present the results of the author's own research on the recognition of experiences, opportunities, and needs in the implementation of outdoor education in non-governmental organizations from the perspective of animators-practitioners. The main research problem was as follows: What are the possibilities and needs in the implementation of outdoor education from the perspective of the examined animators?

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**Methods.** The research was qualitative in nature, and interpretative theories constituted the research paradigm (Denzin, Lincoln, 2005). The research method consisted of semi-structured qualitative research interviews conducted based on a prepared interview guide. The research group consisted of five animators (two men and three women) working for medium-sized non-governmental organizations in Poland. The respondents were chosen carefully, considering the particulars of the workplace and previous experiences with outdoor learning. The analysis was formal and qualitative.

**Results.** The results of the research showed the in-depth and complex experiences of animators-practitioners in the field of outdoor education. The study also revealed animators' needs and possibilities regarding the implementation of this education when working with children and young persons in a non-formal environment. The outdoor education model emerging from the research showed a rich experience supported by reflection on the specificity of the activities carried out, especially in the context of working in nature, the importance of individual experiences, creating situations that enable building independence and experiencing risk, and building interpersonal relationships in a group.

The article was written as part of a research project coordinated by the Association of Critical Education [*Stowarzyszenie Edukacji Krytycznej*] in Poland as part of the "Fundusz Pomocowy dla Organizacji Pozarządowych oraz Inicjatyw Obywatelskich 2022-2023" Program. It was financed by the Polish-American Freedom Foundation and implemented by the Education for Democracy Foundation.

**Keywords:** outdoor education, child, childhood, animator, experience pedagogy, adventure education, outdoor play, pandemic.

### Abstrakt

**Wprowadzenie.** Punktem wyjścia dla rozważań podjętych w artykule stały się doświadczenia dzieci i młodzieży w Polsce związane z popandemiczną rzeczywistością, takie jak osłabienie więzi społecznych czy zmniejszenie czasu spędzanego na świeżym powietrzu. W tym kontekście – wartościowe poznawczo zjawisko – stanowi edukacja outdoorowa, o czym świadczy także rosnące nią zainteresowanie wśród edukatorów, animatorów i nauczycieli. W pierwszej części opracowania autorka prezentuje ramy definicyjne pojęć związanych z *outdoor education*, istotnych dla dalszych rozważań, umiejscawiając je w kontekście przeciwdziałania skutkom pandemii.

**Cel.** Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie wyników badań własnych dotyczących rozpoznania doświadczeń, możliwości i potrzeb w zakresie implementacji edukacji outdoorowej w środowiskach organizacji pozarządowych z perspektywy animatorów-praktyków. Główny problem badawczy był następujący: Jakie są możliwości i potrzeby w zakresie implementacji edukacji outdoorowej z perspektywy badanych animatorów?

**Materiały i metody.** Badanie miało charakter jakościowy, a paradygmat badań stanowiły teorie interpretatywne (Denzin, Lincoln, 2005). Metodą badawczą były częściowo ustrukturalizowane jakościowe wywiady badawcze, przeprowadzone w oparciu o przygotowany przewodnik do wywiadu. Grupę osób badanych stanowiło pięciu animatorów (dwóch mężczyzn i trzy kobiety), pracujących w organizacjach pozarządowych o średniej wielkości w Polsce. Dobór osób badanych był celowy i uwzględniał specyfikę środowiska pracy oraz poprzednie doświadczenie w zakresie edukacji outdoorowej. Analiza miała charakter formalny i jakościowy.

**Wyniki.** Wyniki badań ukazały pogłębione i złożone doświadczenia animatorów-praktyków w zakresie edukacji outdoorowej oraz ich potrzeby i możliwości w nawiązaniu do implementacji tej edukacji w pracy z dziećmi i młodzieżą w środowisku pozaformalnym.

Model *outdoor education*, wylaniający się z wypowiedzi osób badanych, ukazał bogate doświadczenie poparte refleksją nad specyfiką prowadzonych działań, szczególnie w kontekście: pracy w naturze, znaczenia indywidualnych przeżyć, stwarzania sytuacji umożliwiających budowanie samodzielności i doświadczania ryzyka oraz budowania relacji interpersonalnych w grupie.

Artykuł powstał jako część projektu badawczego, koordynowanego przez Stowarzyszenie Edukacji Krytycznej w ramach “Programu Funduszu Pomocowego dla Organizacji Pozarządowych oraz Inicjatyw Obywatelskich 2022-2023”, finansowanego przez Polsko-Amerykańską Fundację Wolności, a realizowanego przez Fundację Edukacja dla Demokracji.

**Słowa kluczowe:** edukacja outdoorowa, dziecko, dzieciństwo, animator, pedagogika przeżyć, pedagogika przygody, zabawa na zewnątrz, pandemia.

## Introduction

Recently, various social circles – parents, educators, social leaders, animators, and scientists – have increasingly clearly and urgently drawn attention to the need for children to have contact with nature – to stay and play outdoors (Gill, 2015; Janik, 2015; Louv, 2010; Moore, 2014; Parsons, 2011; Wilson, 2012). At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Roger Hart (1997) identified the relationship between man and nature as one of the most important issues at the beginning of the new century. From a pedagogical perspective, this approach has its roots in the views of Jean-Jacques Rousseau or Friedrich Fröbel. In the past, children, by spending time outside and playing with their peers, satisfied the need for free play and contact with nature. Today, especially in the post-pandemic era, they rarely have the opportunity to explore their natural surroundings and thus establish a more profound relationship with nature.

As a consequence of the highly dynamic alteration in social relations resulting from the COVID-19 virus pandemic, children and adolescents have been presented with limited opportunities to develop their social, emotional, and communication skills in recent times. Additionally, their physical development opportunities have been severely constrained. In this situation, educators, animators, and teachers are becoming even more interested in outdoor education. This article aims to present the results of the author’s research on the recognition of experiences, opportunities, and needs in the field of implementation of this type of education in non-governmental organizations. The perspective of animators-practitioners has been employed, and there has been no such investigation conducted in Poland to date.

