



Experiential Education

Demonstration Model - "The Forest in the City"

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Introduction

Introducing Experiential Education

This manual has been designed for use by teachers / youth workers who are concerned to adopt informal, interactive teaching methods that introduce children to "experiential learning".

Experiential Learning basically means learning from physical engagement and a process of exploration rather than from instruction. The Equilibrium team believes that it is important that, as far as possible, this takes place within the community that surrounds the school that the children attend. Participation in civic society permits children to positively contribute to cultural life and social development as they learn.

We also encourage exploration of the natural world so that children become ecologically aware and conservation conscious on the basis of their own experience of the issues as opposed to learning these things from educational formulae or the manifestos of environmental organisations.

The Implications

This means leaving behind the control structures that are appropriate in the classroom. It also demands a departure from the formal, didactic instruction to which most teachers are accustomed. The type of spontaneity that would disrupt a classroom lesson is the very stuff of Experiential Education. To make the transition between the two educational styles, teachers need to convince themselves that Informality does not mean Indiscipline or Anarchy. Some educators may even have to adjust their entire philosophy so as to have faith in the idea that educational can take place *without* formal instruction and a tutor's effort to dictate outcomes. One of the main reasons for compiling this manual is to help teachers adapt to the new managerial / supervisory role that promotes Experiential Learning.

Our reason for writing

This document is designed to make use of a project undertaken by Equilibrium that involved Experiential Education. This project will be presented separately as a "module" within a larger body of material comprising a range of similar presentations featuring a variety of project ideas. We do not suggest that future readers should *duplicate* any particular project although, of course, they are free to do so. Rather, we are concerned to avoid excessive theorizing and to provide a range of "real-life" models that are bound to reflect situations that will coincide with incidents that arise when you embark on your own project.

With this in mind, this document comprehensively examines the issue of Experiential Education *on a highly practical basis employing the extensive experience of the Equilibrium team and using a single project for demonstration purposes*. In the fullness of time, when the catalogue of demonstration models is available, we would like peer organisations to contribute examples drawn from their own experience.

The Forest in the City - the Basic Concept

This represents a very simple demonstrative model of community based Environmental Education. Primarily, we worked with groups of teenagers from two well-established child-to-child clubs based in the Ruse elementary schools, Aleko Konstantinov and Kiril & Metodii (Sredna Kula). A third elementary school, Vassil Aprilov, provided youngsters for some of the sessions as part of the early ventures of the new club established there during 2005. In some instances, older teenagers from vocational high schools participated and occasionally younger children were integrated into the groups. This enabled us to experiment with various combinations of young participants, creating different group dynamics as we were concerned to discover what, if anything, would render a group dysfunctional.

Most of the work took place in the actual city in both indoor and outdoor settings. Excursions were made to the Rusenski Lom natural park and to a forested area lying close to Razgrad.

The model is wonderfully straightforward but it involved

- A working relationship with the city's history museum that provided access to both educational facilities and expert personnel
- A contribution to local tourist information and cooperation with the tourist information service
- Outdoor activity undertaken in the city parks and the Rusenski Lom Natural Park with the full cooperation of the relevant authorities
- A series of workshops with groups of teenagers that allowed the exploration of the entire World of Trees - their
 1. longevity
 2. remarkable capabilities
 3. contribution to the balance of nature
 4. contribution to mankind
 5. impact on the human consciousness throughout the ages
 6. Most importantly, the children came to understand the threat posed by human activity.
- The production of information plaques pertaining to trees and the development of an "eco-trail" within the city that both contributes to the cosmopolitan feel of Ruse and expresses a subtle conservation awareness

The Forest in the City was a component of a larger project, funded by the British Government, in which Equilibrium demonstrated a workable alternative to the summer green school. We all know the green school formula. EQ has identified three main problems -

- Parents have to pay for it and this means it isn't an option in poorer neighbourhoods.
- It doesn't really add very much to the educational experience because it is rooted in the same didactic teaching methodology that applies in the classroom.
- The children generally remain isolated in the green school venue or they are taken on formal, controlled excursions with no real

engagement with the natural environment or the rural community they have entered.

The tree project demonstrated the style of local activity that can be part of a system of green schooling that extends throughout the academic year, employs local non-pedagogical service providers, dovetails with the academic curriculum and is eminently affordable.

In this manual, we make reference to the project only for the purpose of exemplification of aspects of Experiential Education and to provide illustrations of the type of practical considerations that arise from this educational approach. We concentrate on the issue of interaction with the young participants in the course of undertaking the demonstration model - The Forest in the City. The significant components of the larger project involving training and the raising of institutional / public awareness are not discussed. Indeed, the production of this manual contributes to these functions.

Experiential Education Defined

The "invention" of Experiential Education is often associated with the development of progressive education in the USA during the earlier part of the 20th century. In particular, it is linked with the insights of the American philosopher, John Dewey. He believed that education should be designed on the basis of a *theory of experience* and should take account of the fact that each student will have a different quality of reaction in any given situation based on his accumulated past experience and how this impacts on the present. Believing that the role of education was to create individuals who made an effective contribution to democratic society, Dewey argued that the educator should depart from authoritarian, didactic practice and carefully select experience for the student so as to optimize its developmental impact and to ensure that it contributed to this "socialization" process by enabling him / her to become a valued, equal, and responsible members of society.

Other champions of Experiential Education include DA Kolb who proposed the existence of an experiential learning cycle, James Atherton who has reinterpreted the cycle and Phil Race, a British educational guru, who has created his own "ripples" model to explain the process of learning from

experience (and who, according to Atherton, finds the cyclical model "unrealistic, prescriptive and needlessly academic").

Our Attitude to the Subject

EQ feels that it is shortsighted to identify Dewey as the "father" of Experiential Education and to root the concept in recent educational theory that frequently is "needlessly academic" or deliberately abstruse. Experiential Education was not created on a 20th century drawing board and the subject has suffered because of attempts to find a convoluted way of stating the obvious - first-hand experience is generally more informative than hearing something described (unless that experience is intrinsically dangerous) and learning takes place on the basis of accumulated past experience and receptivity to current experience.

EQ recognizes that knowledge is *never* a derivative of subjective experience alone. Rather, richness of experience working in combination with a certain attitude of mind - let's call it Openness - allows an individual to test theory. Openness is the willingness and capacity to challenge yourself, your beliefs and range of understanding.

Experiential education is currently hip because it lends itself to postmodern relativism and the belief that the identification of truth depends entirely on the perspective adopted. Truth is seen to be culturally specific or somehow intrinsically linked to the experiential profile of its pursuer. This is what lies behind the agenda of *personalized* education.

There is a growing tendency in the West to attempt to personalize education by placing greater emphasis on a child's experiential background, reducing the abstract and keeping things concrete in terms of what a child is accustomed to and deemed to be capable of taking on board. It sounds as if things are heading in the direction Dewey recommended. The problem is that the prevailing trend is reductive and limiting when experiential learning ideally should provide for the expansion of educational horizons. The experiential educator does not stay fairly and squarely in a perceived comfort zone, spoon-feeding, keeping things safe, delivering modularized information and demonstrating formulaic activity. Quite the contrary - he has the child by the hand and together they're off adventuring!

