

How Do Children Learn Citizenship Through Place-Based Outdoor Education?

—Based on a Qualitative Study of After-School Nature Clubs—

Research Overview

Drawing on Roger Hart's framework, this study examines an after-school nature club to understand local communities' roles in environmental education. Through participant observation and semi-structured interviews, this research reveals the impacts of community-led outdoor education, with a specific focus on citizenship development among youth.

Purpose of Study

The objective of this study is to analyze how former participants who attended an after-school nature club during elementary school interpret their own experiences from the perspective of citizenship education, and to clarify “the impact of community-led nature experience activities on participants’ relationship with their living environment.” Within the context of “Education for Sustainable Development (ESD),” it has already been established that nature experiences in early childhood influence future behavior. For example, Roger Hart advocates for the importance of environmental education within local communities from the perspective of children’s participation. On the other hand, much outdoor education takes place away from local communities, and research on “place-based education” within local communities is limited. While existing research includes school-led and quantitative studies, qualitative research on the impact of nature-based activities organized by local residents on children remains insufficient. Large-scale surveys conducted by the Cabinet Office and the Nippon

Foundation, among others, indicate that there is a low level of motivation for social participation in Japan. In particular, the lack of interest in participating in community activities is a significant issue. In this regard, it is worth paying close attention to this matter.

Research Methods

This study used the “Kuromon Flying Fish Club” in Zushi City, Kanagawa Prefecture, as its field site. With the cooperation of the operating organization, the General Incorporated Association “Sokka,” we conducted participant observation and interviews with former participants.

We conducted retrospective semi-structured interviews with former participants who are now high school students.

For participant observation, the researcher personally participated on-site as a coach approximately three times a month to gain a deep understanding of the practitioners’ values and context, thereby ensuring the validity of the interpretation. For the same purpose, a literature review was conducted on the organization’s publications and external interview articles.

The “Tobiuo Club” conducts nature experience activities in the sea, rivers, and mountains within walking distance of Zushi Beach. On specific days of the week, approximately 25 children gather for a regular two-hour session starting at 4:10 p.m. Optional events are also held on weekends and during long school breaks. The club was founded in 2010 after co-representative Takumi Nagai heard from an acquaintance that “even though the ocean is right in front of us, neither the children nor their parents know how to play there and aren’t enjoying it.” Consequently, he began playing on the

beach with neighborhood children after school. As participation grew, the group was officially incorporated in 2016. A distinctive feature of the operational staff is that they are parents of current or former participants, allowing them to build strong relationships with both the children and their parents. This resembles a common characteristic found in many parenting communities in Japan.

Results and Discussion

Through participant observation and a literature review, it became clear that both the practitioners and the parents supporting the program share values and initiatives that promote social participation. Interviews with participants former participants yielded comments such as: “I tried volunteering once during an activity, and it was fun”; “Even if I didn’t start a group myself, I wanted to support the person who did”; and “It was precisely because I knew there was support that I was able to organize my first community event.”

Based on the results of participant observation and the literature review, it can be inferred that the value of “Tobiuo-ness (Words spoken when reaffirming the culture of a child-centered environment)”—shared by coaches and collaborating parents—plays a role in encouraging social participation.

Interviews with former participants revealed that, in addition to fostering a connection with nature and fostering “Naname Relationship (non-family, cross-generational mentoring relationships)” with residents, these experiences are interpreted as motivating factors leading to participation in volunteer work and community activities. In Japan, where motivation for social participation is extremely low, this is a noteworthy impact. Limitations of this study include its case study nature, the presence of numerous

personal factors, and constraints in the selection method of interview participants. It is important to note that these findings should not be overgeneralized.

Keywords

Place-based education, Sustainability, Citizenship education, Outdoor education, Qualitative action research

References

Hart, R. A. (1997). *Children's participation: The theory and practice of involving young citizens in community development and environmental care*. UNICEF; Earthscan.