The article was written as part of a research project coordinated by the Association for Critical Education in Poland [*Stowarzyszenie Edukacji Krytycznej*], under the “Fundusz Pomocowy dla Organizacji Pozarządowych oraz Inicjatyw Obywatelskich 2022-2023” Program, financed by the Polish-American Freedom Foundation

and implemented by the Education for Democracy Foundation<sup>1</sup>. The project aimed to respond to the effects of the pandemic crisis and build the resilience of children and young people through outdoor education. The result of the project was the development of educational materials<sup>2</sup> showing the methods for implementing this education, as well as the conceptual and methodological development of good practices provided by the Association of Critical Education. Part of the project was to create a space for reflection on the theory and practice of education by conducting research into the implementation of outdoor education in working with children and young persons in the environment of non-governmental organizations (from the perspective of animators). The research was initiated on the assumption that, despite its appealing and efficient nature, outdoor instruction is still underutilized, particularly by educators (Jagodzińska, Strumińska-Doktor, 2019; Michalak, Parczewska, 2019, 2022). The development and dissemination of easy-to-use materials in the field of outdoor education and showing the experiences, possibilities, and needs of people who implement such solutions daily in their work with children and youths can serve as an inspiration for teachers who are still looking for effective educational solutions that enable children to develop in and with nature.

### **Promoting outdoor education and reducing the negative effects of the pandemic**

Nowadays, many authors consider the subject of nature to be a desirable educational environment. These trends are particularly evident in the Western world, such as in Great Britain, Scandinavia, and America, where organizations advocating the necessity and essence of play and learning in natural surroundings have been flourishing for over a decade. One of the trends in this area is outdoor education. This form of edu-

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<sup>1</sup> The aim of the Program was, among others, “supporting civic initiatives undertaken by non-governmental organizations to mitigate or counteract the effects of the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in the field of education and social development of children and adolescents from small towns, as well as from environments at risk of exclusion” (*Regulamin Zamkniętego Konkursu Grantowego Federacji dla Demokracji 2021-2023* [Regulations of the Closed Competition Grant Fund of the Federation for Democracy]).

<sup>2</sup> As part of the project, a package of educational materials was created to disseminate the good practices of the Association of Critical Education in the field of outdoor education and peer tutoring. An educational box was developed that comprises cards containing straightforward tasks that can be utilized in diverse outdoor environments, lesson plans that are tailored to the requirements of diverse age groups, and a podcast and a video that showcase the fundamental principles of outdoor education. The authors of the outdoor education materials were Agnieszka Janik and Joanna Wyrwa. The materials were prepared in cooperation with Kamila Kamińska.

cation is frequently equated with engaging in outdoor activities beyond the confines of the educational institution, which directly results from the implication of the term “outdoor”. This understanding should be considered superficial and simplistic. Outdoor education is a broad term that includes activities like expeditions, hiking, camping, and outdoor activities with elements of climbing, kayaking, or other outdoor activities (Bąk, Leśny, & Palamer-Kabacińska, 2014; Dudek, Kida, 2016; Gilbertson, Bates, McLaughlin, & Ewert, 2006; Leśny, 2022; Leśny, Palamer-Kabacińska, 2012). As Agnieszka Leśny, one of the leading popularisers of outdoor education in Poland, pointed out, this concept appeared in specialist literature in the 1940s, and various forms of education of this type have been known in the country since the 1960s. (Leśny, 2022). Outdoor education can be viewed as a convergence of various approaches that share a similar meaning, including adventure education (Michl, 2011; Miles, Priest, 1990; Ryszka, 2016), experiential education (Allison, Seaman, 2017; Dewey, 1938; Silberman, 2007), environmental education (Palmer, 1998), and forest education (Paluch, 2022). Ken Gilbertson, along with Timothy Bates, Terry McLaughlin, and Alan Ewert (2006), in their discussion of the outdoor education model, demonstrated the interdependencies and networks of connections among its components, including ecological relations, nature education, tourism undertaken in nature, education focused on adventure, interpretations of nature, cultural and historical aspects, personal and group development, and the acquisition of new mental and physical skills. The interactions between these elements are accompanied by the context of experiential learning (Gilbertson, Bates, McLaughlin, & Ewert, 2006).

This article focuses on outdoor education as a process of development, in particular of social and physical competencies, and as a process of deepening the relationship with nature through being in its surroundings, experiencing it, studying it, and exploring it. The creation of a “space” for collective processes in nature, such as learning and experiencing together, holds significant importance. It provides conditions that facilitate self-discovery and fosters peer bonds through collective activities focused on growth and learning. Furthermore, it is important to allow participants to experience difficulties and effort, to take risks, and to go beyond their comfort zone.

Studies have demonstrated the importance of outdoor education for the overall development of children, adolescents, and adults from diverse backgrounds (Dillon, Rickinson, 2006; Friedman, Gibson, Jones, & Hughes, 2022; Łubkowska, Paczyńska-Jędrycka, & Jońca, 2014; Vella-Brodrick, Gilowska, 2022; Waite, 2011). One of the distinctive characteristics of outdoor education is the creation of opportunities to establish interpersonal connections and bolster social bonds. This type of education can be considered a valuable approach to counteracting the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Jolanta Andrzejewska’s (2020) research on the potential of outdoor learning in social development illustrates the value of such instruction in fostering collective

learning, for example, in her 2020 study as part of an educational experiment involving the initiation of learning situations in unexpected settings. The author reached the following conclusion:

The investigation revealed the attractiveness of selected locales, developmental and instructional duties, and instructive settings for establishing peer connections (...). The research was not extensive, but it is possible to assume that tasks outside the classroom integrate children and foster collaborative activities more than tasks performed inside the classroom (Andrzejewska, 2020, p. 164).