Subjective experience has its limitations as defined by Prof. Frank Furedi who states - "personal knowledge provides children with valuable insights about the world but does not provide them with the education that enables them to question, conceptualize, problem-solve and to develop intellectually. The equation of 'personal knowledge' with 'educational knowledge' fails to distinguish between the arbitrary experience of a child and the systematic attempt to develop his or her potential." ('Where Have All The Intellectuals Gone?' - 2006)

We believe in authority based on wealth of experience and time spent testing theory - the foundations of wisdom. We denounce authoritarianism based purely on credentials or professional status. We particularly abhor authoritarianism directed at children or their parents. The rise of the western technocracy has served to tear the fabric of society. Certainly, education should align with prevailing social aspirations but state systems cannot work towards entirely utilitarian ends.

The contemporary tendency towards defining human capability wholly in terms of specialized technical competence is highly disturbing. Authority is frequently bestowed on the basis of academic or professional qualifications and performance criteria while insufficient attention is paid to leadership capability. On the website of the late Tim Field leadership is defined in terms of "maturity, decisiveness, assertiveness, co-operation, trust (and) integrity". How often are these qualities used as criteria for employment or promotion?

It may sound as if we're dismissive of a lot of the theory behind our experiential educative approach. There is good theory and there is bad theory but one thing that is clear is that contemporary education (and the experiential approach in particular) suffers from the industrial-scale purveyance of pseudo-science to the detriment of solid common sense or insight based on longevity of experience. This always happens when an area of human endeavour becomes a bandwagon. EQ offers no enlightened *alternative* to classroom-based pedagogy although we do without a doubt address issues that a monolithic institution is not well disposed to address.

We don't want to contribute to the growing diagnostic tendency in an educational world bustling with psychologists, counselors and specialist pedagogic advisors. The merit of the child-led approach lies in its anti-authoritarianism and its promotion of respect for the student. But, it

cannot extend too far so as to convert student to consumer or to allow a therapy culture to subsume a learning culture.

So what is that we do? We have adapted aspects of our repertoire as experiential educators in order to de-medicalize a process (we'll call it behaviour therapy) that tends to be extremely cumbersome and intrusive to bring it more in line with the educative process and to ensure that it is less disruptive of that process. I suppose you could say that we assist children with personal difficulties *in an educational manner* so as to try to prevent a hiatus in / postponement of their schooling - their being side-lined because of "learning difficulties" arising from circumstances that can be identified and addressed. Our approach imposes no stigma on the children we work with. We describe what we do as Mentoring.

Mentoring

Opportunities can and should be taken for adults and children to informally interact as a learning community in a shared spirit of exploration and adventure. This is what **mentoring** involves - a mentor is more than an instructor or pedagogue. Unfortunately, the mentoring approach cannot normally survive the processes of formalization and institutionalization because of constraints over time and space and imposed boundaries that stymie the formation of the requisite intimacy between adult and child. It, therefore, tends to take place outside the normal school routine in the context of counseling, therapy or *special* education. All of these terms could be reasonably applied to EQ's style of operation. However, we take great pains to limit the duration of a child's separation from mainstream education and also to weld the experiences together for the child. Our focus is on *educational rehabilitation* - helping kids deal with schooling if, for some reason, they failed to cope with it before.

Isn't mentoring the job of parents?

The answer to this question is "yes and no". It also has to be stated that schools do try to deal effectively with learning difficulties. However, there are children with behavioural problems, kids harboring issues, who are *begging* for someone to accompany them on a long, meandering walk through forests and up mountains until trust emerges and a sense of security is established.

Educating the Senses

Like all thinkers in the Aristotelian tradition, Maria Montessori recognized that the senses must be educated first in the development of the intellect. Consequently, she created a vast array of special learning materials from which concepts could be abstracted and through which they could be made concrete. In recognition of the independent nature of the developing intellect, these materials are self-correcting—that is, from their use, the child discovers for himself whether he has the right answer. This feature of her materials encourages the child to be concerned with facts and truth, rather than with what adults say is right or wrong.

Albert Einstein claimed that he never taught his students he simply created conditions in which they could learn. He echoed Socrates who claimed that teaching was concerned with “lighting a flame” and who rejected the idea that a student is an empty vessel to be filled with the knowledge of the tutor. Sogyal Rinpoche is a great Buddhist teacher who encourages humility among educators. He tells us we should smile for the success of the student not for our success as a teacher. True wisdom involves recognizing that knowledge is not ours because we actually had to learn it before we can pass it on.

These three wise men from different cultures and different periods in time each express the essential spirit of Experiential Education while Maria Montessori, working a century ago, melded her insight into child development into an entire educational approach that is sustained in a network of schools throughout the world.

Appendix 2 contains an extract from teacher training material compiled by Equilibrium’s chairman, David Bisset. It provides a powerful insight into the shortcomings of formal, didactic education if it does not take account of the learning characteristics of the student or encourage a child’s exploratory instincts.

There is no Equilibrium Method and we do not propose a teaching regime that is *alternative* to Bulgarian mainstream education. Rather, we suggest that occasional exposure to Experiential Education can help compensate the student for the profound institutionalization of education that is probably unavoidable in complex, modern society. This is precisely why we contest the continuation of instructional teaching during the summer

green school that wastes an opportunity to revert to a more informal teaching method and fails to make the best use of an entire array of stimuli that are begging to be explored.

Promotion of Experiential Learning

Experiential Learning occurs when carefully chosen experiences (experiences selected and promoted by the educator) are supported by reflection, critical analysis, and synthesis. Experiences are structured to require the student to take initiative, make decisions and be accountable for the results. Throughout the experiential learning process, the learner is actively engaged in posing questions, investigating, experimenting, being curious, solving problems, assuming responsibility, being creative, and constructing meaning.

Learners are engaged intellectually, emotionally, socially and physically. This involvement produces a perception that the learning task is totally authentic as a component of *living and experiencing* as opposed to being part of the largely passive absorption of someone else's knowledge. This means that the results of the learning are extremely personal and form the basis for future experience and learning. In addition, relationships are developed and nurtured: learner to self, learner to others, and learner to the world at large.

This exposure to other (older) children and adults in informal situations and the enhanced intimacy that ensues increases the risk of possible abuse and procedures must be put in place to minimize the risk. In addition, innocent behaviour can be wrongly interpreted as "hostile" and both children and adults need to be protected from the implications of such a mistake. However, as a result of being more involved in human interaction, the children will actually develop new skills, coping mechanisms and an improved capacity for social intercourse, cooperation and interpretation of the world around them.

The academic treadmill leading to examinations and the provision of diplomas is important but, if *overvalued*, it leads to young students being deprived of a complete childhood because they become closeted and deprived of the variety and depth of experience valuable for the development of a fully rounded character. Experiential Education provides an educational arena devoid of censure and blame, negative criticism and instruction in the right way of doing things as perceived by

the adult. In these circumstances, children can both practice and develop valuable life skills and establish true faith in personal values through the internalization of lessons in living as opposed to responding to prescription or instruction.

It is important that both the educator (we tend to use the word "facilitator") and learner may experience success, failure, adventure, risk-taking and uncertainty, since the outcomes of experience cannot be totally predicted.

Experience isn't overly sanitized so as to increase the likelihood of favourable outcomes because success isn't necessarily about winning, material achievement or enhancement of personal status. Physical and emotional safety is of paramount importance and activities aren't deliberately designed to be hard, strenuous or tests of endurance - character-building in the militaristic sense. Importantly, the children set their own participative limits. Having volunteered to take part, they have the unimpeachable right to withdraw *for whatever reason*.

