‘Sowing and growing’ life skills through garden-based learning to re-engage disengaged youth

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...kids that are suspended from school [are] usually behind in their work. Not necessarily stupid but just not coping with school. The system at school, ‘the classic – you do it right, you get a reward; you do it wrong, you get punished,’ - just doesn’t work for them.

Dr. Ray Handley CSC.
Outdoor Links To Learning (OL2L)

Pillars of the OL2L Program:

• Connection to nature for health, wellbeing, and educational outcomes;
• Garden-based learning (GBL) to engage students;
• GBL’s positive impact on academic outcomes for students across the curriculum.
Related Literature: Motivational Factors

Hahn, the forefather of outdoor education, repeatedly emphasised that young people will take pleasure in learning if the environment is attractive and the lessons both interesting and worthwhile.
NEL NODDINGS, 1988 (almost three decades ago)

‘At a time when the traditional structures of caring have deteriorated, schools must become places where teachers and students live together, talk with each other, take delight in each other’s company. It is obvious that children will work harder and do things... for people they love and trust.’
The Natural Environments Initiative: Illustrative Review and Workshop Statement

HARVARD SCHOOL OF PUBLIC HEALTH Center for Health and the Global Environment
Methodology

- Qualitative
- Interpretive inductive approach
- In-situ discussions
- Semi structured interviews
- Field notes
- Photo elicitation

Data analysis
- Nvivo: themes and nodes of meaning
- Iterative interpretive synthesis

- Participants - young people in years 8 to 10
- GBL program
  - Planning and construction
  - Planting
  - Harvesting
  - Cooking

- 2 Terms (20 Weeks) in 2015
- Revolving participants
“The degree to which people are able to access, understand, appraise and communicate information to engage with the demands of different health contexts in order to promote and maintain good health across the life-course” (Kwan, Frankish, & Rootman, 2006, p. 80).
Developing a deeper appreciation for growing, cooking, and producing food

“The thing that I was struggling with the most was the comments from some of particularly the younger kids about how much they enjoyed the fresh food and how they really loved eating fresh food, which made me think they probably don't do it very often, but they would really like to if they were given that opportunity. So that was really positive on one hand, but also concerning on the other” (Peter, GBL Educator).
Building Life Skills

Peter Dawe RBG Youth Community Greening
Supporting the development of life skills through experiential learning

UNICEF (2003) defines life skills as “psychosocial abilities for adaptive and positive behaviour that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life” (para. 3).
Engaging environments and behaviour

The environment couldn’t be more unlike a classroom! ‘They can’t bounce off the walls if we take away the walls’ (Kenney 2013).

Opportunities for multiple types of engagement developing new metacognitive schemas.
Engaging work, flow learning, peace

‘Whether it was because they were keen to get outside and make sure no-one was unhappy, I don't know, or whether it was making them think about that and wanting to get through it quick so they could get out, I don't know. That's got to be a good thing if in a general school sense with kids that are at risk of being suspended perhaps, if you can include that in their day for them, gardening, and that gives them an incentive to work, then I think it has got to be a good thing... in terms of a learning tool. Phil Pettitt RBG Coordinator’
A sense of pride in achievement

Positive achievement patterns, predisposing students to deeper learning and supporting the growth of intrinsic motivation (Meece, Anderman, & Anderman, 2006).

‘...Leesa spent considerable time standing on the new levels of bessa block as each on was added and continued to stand on the walls while they were being filled with soil, an almost physical display of her ownership of the construction.’ (Field notes October 2015)
The benefits of being outside

Just being outside in green space is therapeutic.
• Kaplan’s Attention Restoration Theory (ART) (2001)
• Being in green spaces helps to promote ‘brainwave patterns associated with meditative calm’ (Aspinall et.al 2013 cited in Chawla, Keena, Pevec, & Stanley, 2014 P. 2)
The behaviour is always quite positive when we're working in the garden. They're very committed and focused on the different jobs at hand and I tend to find that there are very few, if any behavioural problems when we're actually working in the garden. The kids want to be there and they want to learn about these different processes. So it's always very positive (Peter Dawe RBG Youth Community Greening)
Ecopsychology and place

Ecopsychology (Roszak, 2001)… the deep psychological connection between humans and the natural world and the extent to which it affects our sense of belonging and subsequently, our behaviour.

Place based education theories (Sobel, 2005) … Sense of place in community and personal agency and effectiveness within that community

Both ameliorate disengagement and help to restore a sense of equilibrium.
The elements and food as connection

Mindful, reflective behaviour was carried back into other settings.

Is our humanity reflected in these processes in a visceral way?

We all breath the same air, and eat food. Creating this food and growing plants to create oxygen may well tap into this inherent connection we all share.
Connecting to Adults: Role Models

Maybe they haven't had the male role model and that's where we can play an important role in that respect, of just talking to them about hand tools and safety, working with things and simple things like screws, soil, and how to shovel.
## Benefits of Learning in Outdoor Environments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological</th>
<th>Sociological</th>
<th>Educational</th>
<th>Physical</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-concept</td>
<td>Compassion</td>
<td>Nature awareness</td>
<td>Fitness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
<td>Group cooperation</td>
<td>Problem solving</td>
<td>Strength</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-efficacy</td>
<td>Respect for others</td>
<td>Conservation education</td>
<td>Coordination</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mental acuity</td>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>Improved academics</td>
<td>Balance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensation seeking</td>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>Values clarification</td>
<td>Catharsis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wellbeing</td>
<td>Sense of belonging</td>
<td>Outdoor skills</td>
<td>Agility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stress reduction</td>
<td>Resilience</td>
<td>Enriched cross curriculum links</td>
<td>Endurance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Restoration and Rejuvenation</td>
<td>Connecting and relationships</td>
<td>Reflective skills</td>
<td>Gross &amp; Fine Motor Skills</td>
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Gray, Truong and Ward 2016 – adapted from Ewert 1989
I think one of the issues is that they’re perhaps struggling at school and not given the opportunities in the right way for their learning styles but I find that in the garden it’s an equal playing field and they tend to thrive in that environment.

Peter Dawe RBG Community Greening.
At-risk youngsters get their hands dirty for positive lesson

AT the Campbeltown Suspension Centre in Sydney’s West a program that turns idle hands into green thumbs is giving struggling students a renewed sense of confidence and self-esteem.

At the centre, which caters for students who have been suspended from school for five to 20 days, students work with outreach workers from the Royal Botanic Garden to design, build and maintain a community garden through to a point where produce is successfully harvested.

According to former head teacher Ray Handley, growing and eating their own vegetables meant students could experience the rewards of their labour.

“Those kids that are always avoiding things will get in and do a great job. But they have to self-direct. You can’t say ‘Come on, let’s get this done’,” he says. “With this program, the student builds the garden, plants it, waters it, then eats the food. The kid knows what they’ve done. It’s not just a pat on the back from a teacher.”

The program is supported by research that shows that for at-risk students who participate in a Garden Based Learning school program, the proportion of successful students increases, dropouts and failures decrease, and there are improvements in attitudes towards school, in self-esteem, and in skill development.

“We had one kid in constant troubles. He had a wild temper and his school was really worried,” Handley says.

“We had him dig out a driveway for some landscaping. It was hard-packed dirt and he’s only four foot tall, as a year sixer. He just stuck at it and stuck at it, despite the challenge.

“When he went back to school, every time he lost his temper in class, he was reminded about how he worked hard at landscaping and he was less affected by getting teased.”

JACKSON HEWITT
Questions & Comments

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