It turned out that this type of approach promoted the release of students' potential for effective, collaborative problem-solving. The findings among Italian teachers showed the importance of outdoor education for the development of children and adolescents during the pandemic, in the context of a decline in physical activity and a decrease in time spent outdoors. Tiziana D'Isanto and Francesca D'Elia (2021) emphasized that outdoor activities, in comparison to indoor activities, provided greater opportunities to facilitate children's growth, including the development of body and movement awareness. This was especially true for children between the ages of 3 and 6. Furthermore, it found that physical activity in an outdoor environment increased the feeling of safety in doing so. Another significant conclusion drawn from the study was the necessity of incorporating natural elements into playground design, which could potentially enhance the amount of time children spend outdoors (D'Isanto, D'Elia, 2021).

It is worth noting the discussion regarding the application of outdoor education to the restrictions introduced with the pandemic. The report titled "Learning in Local Greenspace - An Evaluation Report" (Munro, 2022) on the Scottish learning system emphasized the urgent need to revert to outdoor education practices that were restricted by the pandemic. It also discusses the further evolution of this type of education, understanding and redefining the concept in the context of dynamic changes in the social situation. Furthermore, the publication titled "Teaching, Learning, and Play in the Outdoors: A Survey of Provision in 2022", which was published in 2023, highlighted the significance of outdoor education and play-based activity in the Scottish learning system (Mannion et al., 2023). These activities have been implemented as part of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence for children aged 3 to 18 and are provided in professional standards for teachers developed by the General Teaching Council for Scotland. Scotland's curricula allow for outdoor learning in any subject. As part of the report, it described the more than 200 outdoor learning events that took place during the evaluation period. The need to further improve activities of this type was stressed in the context of sustainability: "Conducted in 2022 as the pandemic eased, the findings are timely allowing us an opportunity to reflect on changes in provision, supports for practice, and targets set by the government in the Action Plan for Learning for Sustainability" (Mannion et al., 2023).

As confirmed by various national and international studies, outdoor education is important in dealing with the negative effects of the pandemic. The restrictions imposed on the ability to engage in outdoor activities and establish social connections have resulted in the isolation and weakening of peer bonds. Therefore, the need for outdoor education activities in a post-pandemic situation appears to be even more significant. It is important to note that being outdoors and maintaining social distance are ways to reduce the risk of virus transmission. Implementing this type of solution in early education and care institutions could allow them to continue their activities during a pandemic instead of implementing the decision to close them (Spiteri, 2020).

### **The methodological foundation of the research**

In this article, an attempt was made to examine the ways and possibilities of implementing outdoor education in the NGO environment. The research centred on the environment in which animators implemented such solutions in non-school settings in their work with children and young individuals. The main research question was as follows: What are the experiences and needs for implementing outdoor education from the perspective of the animators? The sub-questions were pertaining to the significance of outdoor education as imparted by animators; the recognition of their prior expertise, knowledge, skills, and experience in this domain, and the identification of opportunities and needs for incorporating outdoor education into daily practice.

Regarding the research questions that were formulated, the research methodology employed was an interpretative theory, as stated by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln (2005). To deepen the research findings and reveal individual experiences, the research took a qualitative form (Silverman, 2004). Semi-structured qualitative research interviews were conducted based on a prepared interview guide indicating directions for exploration (Brinkmann, Kvale, 2015). The study included five animators, comprising two male and three female individuals, who were employed by non-governmental organizations. The deliberate selection of interviewees was evident: animators with experience in field and nature-based activities were invited to participate. During the interview, questions would be asked to enable them to describe their experience and knowledge of conducting outdoor education. Subsequently, the participants formulated their perspectives, competencies, and requirements for delivering this type of education, contextualizing them within their experiences and pertinent contexts and subjecting them to continual reflection and negotiation. This selection of participants was intended to demonstrate the value of outdoor education imparted by those with experience in the field and an openness to such activities. It is evident



that research should be undertaken with a wider range of people, with more diverse experiences and attitudes towards outdoor education activities.

Interviews with NGO animators were conducted by Joanne Wyrwa. The interviews were recorded using a voice recorder with the consent of the participants and then transcribed and analysed (Gibbs, 2018; Silverman, 2004). Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. The first stage - formal analysis - consisted of extracting passages from the text that were relevant to the primary and secondary research questions. The subsequent stage entailed the process of coding and furnishing the codes with their initial descriptions. Furthermore, the data were further processed - they were collated and compared, differences and similarities were sought, generalizations were made, and broader categories were created. This approach revealed the main categories that could be used to describe the outdoor education model, which consisted of the experiences, meanings, opportunities, and needs of the surveyed animators-practitioners. The model emphasized the importance of individualized experiences, creating situations to build self-reliance and experience risk, as well as building interpersonal relationships within the group. Using these elements, the author interpreted the described phenomena and processes in the studied field of outdoor education.

The following designations were used to identify the surveyed participants' statements: Animator 1, Animator 2, Animator 3, Animator 4, and Animator 5.

The research environment was composed of Polish non-governmental organizations located in major metropolitan areas. It is worth highlighting the specifics of the work of the animators surveyed and the diverse directions of their organization's activities in local communities. Animator 1 dealt with social economy in the broadest sense of the term and also addressed projects aimed at seniors. The specifics of Animator 2's work was focused on "mountain education": "The backbone of our activities is this outdoor mountain, that is, all activities focused on mountain tourism". Animator 3's work was centred around the aquatic natural environment: "We mainly conduct activities near rivers or on rivers, swimming, canoeing, organizing picnics, semi-camps on the river and cruises: nature, ornithological, factual, and hydrotechnical; we also try to teach about the Wroclaw water node". The implementation of such activities necessitated the involvement of specialists such as naturalists, engineers, hydrologists, and ecologists, which closely aligns with the methodology of integrating knowledge in the minds of children and constructivist theories (Klus-Stańska, 2002). Animator 4 successfully implemented projects regarding social, multicultural, and circus arts. Animator 5 worked on outdoor, educational, and cultural projects.

To summarize, Animators 1 and 3 collaborated with children and juveniles from diverse educational backgrounds. In addition, Animator 3 performed management functions within the organization. Generally, Animators 2, 4, and 5 worked with children and youths from marginalized and vulnerable backgrounds. Animals 2 and 4 had



over 30 years of experience working with children and young persons, and Animators 1, 3 and 5 had over 10 years of experience.