Indeed, the very decision to withdraw is part of the learning experience. Why has the child decided enough is enough? Having the opportunity to set personal limits in this manner enables the child to explore the entire concept of selfhood. How often is a child permitted to say "NO" in an educational context and not be chastised for doing so?

Both the learners and facilitators are given opportunities to explore and examine their own values and it can be argued that both engage in the experience *soulfully*. How often is a child safe to invest his/her soul in learning because no educator seeks to define the reaction that is deemed appropriate?

The Role of the Adult

The coordination of programmes in experiential learning together with the supervision / facilitation of the activities requires certain know how. These things demand the development of a range of skills that are different from those that are generally used in the classroom. Planning and logistical ability is required. Educators need to be able to cope with practical issues that arise outside of the school or youth centre while

also dealing with a new range of formalities and regulations. The facilitation of experiential learning certainly involves *teaching*. However, there is a very significant difference in the style of teaching.

Equilibrium's team contains some of Bulgaria's most resourceful and adventurous facilitators in experiential learning who are also highly experienced trainers. We are not theorists, we are activists and the content of this module reflects the sort of thing we do frequently. We've tried to keep that content as simple and practical as possible.

Facilitating an Experiential Education session

A fastidious approach is destined to fail and any facilitator who places faith in the perfect execution of the various activities and games will become disappointed. That person is likely to blame colleagues or the children themselves when things go wrong. The trouble is - when it comes to interactive learning, events will *never* unfold according to an inflexible plan. The process is, in essence, a sophisticated and elaborate form of play. What exactly is the *right* way to play?

To describe the process as a form of play is not to suggest a lack of seriousness in the purpose of Experiential Education. However, if the endeavour is approached without the requisite lightness of spirit it is likely to founder because of the earnestness, self-consciousness or dictatorial tendency of the adult participant.

Most parents have been guilty of providing their children with a birthday party that was ridiculously over-organised. They'd invested so much time and effort planning and preparing that when party time arrived they simply took over -

"Oh, it's time for games"

"Oh, it's time to bring in the birthday cake"

The party was run like a military exercise and when the children complained they were blamed for being ungrateful and uncooperative.

When facilitating Experiential Learning it's important to remember that the games and the other activities don't matter. In themselves, they aren't particularly important. They are only components in a system of

communication like words, like gestures. That's all they are and they can be misused.

If we become preoccupied with the activities themselves, with their successful implementation, we will fail as communicators in the same way that mum or dad ruined the birthday party.

This will happen because we give the execution of the activity priority over the underlying purpose, which is

- To engage young minds with the subject that is being explored without directing or coercing
- To interact as a learning community in a spirit of exploration and adventure
- To communicate approximately as equals so that the facilitator is a member of the community and not apart from it

The project 'The Forest in the City' was designed to sensitize children to the contribution of trees to their lives as young urbanites. Activities and games were designed to fulfill this purpose and games generally involve rules. Informality does not mean a lack of structure or "stage management" in the execution of educational sessions. However, the activities are only *tools*. Yes, there is an optimal way to use most tools but optimal does not mean "exclusive". If, as facilitators, we seek to congratulate ourselves for our skill, our ingenuity, our success when we employ these activities our intervention becomes too obtrusive and we are in danger of taking credit for the skill, the ingenuity, the success of the children. *Good facilitation shows a lightness of touch.*

Improvisational skill is demanded. The children may show a great deal of enthusiasm for a particular activity that is only a small component of what you had planned for a session. Can you prolong the activity without damaging the integrity of the larger programme? An activity that is a particular favourite of yours may not hold the same appeal for the children. Do you have an escape route, a means of purposefully changing direction while preserving the spirit of the larger programme?

Many highly experienced live performers ranging from comics to musicians have stated that they are never quite sure at the start of a performance where it is going to lead - they take their cues from the audience. Experiential educators gradually develop a similar type of

empathy and confidence. It certainly helps if they have a great deal of good material at their fingertips but the artistry is in the interpretation of the material, in the way it is blended and employed to elicit reactions.

The educator's primary roles include setting suitable experiences, posing problems, setting boundaries, supporting learners, ensuring physical and emotional safety, and facilitating the learning process. He / she acts primarily as an *agent* who promotes events or sets them in motion without trying to determine a particular outcome.

The educator recognizes and encourages *spontaneous* opportunities for learning while striving to remain aware of his / her biases, judgments, and preconceptions and how they influence the learner. It's important to make use of ideas and suggestions that simply crop up during a session while also reacting constructively to surprises, revelations or sets of circumstances that were not anticipated.

Ideally, the design of the learning experience includes the possibility to learn from natural consequences, mistakes, and successes. This demands a great deal of self-discipline from a trained pedagogue (or for that matter, an experienced parent) to avoid the natural inclination towards attempting to dictate outcomes.

A practical example:

- **Refraining from trying to dictate outcomes**
- **Reacting spontaneously to educational opportunities**

David led the exploration of the significance of trees in Bulgarian folklore and traditional practice. He talked about the effectiveness of hawthorn in repelling evil - it can be used to destroy a vampire and it will protect male travelers from the hostile attentions of the samodivi.

The children were invited to split into pairs. One person would draw the samodiva, the other would provide a representation of a hunter clutching his hawthorn stick. Despite the fact that David provided a great deal of detail about traditional representations of samodivi, most of the drawings resembled chalga performers. The hunters brandished weaponry including Kalashnikov A-47s, hand grenades and bazookas with the hawthorn apparently added as an afterthought.

It would have been totally inappropriate to proclaim - "They're not supposed to look like that!" The chalga girl appropriately represents seduction while, on the basis of modern expectations, the arsenal of weapons provides splendid back up should the hawthorn fail. As stated above, Experiential Education should permit the exploration of values and when the kids provided a contemporary twist to a traditional motif, it represented an ideal opportunity to invite the young artists to consider their reasoning.

This opportunity arose unexpectedly as the facilitators did not anticipate the images of chalga or modern killing power. Being accustomed to the twists and turns that characterize informal exploration of a theme, they were able to react to create an opportunity for learning and personal reflection.

Starting a Session - Breaking the Ice

No great mystery surrounds the process of breaking the ice. It simply involves dealing with novelty (new facilitators, participants, a change of venue or scenario) by a process of introduction while giving the children the time to adjust to circumstances to which they are unaccustomed. There is no *correct* or *best* way of doing this. Many simple games are designed for ice breaking and a selection are described in Appendix 1. Such games instill an immediate sense of fun and the rules provide a sense of security - the kids understand what is expected of them - that is valuable at this early stage in the proceedings.

You will notice that the games tend to involve taking turns to undertake some sort of short performance and this creates a *sense of fairness* - everybody does the **same** thing (or similar).

It is important for the adult facilitator(s) to take part. Our experience has demonstrated that children respond very favourably when the facilitators introduce themselves fully and unreservedly using the same criteria as those that apply for the young participants. So, if the kids quote their hobbies, the adults should do likewise. Such a process of *reciprocation* is a highly important component of the facilitation of Experiential Learning. This is a difficult thing for some adults to do but **you do not need to be authoritarian or distant in order to maintain authority**. The efficacy of Experiential Education is reduced if the "distance" between the educators and learners is too great.

Facilitation and Teamwork

The EQ trainers tend to work in teams of two / three facilitators with groups of less than twenty children. We do not claim that this arrangement is optimal for all age groups or styles of activity - it simply suited the composition of our team and the normal age range of the young participants (young teenagers). For one session named 'Trees and Human Survival' it was important to engender a sense of isolation in the wilderness (although, in reality, the group was twenty minutes from a village and minutes from a source of assistance). In this instance, David was alone with a group of children overnight in a dense forest.

The session briefly described above made use of David's wilderness experience. The other members of the EQ team - Galya, Elena and Dima - have different talents and areas of interest ranging from art and crafts, to storytelling and dramatic interpretation and we also employed the botanical knowledge of a colleague from the museum, Venci Petkov. Thus, different people led the groups at different times.

Leadership was varied depending on whose ideas we were acting upon at any particular time and on the basis of the strengths and talents being employed. Remember that enthusiasm is infectious and this means that, probably, the best person to lead activities is the person who devised them (although this needn't always apply). This enthusiasm is generally of greater importance than professional expertise or specialist knowledge. Venci, our botanist, was highly effective in the context of Experiential Education because he was capable of discarding his professional / academic engagement with the subject of trees and leading biological exploration in an animated and almost *childlike* way.

Experiential Education can appeal to the intellect and, indeed, it should. However, sensory appreciation of natural phenomena supplements and, on occasions, replaces description in the form of oratory or the written word. A large part of the facilitator's job is to encourage the constructive use of the senses while remaining within safe boundaries.

A later section in this manual is dedicated to safety considerations. However, at this point, it's important to point out that ensuring physical safety is easier than catering for the total emotional security of the young participants. Facilitators must retain sensitivity towards phobias,

irrational fears and a variety of sensibilities and personal boundaries. Some children will become embarrassed or afraid in a situation most would find innocuous. Experiential Education does not mean turning every boy into Action Man and every girl into Jungle Jane and there is always a risk of a child's reacting badly to a new experience that they actually volunteered to take part in. Not every child can develop the confidence to perform in front of peers or mentors with candour and openness.

Although the expression of opinion is part of the facilitator's engagement with the children, there is no room for judgementalism directed at the children or aspects of their lives. Teenagers are adept at tossing a loaded gun at an adult during conversation. You don't want to shoot yourself in the foot and you certainly don't want to be responsible for assassination.

There may also be times when you need to place yourself between an immature gunman and a potential victim. The danger need not arise from malice and, in fact, it is often the case that the likely victim is the person swinging the six-shooter who is in danger of shooting himself. He has found his voice and it is carrying him in a direction in which he probably shouldn't go.

Practical Example 1 - irrational behaviour

The EQ team encountered one boy aged 11 who was not only obsessively concerned about personal cleanliness, he also refused to depart from areas of asphalt while in the Rusenski Lom natural park. He did this because his mother had provided dire warnings about biting insects and snakes that lurk in the undergrowth. (We later discovered that mum hadn't really wanted him to go on the trip but dad had overruled her.)

When working with groups of children (and especially in an outdoor setting) it is essential that you have the capacity to have an adult accompany someone who separates from the group or the capacity to divide the group in reaction to special circumstances without leaving any children inadequately supervised. Our young straggler was always accompanied and reassured when he lagged behind. Most importantly, despite the specialist knowledge of some of the adults present, he was not lectured on the issue of snakes and creepy-crawlies.

To some adults, this may seem like mollycoddling a child who was being silly by the standards of the majority. After all, he *had* volunteered to

take part in the excursion and, indeed, parental consent had been obtained. His mother must have been aware that she was placing her son in an impossible situation and, indeed, his inner struggle appeared to be torturing him. He could rationalize on the basis of the action of his peers and adults he knew to have a great deal of relevant experience and knowledge concerning the real threat posed by insects and snakes. However, he could not combat the fear that had been planted in him.

In such a situation it is crucial for the facilitator to demonstrate empathy and to respect the child's inalienable right to deal with his fears on his own terms (or fail to deal with them).

Practical Example 2 - the loaded gun

Hawthorn can be employed in the destruction of vampires. When supposedly drawing a vampire, one little lad produced an obvious self-portrait. When asked why he'd represented himself as a creature of the night, he showed embarrassment and mumbled a few words about power and immortality. Unfortunately, he'd made the mistake of revealing his sexual fantasy involving ease of access to any chosen bedroom to a colleague who decided that this needed to be shared with the entire group.

Elena swooped like a vampire to nip the story in the bud while David, feeling he was about to start laughing with the other children, surreptitiously left the room and stayed in the corridor until he was sure he wouldn't betray his amusement.

The cohesion of a group is assisted by humour - the young participants tease one another, the adult facilitators tease the young participants while showing that they don't mind jokes at their expense. However, the boy who is the subject of this example was socially immature and inept in the company of children his own age. David and Elena both recognised that he had made a brave decision to join the group. Between classes at school, he was frequently the butt of jokes. They reacted to minimize his humiliation and to prevent it eroding the confidence he had gained over previous sessions.

The above examples show children experiencing difficulties that would not have arisen in the classroom where self-expression and physical movement are limited according to a long-established protocol. This does, inevitably, provide safety. However, it also limits the range of potential achievements on the basis of the outcomes that the tutor is trying to dictate.

It is extremely difficult for a grown person to rationalize and reassess when an attitude, belief or fear derives from a familial role model or pedagogue encountered during childhood. It is arguable that the day of soul-searching spent in the Rusenski Lom provided the boy in question with increased capacity to rationalize and reassess and, perhaps, he may not enter adulthood as a confirmed urbanite with an abiding fear of wild places that he will relay to his own children. The little vampire *had been* showing increased confidence and an improvement in his social skills and the facilitators revealed the trustworthiness that was, in a manner of speaking, their part of the bargain. They stepped in and assisted when he slipped up. After all, what are friends for?

Facilitation isn't about standing with your arms folded, supervising, and adults should get involved while avoiding becoming dominant. However, it's wise to give one adult the job of Objective Observer. This person purposefully remains disengaged and watches the entire group. Not only is this person able to give the active facilitators feedback about the overall shape of the session after it has ended, he/she is available during the session to react to any indication of problems.

Unless you are working with an exceptional group that, through mutual experience, has developed into a well-balanced unit in which intentions and purposes tend to coalesce, you will inevitably find that at least one group member does not participate as eagerly or dynamically as the rest. The Objective Observer should react to any sign of negative emotion - distress, boredom or whatever. However, if a child is content to sit and watch or chooses to withdraw from the melee at any stage, *he / she is still performing an experiential function within the group. Don't interfere.*

Further Tips for facilitators - general considerations

- As a general rule, avoid complexity, the longer it takes to explain an activity, the more likely it is to fall apart on execution.
- Take care of the "little things" as this demonstrates respect for the children to which they will respond. Start the session at the appointed time. Be polite using expressions like "Good morning", "please" and "thank you".
- Be authoritative - you're the guide and you need to earn trust - but don't talk down to the children.
- Be an active listener. Pay close attention when a child speaks to you and show respect for his/her thoughts and beliefs.
- Don't expect children to do something that you would not do yourself if you were in their position.
- Promoting informality does not mean it is necessary to behave like a clown. Few people are actually good at telling jokes or funny stories and children will tire of a facilitator who constantly *performs*.
- Communicate clearly and purposefully with openness and honesty tempered by tactfulness.
- Some children may have led a fairly sheltered life providing a narrow range of experience and this can be a source of embarrassment. Such children may be discouraged or even intimidated by the apparent sophistication of their peers or overwhelmed by the fact that their facilitators appear to have led a life of great adventure. (A day trip to Varna can seem like a great adventure to certain kids). The personalization of sessions is important and relevant anecdotes help to properly imbed the experience currently being shared into the lives of the various group members. However, sensitivity is essential and, most certainly, boastfulness and exaggeration should be discouraged.
- In general, avoid rigorous timekeeping in the course of events and design sessions according to the average attention span of the group members. Long activities should be broken down into discrete, self-contained units. Whether you are traveling outdoors or involved in indoor crafts, it is sensible to allow the slowest members of the group to set the pace. Those who are fast are capable of slowing down while those who are slow are normally unable to go any faster.
- Experiential Education promotes a welcome sense of camaraderie and intimacy among young colleagues and also between educator and learner. For this reason, before embarking on a programme, it is important to formulate guidelines pertaining to all matters sexual

and specifying the types of situations that should be rigorously avoided.