The Institute of Pedagogy at the University of Wrocław's Research Ethics Committee gave the study a favourable recommendation. The research was conducted using good pedagogical research practices. Participation in the research was based on the principle of voluntary participation and confidentiality.

### **Experiences and needs of animators in the field of outdoor education in their work with children and adolescents - the results of the author's research**

#### ***The experiences and significances imparted to outdoor education***

The participants in the study cited numerous and diverse instances of outdoor activities undertaken by groups of children and/or youths. Their experience was based on a variety of multi-directional activities, frequently directly connected to the realm of outdoor education. These activities encompassed but were not limited to, workshops conducted outdoors (regardless of the weather) to sample and explore the immediate environment (such as hydroponics and growing vegetation in water), experiments conducted with specialized equipment, workshops designed to enhance manual skills (such as academy of knots, ceramics, macramé), organizing picnics, bivouacs, rallies, games, and field games (such as games of passing, building a hut, joint treasure hunts), organizing trips to the forest, and hiking in the mountains and green areas, organizing activities with climbing elements or activities centred around circus arts, and developing physical strength. The animators also emphasized water-based sports, such as canoeing and swimming in streams. The study participants identified outdoor activities with the implementation of educational and integrative tasks, giving them the following goals:

- developing knowledge, such as ecological or natural history,
- integrating the group,
- building social competencies,
- improving skills,
- promoting multifaceted growth.

After explaining what was particularly important to them in outdoor education, animators highlighted the following elements (Figure 1):

- educational,
- developmental,
- social,
- mental health care.

Educational factors included the following:

- the creation of circumstances that enable individuals to encounter and endure procedures, tasks, and obstacles in the natural environment: “We are able in outdoor activities to create certain experiences for participants that we cannot do within four walls. It won’t be the same experience” (Animator 1),
- the awareness of environmental, locational, historical, and cultural aspects: (e.g., promoting the notion of *Odrzanin*, *Odrzanka*, restoring the river in the consciousness of the inhabitants of Lower Silesia, building awareness of ecological disaster and over-urbanization, forming a sense of belonging to a place, rediscovering the meanings and historical contexts of the place of residence; building regional identity; developing an attitude of caring for one’s neighbourhood),
- the expansion of knowledge regarding historical, cultural, and environmental aspects: “We would like to inculcate how to spend time wisely by the river, to live wisely by the river, and to use wisely those qualities that the rivers give us” (Animator 3).

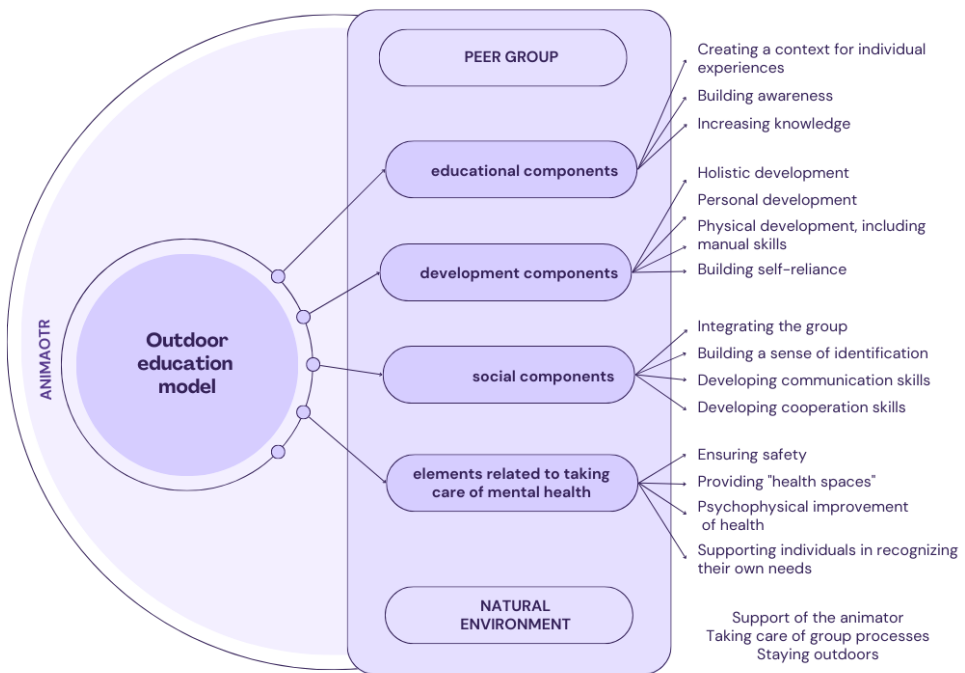


Figure 1. Model of outdoor education based on the experience of the animators interviewed. Source: Author’s own study.

It was important to consider the following social factors:

- integrating the group,
- building a sense of identification with the group (doing teamwork and learning to function as a group),
- developing communication skills,
- developing the ability to cooperate, to help each other:

There is a group, there is a goal set, we want to build this group, we want to teach them to cooperate, we want to build mutual trust, and we think that the outdoors and nature give us countless opportunities to achieve these goals (Animator 1).

Among the factors of a developmental nature, the most important were:

- enhancing physical fitness and manual dexterity, such as creating works with their hands, performing manual work, and ensuring overall physical fitness,
- personal development: opening up to others, overcoming one's weaknesses, forming responsibility for oneself and the team, taking on group challenges,
- building self-reliance, coping with difficulties,
- holistic development, described in more detail later in this paper.

The following aspects were deemed essential when it comes to taking care of children's mental health and well-being.

- ensuring safety – introducing and discussing safety rules,
- taking care of "health spaces" in the city,
- improving psycho-physical health,
- supporting oneself in achieving one's own goals and coping with stress.

Concerning the areas identified and deemed as particularly significant in outdoor education by the individuals interviewed, it is noteworthy to mention that Animator 2 emphasized the significance of comprehensive and holistic growth and development of the child or young person: "It is important to shape, just be, or support young people in being in a peer group, so that their development is as holistic as possible, as complete as possible". The outdoor education program was designed to effectively manage leisure time productively and effectively, while simultaneously ensuring the harmonious growth of the participants. Education of this type was one of the tools used to achieve this goal. The perception of outdoor education as a means to attain a goal rather than an end in itself was also elucidated by Animator 1:

I see it more as a tool. The goals are different, but the whole outdoors is kind of a bit of a tool to achieve those goals. I think the outdoors really gives us an unlimited amount of inspiration for action, and doesn't limit us in those activities (Animator 1).

The value of experience and personal development were repeatedly emphasized by interviewed animators. The statement of Animator 1 demonstrated the complexity of experiences and processes occurring during outdoor education:

The point is to provide experiences; these experiences are supposed to lead to the formation of this person's personality, to the fact that this personality changes a little; that I acquire self-confidence, that I acquire trust in someone else, that I overcome my fears, which also affects my self-esteem (Animator 1).

Animator 1 also noted the therapeutic and aesthetic benefits of interacting with nature:

We have adopted an allotment, such as a family allotment garden, where we will also conduct hortotherapy classes or horticultural therapy. Classes of this kind promote well-being. (...) Being in nature is also an aesthetic experience, calming, soothing, putting you in such a good mood (Animator 1).

An additional significant aspect of arranging outdoor education activities, as emphasized by the animators, was the inclusion of a peer group. The group ought to provide its members with a sense of security, enabling them to "be themselves" to undertake further self-improvement efforts:

The peer group, it's a safe area where the kid feels OK with all his flaws, advantages; he can articulate himself, that he can just start working on himself, see himself and his team in such a kind of positive light, that this is my team, that is such an identification with the group (Animator 2).

Animator 2 stressed the importance of taking up interaction, one of the basic functions of a group: "This is the need for interaction. We are herd-like, even if someone is a soloist, he is a soloist because he realized it in the herd". On the other hand, this Animator highlighted the multi-level and complexity of group functioning and the interactions that transpire within it:

You have to try to simply present to young people this interaction, the multi-levelness of these interactions, areas in such a way that they are, as comprehensive as possible, that is, let's try to be with each other in different circumstances (Animator 2).

Based on an analysis of the statements of the animators surveyed, it should be considered a highly desirable and important element of outdoor education to develop independence. This is especially significant in the context of being in a group of peers, without parental supervision or "guidance". As Animator 2 pointed out, "We are very focused on making the kid, the youth, as independent as possible in

decision-making, in responsibility for the group, in all that concerns the team (...). We don't train soloists; rather, we are focused on team activities". Moreover, fostering self-determination through learning will not be possible without putting some responsibility and power in the hands of the participants. This is indicated by the statement of Animator 4:

You have to give up power, decision-making must go to the young person, let him make his own decisions, which also affect you. If not, how is he supposed to learn to deal with their consequences and cope with what may not work out, how is he supposed to learn to take risks (Animator 4).

A factor that contributes to developing self-reliance is coping with and overcoming difficulties. It appears that the animators' attitude and support are key factors in the development of these skills. As noted by Animator 2 and Animator 5, factors such as parental overprotectiveness or "sitting on the computer and phone" play a significant role in preventing children from experiencing the real world and making them fear it. Therefore, the animators' responsibility is to establish secure conditions for exploring both near and far-reaching surroundings, and to provide assistance if necessary:

We try to show that this world is big, it can be complicated, whereas if you have someone who is able to show it to you safely so that you can touch it, get to know it, and think about whether an area or activity suits me (Animator 2).

The animator assists the participants in stepping outside their comfort zone and exposing themselves to risk, thereby supporting them in acquiring the skills to effectively manage it: Children don't get enough chances to see and do things in real life anymore. All obstacles are removed in front of their feet, so how do they learn to overcome them? If a child falls, he is able to get up and try again, if necessary, with the support of an animator (Animator 5).

The animators interviewed described examples of challenges that allow children and young people to experience risk, including overcoming off-road obstacles, crossing a stream, discovering a trail along a creek on one's own, climbing a mountain at night, hiking for hours, preparing a meal and lighting a fire, building a hut, navigating the terrain with a map and compass, spending the night in the woods, riding a zip line over a ravine, climbing crates, and walking on slack line.

As emphasized by Animator 2, it is imperative to bear in mind the principle of graded difficulty when arranging the educational process:

We think that everything must be taught to people in small steps, so that this experience, which will later turn into more and more difficult mountain activities, is safe, is done according to the art, and also gives people pleasure and that the knowledge they gain with us is passed on (Animator 2).

As stated by Animator 2, one of the fundamental principles of outdoor education is to acquire knowledge from mistakes, while also acknowledging the effort put forth to overcome obstacles:

If one has failed to climb a mountain multiple times, it is not a failure to view it as such. This is the process to get you there. (...) It also gives you the ability to learn, reach some goals, accept failures, and draw positive qualities from them. This is the value of the outdoors (Animator 2).

The essence of being in a group is cooperation. The research revealed the subsequent dimensions, which were undertaken as a component of outdoor education:

- Helping each other as a value in itself:

A significant component is to emphasize the importance of cooperation and also focusing on serving others, as a means of overcoming self-centeredness. This involves not only setting individual goals but also placing a significant emphasis on group cooperation and assisting and serving one another (Animator 1).

- Supporting each other on the way to achieving the goal:

We always remind the children that an athlete did not achieve success on his own, he had a team of people. And it's the same here, we always say, you're a group, you're a team, where every achievement, even individual, is still the result of some self-made leader. He divided the work, but everyone did their part (Animator 2).

- Acquiring the ability to cooperate and execute tasks collaboratively:

We choose tasks that require a team effort. Without other people's help, it won't be possible to complete them. Sometimes these activities are more complicated, like building a hut, and sometimes they are tasks where two people have to hold something, move something together, or do something. These are different types of cooperation (Animator 5).

- Providing support in overcoming difficulties:

We are part of a group, we are together. We have support when we go up the mountain at night, and we hold each other even if we are afraid to go separately. That is what brings us together - sharing experiences of challenges and triumphs, and celebrating them together (Animator 4).