Practical Example - Male facilitators working with young, female participants

David has a daughter, three goddaughters and three younger sisters. As you can imagine, he is totally at ease in the company of women and is utterly unfazed when working with teenaged girls. By nature, he is tactile, open and affectionate but, as a skilled youth worker, he modulates his behaviour according to the circumstances rigorously avoiding situations that could be misinterpreted.

David has provided the following advice for male teachers / youth workers.

"The teenage years are characterized by emotional confusion, the experiencing of feelings you don't really understand, feelings that seem too big to cope with. It's very common for teenage girls to form powerful attractions to adult males and these attractions need not be totally driven by awakening sexual feelings. Experiential Education can create situations in which the male idol is highly accessible and this can prevent the infatuation from sizzling out in the way it would in general circumstances.

If a male facilitator becomes aware that a difficult situation is developing it is best that he refers the matter to a female colleague. It's a difficult thing for the man to try to deal with himself - he may simply make matters worse. A sense of rejection can be heartbreaking for a youngster. The best person to talk to the girl is a woman she knows and trusts."

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Group Dynamics

During most of the sessions relating to The Forest in the City, we worked with mixed sex groups of teenagers in the age range 12-15. Nevertheless, on occasions, younger children were successfully integrated. Remember, a child's level of intellectual attainment isn't all that important although, obviously, it is essential to avoid insulting the intelligence of group members. Age itself isn't a barrier and we did not experience difficulty because of levels of socialization skills. However, younger children generally lack the physical dexterity and physical / mental stamina of older kids and these are barriers to successful integration. Thus, we tended to find that the integration of mixed-age groups depends largely on the choice of activity.

Factionalism may arise when children come in ready-made groups representing different schools or clubs. Teenagers are naturally clannish - they need to feel a sense of belonging to something. However, it's utterly possible for the new, Experiential Education group to become a comfort zone - a new team that the children can identify with.

During the course of The Forest in the City project, we discovered that a small number of the children formed an extremely strong attachment to and, probably, a dependence on the routine we provided. In fact, on occasions they turned up at the meeting place unannounced. This created a practical dilemma: we had other things to do and could not be at the children's beck and call. It also created a moral dilemma: we obviously answered a need, a type of vulnerability that the children shared, and we had to ask ourselves how far we should respond when we had no formal obligation - we are not social welfare providers.

A workable solution seemed to be the sort of reaction you would demonstrate if an adult friend or colleague appeared unexpectedly - you demonstrate that you are pleased to see him / her but indicate in a courteous manner that you are, in fact, rather busy and can't play host unless a crisis or something of particular importance has prompted the visit.

There is no great mystery to what was being demonstrated by kids arriving unexpectedly. Children that have been largely deprived of supportive attention from adults will form strong attachments when

someone does become accessible or responsive. They will seek this person's approval and try to please.

If carried into adulthood, attention seeking can create social tension around the person that craves approval. It is something that teenagers need to be sensitively weaned out of and Equilibrium has discovered that the Experiential Education formula can help. It's natural to suppose that the group provides a captive audience and to assume that adult facilitators who feel *obliged* to be open and accessible are easy victims. However, the accent on (hectic) activity does not provide an easy platform on which to seek attention. In addition, the routine provides opportunities for personal reflection and self-expression, the comparison of self with others and this means that the attention seeker is joyfully confronted with facets of his/her *true* self. Thankfully, these distract that person away from the "Look-at-me" character that is the normal persona they project.

We discovered that it was this profound sense of Self that was the root of the addiction to the routine that Equilibrium provided and that caused the children to turn up unexpectedly. After a short time, most discovered that they did not need the type of scenario that Equilibrium provided and that they could sustain that sense of Self in other situations.

On the other hand, we also experienced paucity of responsiveness in some teenagers. Children who have had little to occupy them outside of school (and who have never been encouraged to show initiative or to explore) find it difficult to respond to the "democratic" spirit of Experiential Education - the lack of coercion. They seem blighted by apathy and have lost the ability to emotionally and unabashedly engage with new experience - a capacity that, in an ideal world, should characterize childhood. After all, we talk about "childlike fascination".

Children thus affected may provide disappointing reactions to the prompts and guidance given by the facilitators. For them camaraderie is what it's all about, simply hanging out with the gang.

During *The Forest in the City*, Equilibrium encountered both types of reaction - a complete contrast. Does the first suggest the roaring success of our mission to inspire while the latter reveals that, on occasions, our best efforts were ineffectual?

The team feels that the contemporary reaction of the children is probably not the most important criterion on which to judge Experiential Education. The synthesis of experience can be a long-term process and we look to the future. We focus especially on the transition to adulthood. By simply extending experiential boundaries, by providing a larger range of reference points, Equilibrium feels that it was improving the chances for the children involved to rationalize and reassess *at some stage in their life*. They have the rest of their lives in which to respond.

Experiential Education embraces the concept of *adventure* as an appropriate manner in which to engage with the world. We tend to associate the idea of adventure with recklessness; adventures are seen as the sort of stunts that satisfy those types who seek the rush of adrenalin.

There is an alternative definition that identifies adventure as a learning mechanism. Adventure involves the quest for *natural* meaning and *depth* of understanding. It isn't a matter of saying - "I'll believe it when I see it". This reflects cynicism. Rather, it's about openness in combination with thoroughness and discernment - "I will believe it not because I am told that it is true but because I have satisfied myself that it is true."

Experiential Education promotes adaptability, flexibility and openness to learning opportunities. It increases a person's capacity to weigh up options.

Inevitably, during the course of *The Forest in the City* the adult facilitators talked a great deal about trees on the basis of their experience and accumulated knowledge. However, not only was this verbal and written information supported by graphic demonstration, the educators responded unreservedly to teenage questions. Thus, the group members could pursue lines of enquiry and physically examine the tree-related phenomena *to their satisfaction* in so far as this was possible.

So, it **was** true that some of the teenagers appeared to simply want to hang out and they seemed to be locked into a regime of fashion, football, chalsa, sex and cigarettes - hardly adventure material. But they *did* attend the sessions. What did Equilibrium provide for these children? The answer - a glimpse of the world outside the stockade. The walls of that stockade were just too formidable for them to knock down at this time but the potential has been created.

Demographic Factors

To a large extent, schools and youth clubs are characterized by the catchment areas from which they source children. Equilibrium chose to operate in poorer neighbourhoods that provided little variety in education and structured recreation. This meant that the team had to cope with a culture of low expectation and the effect that this had on the preparedness and responsiveness of the children. The children were simply unaccustomed to the level of attention that was being lavished on them by people from outside their family circles. (The materialism and academic competitiveness that prevails in the "elite" schools could have created a different range of difficulties had we chosen to work in this area.)