– Providing mutual care and support:

Caring for each other, taking care of each other, but also being able to ask for help with confidence (Animator 4).

Furthermore, Animator 2 and Animator 5 particularly appreciated the creation of opportunities for children to engage in free play, sometimes experiencing boredom and so-called doing nothing:

It is a fairly natural desire for a child to have some freedom, to get dirty, to climb a tree, to sit and eat potatoes from the campfire (...). He can sit and poke himself with a stick. This is something we didn't invent (Animator 2).

Animator 4 emphasized the importance of being surrounded by nature and doing nothing:

One of the values of being in nature is to do a little bit of nothing - to just be and absorb, to relax, to be at peace - and such being and doing nothing has great value, it connects with nature in a unique way, it calms the senses.

Another significant aspect of outdoor education activities was the collaboration with parents. Animator 2 emphasized its importance in the context of establishing trust before the activities and subsequently pursuing the objective of carrying out the activities after the process, such as assisting the child in acquiring independence after the camp in the mountains and providing him with the opportunity to practice it at home. The animator pointed out the importance of networking and “whisper marketing” in cooperation with parents:

Parent education is crucial. Parents who want their child to have an exciting experience often have had one themselves. Here it is easier to work because they are aware of its value and do not need to be persuaded. It is more difficult to build trust and encourage parents who see something bad happening to their child, such as a broken leg. This is where whisper marketing helps us. We operate within neighbourhoods, where parents exchange information, provide encouragement, recommend each other, and share their experiences and impressions.

Whisper marketing can therefore prove particularly helpful and effective, in countering the concerns of parents with less experience in outdoor education.

An important aspect of outdoor education carried out by the animators interviewed was the prior independent experience of various activities in nature and group processes, followed by reflection. This understanding of outdoor education appears to be particularly relevant concerning the concept of experience proposed by John Dewey (1963). In the author's view, the process of experiencing means actions supported



by reflection and thinking. In this manner, the individual constructs meanings and discovers connections between their actions and their consequences, thereby attempting and acquiring knowledge. From the author's research, it was evident that individual experience is one of the intrinsic conditions for the subsequent proper conduct of outdoor activities – it was considered crucial for the animator to experience the processes that they would then create for their wards. This would build awareness of the possibilities and limitations of conducting activities, and recognize the potential and difficulties that participants may experience. Animator 2 emphasized that each of the 20 instructors employed within his organization had first undergone the entire process as a participant – the instructors had all been personally involved in the process. Another aspect of the outdoor education experience was emphasized by Animator 1, who had the privilege to partake in experiential pedagogy classes during a study visit to Germany: "I actively participated and observed how they do it. And it fascinated me a lot". The element of fascination, as well as a pleasure or enjoyment, is also a significant aspect of the experience:

In all this, of course, there was walking somewhere high and overcoming some fears, but there was also a lot of different fun, where we swung on a huge swing. (...) These are also things that are also associated with exertion, but also something that provides an enormous amount of fun, just plain fun. (...) It's something so powerful, cool (Animator 1).

Animators 4 and 5 noted the great importance of the experience itself, overcoming difficulties and realizing positive emotions in dealing with the situation: "I am fascinated by adventure and such education. Sometimes I was scared to do something, like jumping from a platform into deep water. But I had help and we did it together, and it felt really good" (Animator 5). In the context of overcoming difficulties and her own limitations, Animator 4 referred to her experience of the group process: "It's important to have the help of others to overcome fear and to cope. This helps with everyday situations and self-esteem, but most importantly, it makes you happy and is fun!". As Animator 5 pointed out, it is important to emphasize that:

Sometimes it is not possible to overcome difficulties or overcome fear on the first, second, subsequent approaches. This, in turn, creates situations for dealing with emotions and a certain sense of defeat, it is combined with being in the process, overcoming these difficulties in small and even very small steps. Sometimes it is necessary to let go but also to return calmly to the task at hand (Animator 5).

Animator 5 pointed out the importance of dealing with emotions, managing them, and strategies for overcoming difficulties in the long term.

The animator's attitude is another important element for outdoor education. The participants interviewed emphasized the significance of adopting an attitude that is open to change, modification, and innovative solutions. It is important to show patience with children and young people, to build boundaries kindly but firmly, and to be consistent. An animator should be characterized by constant reflection on what is being done and what is happening, as well as observation, attentiveness, and learning from one's experiences: "An animator should take a fairly flexible approach and treat it as a process that never ends. Based on these experiences, we build something new every now and then, improve it, make it easier, give up something, add something new" (Animator 2). Above all, it should be characterized by liking what one does.

An important task of the animator is also to create space for reflection and to teach young people to reflect on their actions, the course of the day, the difficulties they faced and what they appreciated or what they still should work on:

We observe them [children, young people] (...) in the evening, summarizing the whole day, we try to refer to certain things. They are often surprised that we remembered so many things, but we also recognize that it's not that they are not attentive, that they don't notice what's going on around them, because they can articulate it later, you just have to give them the opportunity to do so (Animator 2).

Furthermore, the animator needs to provide support in the process of learning reflection given to the participant in outdoor education. It is possible to provide this type of support through various strategies. For instance, it is possible to ask questions during conversations with children and juveniles, enabling them to propose topics for contemplation, express personal observations, and elaborate on a particular viewpoint:

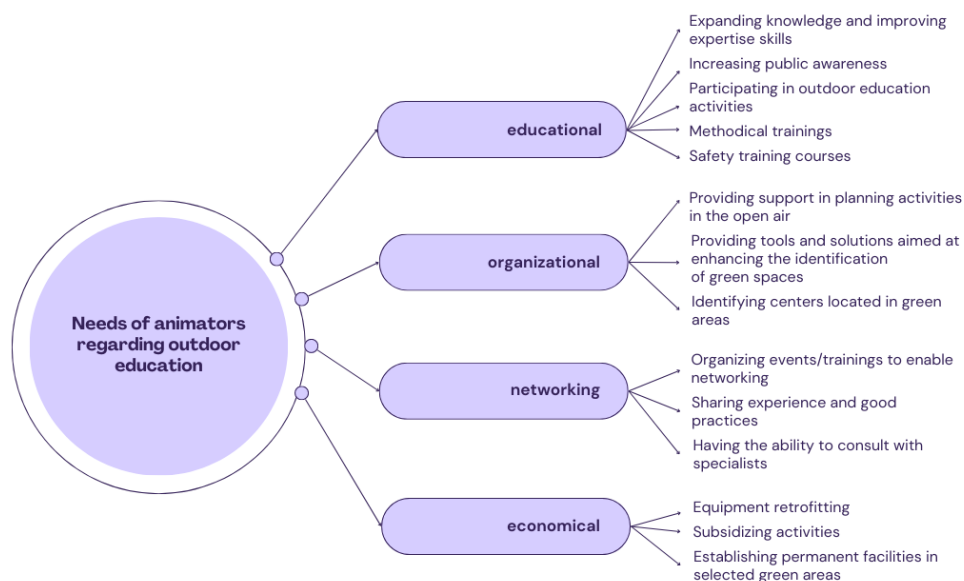
We frequently ask different questions, and we do not always respond to them. We ask you to try it yourself or ask a friend. Often after an activity, we sit in a circle and ask: what did you like the most and what didn't you, and why? What moved you, what made you stronger, what helped you, what didn't work out the way you wanted? What was important? What would you change? Sometimes we ask a lot of questions like this, sometimes we hint at a topic, but the important thing is to start somewhere. Reflection is a skill that must be learned to function more deeply and better, to experience, to grow and learn (Animator 5).

### **Needs and opportunities for animators to conduct outdoor education**

The animators interviewed had years of experience in conducting activities of an outdoor education nature. They identified a variety of factors, among which can be distinguished those of an educational, organizational, networking, and economic nature (Figure 2).

Among educational factors, there is the need for support in:

- expanding their knowledge and enhancing specialized competencies in outdoor education, such as obtaining certification as an instructor of rope parks, climbing, and survival, while also demonstrating their ability to execute tasks related to the specifics of their work,
- raising awareness of this type of education and environmental education among the public and parents/legal guardians, as well as helping to reach parents/legal guardians with outdoor activities,



*Figure 2.* Needs of animators in conducting outdoor education. *Source:* Author's own study.

- providing opportunities for participation in training sessions to acquire and enhance methodical competencies, including interpersonal ones: group management, dealing with conflicts and stress (stress caused by the lockdown experience, the war in Ukraine, the general crisis, and inflation), individualized approach to the child, working with children and young persons from excluded backgrounds,
- familiarizing with safety issues and preparation for creating safe conditions (also from a legal perspective),
- facilitating participation in outdoor education events and workshops with attention to the stages of self-organization.

There were several organizational needs, including:

- support in the planning of outdoor activities and the practical organization of the trip by providing a helper, super-review, safety training, and reporting the event to the supervisor,
- provision of tools and pre-made solutions aimed at enhancing the recognition of green areas and their resources, particularly in the context of conducting specific outdoor education activities (site inventory),
- recognition of centres situated in green areas, close to forests, offering facilities for overnight and feeding groups, and conducting outdoor activities. Additional assets should be indicated, including the possibility to enter a rope park, kayaking, canoeing, boating, climbing, mountain biking, overnighing in the forest, and sailing.

The following needs are worth mentioning among the networking factors:

- organization of events and trainings aimed at generating inspiration and networking with organizations involved in outdoor education, thereby enhancing motivation and demonstrating the diversity of methods for implementing outdoor activities,
- sharing of experience by educators conducting this type of education (good practices), including organizing the group process, dealing with difficulties, responding and providing assistance in case of an accident, and cooperating with parents/legal guardians,
- consultation with specialists, such as psychologists, street workers, and social workers.

Another group of factors was the economic conditions, which included support for:

- equipment retrofitting (props, maps, tools, outdoor equipment),
- subsidizing activities (for example, the large costs of climbing instructors and equipment rental),
- creation of permanent facilities in selected green areas and adapting them for outdoor activities (enabling activities even in winter).

In conclusion, animators interviewed pointed to the need to create opportunities for children and young people to develop social contacts, deepen peer bonds, and increase time spent outdoors in the context of the pandemic:

Closed settlements have exacerbated this, especially since the pandemic. Contact only by phone and that's enough. Fear of arguing, talking, thinking freely, and talking in general (Animator 3).

This need for interpersonal relations, such as live ones, was somehow natural, at the moment I observe among kids that it is really enough for them to communicate through the media or instant messaging. In a pandemic and after a pandemic even more so. They don't see each other very often, and they don't talk to each other in any other way, they don't feel the need to do so (Animator 2).

In this particular context, the outdoor area itself, where children and young individuals can spend time, holds significant significance. Animator 3, describing the benefits of outdoor activities, highlighted the importance of the outdoor space, located in the real environment affected by the educational process: "Our activity centre is a ship registered with the Inland Waterways Authority, which is also adapted for educational activities". The animator appreciated the meeting place on the river as a space for educating about the river and the processes involved:

We are interested in expanding knowledge related to the Oder River and shipping, ecology, and other aspects. This place is right here, on the Oder River, by the Oder. It is a place where there is direct contact with nature. It's a meeting place on the water.

As Animator 2 noted, "The fundamental principle is to venture outdoors and engage in physical activity, as it is the fundamental foundation". Animator 1, on the other hand, emphasized the significance of terrain enriched with natural materials that can be utilized during activities: "For certain tasks, we require such spaces, not a cleaned-up park, but a place where one can find various kinds of materials, such as pinecones, stones, and twigs, which can be utilized for various tasks". Animator 2, following Rudolf Laban's take on space, expressed the importance of being outdoors for the development of children and young people as follows:

Laban says that when we are in a space, we can be more open, learn, and look at a bigger group than when we are in a closed environment. That open space gives us the chance to learn, be attentive to other people, and broaden our horizons (Animator 2).