Some showed an attention-seeking response as referred to above. Others simply seemed unable to deal with the demonstration of such commitment by a strange group of adults who appeared to have descended from the Planet Enthusiasm. This was not the same type of unresponsiveness dealt with above that involved children cocooned in a "complacency bubble" because they were content with a range of interests that they perceived as the only ones relevant to their station in life. While some would fake the cynicism of the Complacency Bubble Gang, it actually concealed a fear of **reciprocation**.

Reciprocation involves mutual action, give and take. Behavioural patterns like enthusiasm and openness tend to demand similar types of behaviour in return. This is rather a tall order for someone who isn't ready, someone who has been taken by surprise.

Strategic Response

In such circumstances (and also as a response to multiple complacency bubbles floating through a group session), it would have been easy to fall into the trap of blaming the children for their unresponsiveness, blaming them for their carelessness regarding timekeeping and unreliability when it came to regular attendance. Alternatively, we could have blamed these things on parental indifference or inadequate support from the local schools. However, there are effective strategies for dealing with unresponsiveness -

- Avoid expressing negativity or pessimism in front of children and co-workers.
- *Don't* try to be hip or to talk like a teenager (you'll just make a fool of yourself) but *do* make the effort to present things in a "teenager friendly" manner.
- Don't push - lead and develop momentum. Initiative is a powerful transformational force to which most will respond favourably. Don't worry about those who don't follow immediately but invest your energy in those who do thus creating an example that the poor responders may find intriguing. If some remain unresponsive, remember that their being present is **not a waste of time**. Information can be ignored or immediately forgotten but experience remains in the active memory creating potential for the future.
- Be open and explicit about shared responsibility for the meaningful progress of each session and the project as a whole.
- Avoid excessive reliance on institutional channels of communication to sustain child attendance. If the institution in question hasn't formally defined responsibility, an institutionalized individual is unlikely to take that responsibility. Peer-to-peer communication is effective and the young, enthusiastic stalwarts of the programme are the best ambassadors, Use them!
- Keep the parents informed and remember that mums and dads will usually support the ventures of their children provided that they are not harmful or too expensive.
- Employ humour with adults and children alike but don't make fun of anybody. Humour reduces inhibition and the provocation of laughter can be a powerful persuasive force.

Anthony Judge, the influential American social commentator, has written:

"Humour is seen as a vital supportive aspect of the learning process. Humour would help to reframe some problems creatively - especially for those who have been over-exposed to them."

(Humour and International Challenges, 1998)

Shared laughter is an effective adhesive that holds groups together and sustains programmes of activity.

Character Traits

The EQ team holds the view that extroversion and introversion can be entirely natural and, therefore, they represent totally legitimate character traits that should be accepted. We recognize, however, that both conditions can develop when children are exposed to long periods of trauma.

In any event, when children demonstrate extreme forms of one or other of these traits, they are not ideal candidates for sessions of Experiential Education involving group work. The extrovert's desire to dominate can disrupt the proceedings. The introvert will find the session torturous. Both types **can** respond well to trained mentors but the following observations need to be borne in mind -

- Introverts can probably cope with the company of a small number of children who are equally placid
- Extroverted children can rarely cope with fellow extroverts because of the need to *compete* for attention

It is to be expected that extroverts will put themselves forward for group activities and it's a good idea to find out as much as you can about the children at the planning stage. A single extreme extrovert can probably be coped with but competing extroverts cause major disruption and steps should be taken to organize groups appropriately.

Some parents and teachers think that introverted children should be encouraged (or even forced) "to become more sociable". The EQ team totally repudiates the belief that natural introverts can change in this way and, indeed, we feel that this type of effort can damage a child emotionally.

The "intensity" of Experiential Education makes it crucial to work only with children who have **volunteered**. An introverted child may do this and benefit from the decision simply because they are not coerced and can set their own boundaries. However, it is vital to bear in mind that introverts give energy when they are interacting with others. This means that all those popular, outgoing extroverts take energy from introverts when they are together in groups. This happens because of the introvert's need to internalize experience that, by necessity, involves the careful selection of something they want to dedicate their attention to and their

consequent absorption in that activity. Introverts can become drained during an event that requires a good deal of social interaction simply because there is too much happening and it overloads their mental circuitry. They may retreat to a quiet corner to recuperate and should be permitted to do so.

Extreme extroverts are highly selective listeners picking up and reacting to the snippets that correlate with their capacity to push themselves forward and perform to their audience.

Most people are somewhere in the middle and, on the basis of the above explanation of the mechanics of group-oriented Experiential Education, you can see the necessity of both traits. Introverts are naturally inclined towards "self-education" and the pursuit of lines of enquiry, investigation or exploration on the basis of personal curiosity until they are satisfied or thwarted in their search. Extroverts thrive in the group scenario but their need for self-expression can render proceedings "undemocratic" because of their reluctance to give others the speaker's platform.

Devising the Programme and Framing Activity Sessions

At an early stage the team had produced a long list of possible activities, games and discussion topics that provided the opportunity to approach the issue of Trees from a wide variety of perspectives.

Our next job was to devise a programme that did not appear to have been thrown together in a random fashion. We were concerned that each session should have a sense of completeness and self-containment but also that there should be a thread of continuity binding the sessions together. This meant identifying thematic relationships and we soon discovered that there were multiple links operating on different levels. There might have been an obvious relationship between A and B that worked on an intellectual dimension, but it appeared rational to group A with C for hard, practical reasons. We faced a variety of practical issues -

- Trees change with the seasons - when would it be best to undertake this activity?

- What is the ideal venue for this session and when will the venue be available?
- Is this a warm-weather, outdoor activity or can it be done indoors in winter?
- Is this likely to be messy?

Activities demand equipment and the right personnel. For certain ventures, the written permission of a parent needs to be obtained.

Practical Example - Thematic Links and Practical Considerations

One craft-oriented session involved making clay moulds from tree bark. The Kiril and Metodii School in Sredna Kula was an ideal location. Not only was there a large classroom available where the team could distribute the tree bark that had been collected from a forest (that came in all shapes and sizes), the school yard contained a number of trees with rough bark that was great for making moulds.

The ritual practice of ancient Thracian civilization provided a precedent for creating moulds from tree bark. By explaining this to the children as they undertook the activity, not only did we provide an imaginative context, we created a link to future sessions relating to the significance of trees in Bulgarian traditional practice and folklore.

An overarching consideration is the provision of adequate preparation time for the different sessions.

Practical Example - Scheduling

The manufacture of clay moulds from tree bark was timetabled for the beginning of September, shortly after the start of the school year.

Tree bark in sufficient quantities could only be sourced in the forested areas outside the city. It would be necessary for someone to go by car.

The summer had been atrociously wet and forest material was unlikely to be dry. Collection and storage would be messy. Wet bark would be useless for the activity and we would need drying facilities.

We decided to ensure that the material had been collected at least two weeks before the allotted time for the activity.

Even then, the drying-out period produced bark samples that were only just dry enough to work with. We were lucky.

Safety Considerations

A programme of Experiential Education involves transporting groups of youngsters into a variety of settings in which they will undertake dynamic activity. The venue itself is a vital component of the experience and the relationship between each child and the physical environment needs to be as natural and multi-faceted as possible. However, the team of educators has a duty as carers or temporary guardians and they need to anticipate the potential hazards and react appropriately.

Indoor venues should *always* be pre-inspected and assessed as should urban, outdoor settings like parks. When working in rural settings (the EQ team took a group into the Rusenski Lom natural park and another into woodlands near Razgrad) it is essential that at least one team member (and preferably more than one) is intimately acquainted with the type of terrain you are entering and that the other adults have been thoroughly briefed.

Never enter a situation in which you are deprived of communication capability and the ability to call for assistance in an emergency.

When working in an unpopulated area you **must** remain aware of the following two things

- Mobile telephones are not infallible and in certain areas you lose your connection with the network. It pays to check your phone regularly and to have designed a strategy for coping with emergencies should you be deprived of this type of communication.
- During an outdoor programme, supervisors should continually be involved in a process of *risk assessment* that involves remaining

aware of the likely time it will take for emergency assistance to arrive.

Practical Example - Assessment of a Building

A festive event involved the use of an upper story of a museum building. While the ground floor and basement were in full use, the interiors of upper floors were only partially constructed. The venue provided ample space and the lack of furnishings and expensive flooring meant we could play games that involved scattering materials and a great deal of mess.

However, the following issues demanded careful planning -

- Electricity had not been installed on the upper floors - lighting would be inadequate and we would need to use a remote source of power for electronic sound equipment.

We chose to conduct the event during daylight hours, installed strategically place spotlights and took extreme care with the channeling of cables to ensure they did not become a hazard.

- The upper floors were accessed by a stairway open at one side exposing a drop

The stairs were lit with candles and, while this blended with the rest of the festive decoration, it was also done for the sake of providing additional light. In addition, barriers were positioned to offer protection in the most hazardous parts of the stairs.

- There was a risk of some of the numerous guests wandering to other floors

These areas were cordoned off and access by stairs was blocked. Nevertheless, the event was meticulously supervised and Equilibrium personnel repeatedly checked the places that were off limits.

Medical Competence

Schools contain staff with medical competence and experiential educators should ensure they have similar cover. When working outdoors,

it is essential that the supervisory team contains someone who is competent in *medical first aid* and the other adults should be prepared to act under instructions in an emergency situation. In some situations, *rescue techniques* are important so that a casualty can be competently removed from a hazardous situation / location.

Outdoor hazards - in brief

The Weather

Always check the weather forecast before departing on an outdoor expedition even if conditions have been stable for a number of days. Children should be instructed to dress / carry clothing in accordance with this up-to-date forecast even if this countermands earlier general instructions. Remember - when working outdoor for a significant period of time, inadequate or inappropriate clothing is a hazard in itself. The fact that the group is working within city limits does not reduce the significance of appropriateness in dress.

Heat

Heat and exposure to the sun can lead to all sorts of problems ranging from skin irritation to total collapse. Supervisors should make provision for the ample supply of liquids. In addition, they should keep the times when the group is in direct sun to a minimum and avoid being in an exposed area during the midday sun. The following is a list of essential considerations for all participants -

- A sunhat
- Sun cream
- Loose, comfortable clothing in reflective colours (denim jeans are not recommended)

Participants should save their energy for the prescribed activities but resist the temptation to sunbathe between sessions because this increases susceptibility to heat-induced trauma. It's pleasant to chat but noise is not conducive to relaxation. Rest periods represent the ideal time to encourage the young participants to listen to natural sounds like birdsong.

As far as possible, make use of natural sources of shade even when on the move.

Supervisors should be vigilant for signs of an adverse reaction to heat and exposure to the sun.

1. **Skin Irritation:** Profuse sweating, coupled by rubbing from clothing, can cause the blockage of sweat glands. This leads to uncomfortable skin irritation. A similarly uncomfortable reaction can occur because of an allergic reaction brought on by exposure to the sun. In both instances, the affected area should be treated with cool water and then covered by loose, lightweight, *dry* clothing. The consumption of liquid can actually make these conditions worse and if the person affected is at risk of becoming dehydrated through continuing to participate in the activities, it is, obviously, better to remove him / her to safety.
2. **Sunburn:** We tend to associate this condition with light-haired, fair-skinned people but nobody is impervious to the effect of the hot sun on exposed skin. Some people believe that those who have already built up a good suntan no longer need to take precautions but this isn't true. Becoming sunburned while you are expending energy can rapidly lead to the development of *heat cramps*.
3. **Heat Cramps:** Heat cramps can signal the potential onslaught of *heat exhaustion*, a condition that does not necessarily arise from direct exposure to the sun - the combination of intense heat and humidity is the normal cause. A sufferer will inevitably feel weak and dizzy and he/she may show signs of shallow breathing. The person may vomit. The sufferer needs coolness and shade and access to cool (**not** cold) water containing a pinch of salt. **A supply of salt is an important component of any summer first aid kit.**
4. **Heat Exhaustion:** This condition is signaled when a person becomes pale-faced and his/her skin feels cold and clammy. A weak pulse can be expected. Someone suffering from heat exhaustion requires the same treatment as for heat cramps but speed and efficiency are highly important - heat exhaustion can quickly lead to delirium and even unconsciousness.

A failure to react appropriately to signs of heat exhaustion could lead to the development of a life-threatening condition and a member of the adult team should know how to react in this worst-case scenario.

Wet Weather

Not only is it extremely unpleasant getting wet (effective waterproofs should be carried whenever there is a risk of rain), many types of terrain become dangerous in wet weather. This means that the adult team needs to be capable of making an authoritative decision -

- Do you go back the way you came?
- Do you proceed towards your intended destination?
- Do you alter your course?
- Do you seek any shelter that is close at hand?

Electrical Storms

It is unpleasant and even alarming to be caught outdoors during an electrical storm. However, there is no significant danger for the group if the adult supervisors behave appropriately.

If outside, with no time to reach a safe building or vehicle, follow the following rules-

- Do not stand underneath a natural lightning rod such as a tall, isolated tree.
- Avoid projecting above the surrounding landscape as you would do if you were standing on a hilltop or in an open field
- Get away from open water.
- Get away from tractors and other metal farm machinery.
- Stay away from wire fences, clotheslines, metal pipes, rails and other metallic paths that could carry lightning to you from some distance away.
- Discard any metal equipment you may have been using and do not use an umbrella for shelter.
- Avoid standing in small isolated sheds or other small structures in open areas.
- In a forest, seek shelter in a low area under a thick growth of small trees. In open areas, go to a low place such as a ravine or a valley.
- If you're hopelessly isolated in a level field and you feel your hair stand on end - indicating that lightning is about to strike - drop to your knees and bend forward putting your hands on your knees. Do not lie flat on the ground.

Winter Extremes

Winter weather patterns create unpredictability and increased objective danger. In addition, it is difficult to ensure that city children have access to suitable thermal clothing and footwear that is absolutely waterproof. Therefore, it is wise to avoid ambitious outdoor activity during winter conditions.

Even if you choose to stay close to base, be aware that hypothermia can occur in the local park or other urban setting. Can you identify the early warning signs and do you know how to react? What is the best way to assist someone with extremely cold extremities (hands, feet, face)?