## **Conclusion**

The popularity of outdoor education is increasing in non-formal and non-public educational circles. It is especially valuable in the context of post-pandemic reality and the consequences of children and adolescents being "confined" to their homes: isolating them from the environment of their peers, weakening social ties, incre-

asing feelings of loneliness, reducing contact with nature, and limiting opportunities for peer exploration of the immediate environment (Grant-Vest, Wragg, 2021; Wazywoda-Kruszyńska, Kruszyński, 2022). Research focused on outdoor education related to the environment of animators working in Polish NGOs was presented in the article.

The results of the research revealed a wide range of experiences, opportunities, and needs in the implementation of outdoor education in work with children and adolescents, as well as the importance given by animators to the activities carried out in this field in the NGO environment. It is noteworthy that the animators interviewed, in their definition of outdoor education, referred primarily to the diverse range of activities, and events organized by themselves and their organizations. They outlined their specifics within the context of pursuing nature-based work, generating environments that enable individuals to engage in autonomous experiences, and establishing interpersonal connections within the group. The animators were aware of the numerous benefits of outdoor educational activities and referred to them with a positive attitude, reflecting on the desired impact of the activities on participants. The outdoor education model, which emerged from the findings of the study, incorporates:

- psychological, cognitive, and socio-emotional factors experienced by participants during the process itself, such as individual experiences, the peer group as a supportive and cooperative environment, and the opportunity to develop independence, coping skills, overcoming one's limitations, and taking risks,
- factors and conditions of a social nature directly affecting the process and participants, such as the appropriate preparation and attitude of animators, including the provision of support by the group and animators, the opportunity to experience risks and group processes,
- factors indirectly affecting the process and participants of a logistical, physical, and economic nature, such as establishing cooperation with parents, logistical preparation of the expedition/educational process, including factors of a physical and economic nature, i.e., economic support of the activities carried out.

These factors create a network of complex interactions, co-creating processes, and the proper environment for these processes is nature. The co-creative and stimulating entities are the animator and the peer group (Figure 3.).

It is noteworthy that the activities presented align with the outdoor education model as outlined by K. Gilbertson, T. Bates, T. McLaughlin, and A. Ewert (2006), as well as the outdoor education concept espoused in this article.

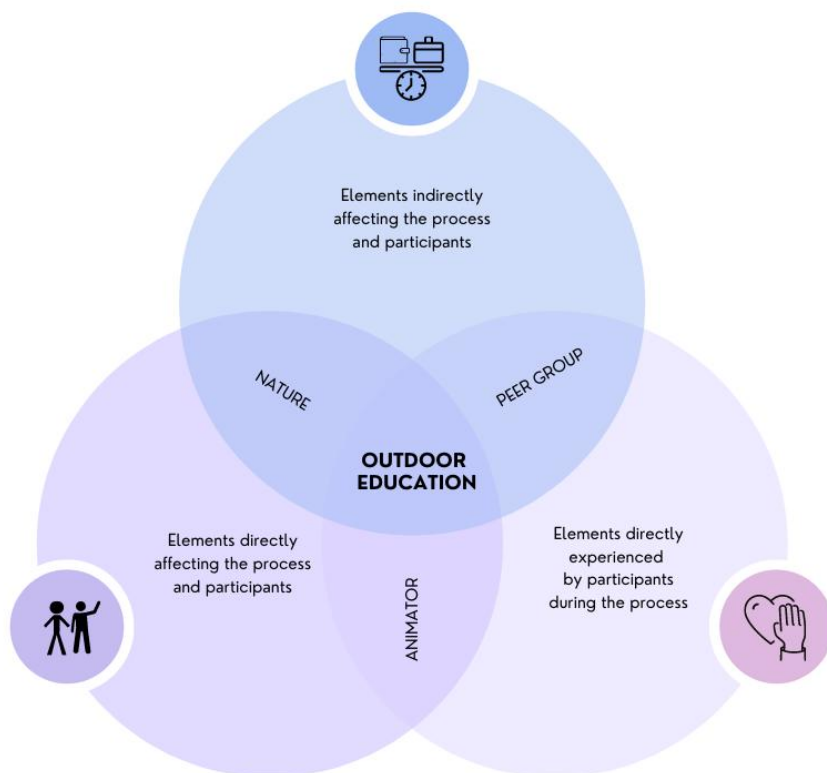


Figure 3. A simplified model of outdoor education. *Source:* Author's own study.

To conclude, it is noteworthy to cite a statement made by Kamila Kamińska (2022), the president of the Association for Critical Education, which elucidated her approach to modern childhood within the context of its relationship with nature:

There are no wild children. There are children on the phone, there are children on the computer. There are children who are somewhere else, and there are no children who run barefoot in a meadow, bathe in a stream, sleep on a trampoline. But there is such a wild child in every child, and if you want to discover it and you want to see it, then adults are needed to take these children, to take them across the crazy bridge and to go under a precarious overpass, to roll hay bales and jump over them, and to take off their shoes, and to go into the stream. Everyone has a child somewhere in them, and everyone can take them out, and for that, we adults are needed, too, who also have children somewhere in them. The energy from these children running barefoot in the meadow returns to us, and they jump over the fire or make their own bonfire or dance late into the night barefoot as well. But for all this, we as adults must give them space, sometimes



money, sometimes we have to take them to this forest by bus, protect them from what is dangerous, but also give them faith that if they scrape a knee, or cut a finger, or get a splinter stuck in it, they will survive, and that it's worth it to have that splinter in that finger, and it's worth it to scrape that knee to be able to enjoy this grass and this meadow and this stream (Kamińska, 2022).

The cited statement aligns with the approach of outdoor education, which encourages the formation and strengthening of bonds within a group, gaining insight into one's self and the immediate surroundings, and fostering self-assurance in pursuing new endeavours with the kind and supportive assistance of adults who allow for personal freedom and room for their own adventures. This type of education involves the deliberate and planned creation of conditions for learning that are directly in contact with the natural environment and peer groups. It allows children to experience a "wild" childhood, experience freedom and the consequences of their own choices.

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