Spotting Hypothermia

Any combination of the following symptoms may indicate the onset of hypothermia –

- Irrational behaviour - a sudden burst of energy followed by extreme lethargy
- A slowing of responses / inadequacy of response
- Sudden, uncontrollable fits of shivering
- Loss of coordination
- Blurred vision (usually - but not always - accompanied by severe headaches)
- Abdominal pains

Reacting to the symptoms

Apply the following general rules -

- If heat is lost rapidly - re-warm rapidly
- If heat is lost over a period of time - re-warm slowly

Prevent further heat loss and shelter the child from the elements as best you can until you can get him / her indoors. Once indoors, replace wet clothing *one item at a time* (don't strip the casualty). Apply *gentle* warmth. Target the heat towards the pit of the stomach, small of the back, armpits, back of the neck, wrists and between the thighs. Provide warm drinks and sugary food but remember that the child is not cured when his/her temperature returns to normal - recovery takes time and requires rest.

Freezing Extremities

Certainly, friction creates heat but **never** rub a child's hands, feet or face to provide warmth as this can damage blood vessels close to skin. Don't march the child straight to the nearest open fire or radiator. The following procedure should be applied -

Feet / hands

- Remove wet gloves or socks
- Use someone else's body heat by placing the child's feet/hands under another person's armpits, between someone's thighs or in the pit of someone's stomach with clothing on top.
- Provide dry garments (always carry spares)

Face

- Blow gently on the affected areas - cheeks / nose
- Provide a soft scarf (or improvised alternative) as a wind-stopper around the face.

Keeping hands and feet warm - The Penguin Bounce

The following amusing procedure encourages blood circulation -

- Hold your arms down straight by the sides of your body so that your wrists are against the tops of your legs.
- Splay your hands outwards like a penguin's wings
- Bounce up and down by lifting your heels from the ground

Winter Clothing

Avoid overheating - your clothing should permit ventilation. Multiple thin layers worn under a waterproof exterior shell are preferable to massive bulk. This also permits you to remove clothing if you become too hot. It is also advisable to wear loose-fitting garments that allow air to circulate. Keep dry inside and outside.

Tics and Biting Insects

When working in rural areas, it's sensible to carry insect repellent sufficient for the entire group. In most cases, a single application will

provide protection for an entire day. Some parents don't like using chemical formulae for their children and it is possible to rely on cosmetic lotions that contain tea tree oil although they are not totally effective. Juniper repels mosquitoes but the lanolin-based lotions that are available locally offer poor protection. Some shops stock essential oils and if juniper is available it can be diluted and applied to the skin as a repellent.

Ticks should be removed from the skin as soon as possible. It is important to carry materials that assist the removal while ensuring that a group member understands the technique that ensures the tail is not left penetrating the skin.

Snakes

Snakes can't hear but they are upset by lots of vibration - they will do their best to avoid a group of clumsy humans. However, children should watch their step especially when away from the group. Snakes are sluggish in the cool of the morning, after eating or when shedding skin and their camouflage makes them very difficult to spot.

We recommend the following simple precautions -

- Don't wear shorts or open sandals - long trousers and sturdy footwear are recommended
- Do not put hands or feet in places you can't see
- When resting or picnicking, don't leave shoes, clothing and bags lying in the open as inviting shelter for snakes
- Don't dislodge or lift rocks from the ground and discourage the children from scrambling on boulders

In the case of an encounter with **any** snake (even those recognized as non-poisonous that can still give a dangerous bite), stay calm, don't make any sudden movements and back off slowly.

Hazardous plants

No fruit, berries or fungi should be consumed unless they have been authoritatively identified. Plants that produce a milky sap should not be

handled unless positively identified as safe and similarly the colour red should be interpreted as a warning, Some plants (wild rhubarb, wood sorrel) produce oxalic acid that causes stinging or burning when applied to the skin and should not be handled. If gathering leaves for project activities, avoid the following varieties -

- Plum
- Peach
- Cherry
- Blackberry
- Raspberry

These leaves produce deadly toxins when they wilt and rot and therefore shouldn't be brought into homes or other buildings where there are pets or very young children.

Hazards close to Villages - Stray dogs / dogs guarding livestock and village homes

Be on the lookout for stray dogs in the vicinity of a village especially if you are close to abandoned buildings or old agricultural compounds. Strays tend to be fearful and wary of humans - barking and snarling will to be combined with submissive posturing (rear quarters held low to the ground, tail between the legs, dog won't fully face you).

Dogs guarding homes or livestock are expected by their owners to act aggressively and they probably will be very threatening. Always try to alert the owner by shouting from a distance before you approach an isolated home or group of animals. If nobody replies and a detour is impractical, approach cautiously but noisily - it is best not to take a guard dog by surprise.

If threatened, the biggest person should place himself / herself between the dog(s) and the group, and stand perfectly still facing the animal(s). Movement should be restricted to a few, slow steps to prevent his/her being outflanked. If any child is especially small and vulnerable it is actually preferable for that youngster to stay with the person acting "rearguard", hand-in-hand, while the others file past in a controlled manner.

- No member of the group should run as the dog may interpret this as play and give chase.
- For the same reason, it is unadvisable to lift any child from the ground or to pick up a weapon like a stick.
- Not even the "rearguard" should stare into a dog's eyes as this is highly provocative. However, if attack is imminent - the dog(s) should be *challenged* by the rearguard.
- Nobody should scream. Stay calm.
- If anybody falls or is knocked to the ground, that person should curl up in a ball protecting head and neck.

Once the group has placed a safe distance between itself and the dog(s), the rearguard should back off slowly.

Other hazards within or close to villages

Safety in village locations is largely a matter of common sense. Hazards include

- Discarded equipment and machinery, wire and glass
- Harmful chemicals close to rubbish tips, agricultural compounds etc
- Water pollution - *never* drink from streams or rivers if the water flows from the direction of a village or in an area where animals graze

A lost child / children

Vigilance is required to prevent a child / children becoming separated from the group and there should always be a sufficient number of supervisors to keep an eye on everybody. When traveling, the group should normally proceed at the pace of its slowest members and an adult should walk at the rear. As far as possible, the group should stick to established paths as this assists orientation. All groups members should carry a whistle which, when blown, creates a shrill, unmistakable sound that penetrates barriers that would muffle the human voice. The international distress signal of 3 short blasts in quick succession (repeated at intervals) can be heard from quite a distance.

During rest breaks, activity sessions and picnics, boundaries should be established to stop children wandering too far. It's best not to choose locations close to hazard zones (eg precipices, deep water) and it is also

wise to make a proper assessment of how easy it is to get lost or disoriented in the vicinity. Choose a location with distinctive features / landmarks that can be seen from a distance (this may not be possible when working in woodland areas and great care is needed when operating in regions where there are few distinctive route markers).

If the worst happens, it is important to stay calm and to encourage the children to do likewise - the situation demands rational thought and effective action.

The group **must** remain supervised. It should find a safe, sheltered place to wait - preferably a spot that the group has already passed. It's best to go back a short distance rather than forward unless the group is within a few minutes of a prearranged stopping place or the final destination. Once the group is settled everyone should shout the name(s) of the missing child / children.

Conducting the search

Only two searchers are needed.

1. Without endangering themselves, the searchers should check known hazard areas in the locality before doing anything else. (Anyone who has ventured into such a region needs **immediate** assistance.)
2. Next, the searchers should retrace the steps of the group as far as the last stopping place if practicable. At this stage, it is probably counterproductive to go further or to venture off route.
3. When one adult stays in this location, the other should return to the main group and assist with attending to the needs of the children. This usually means proceeding to the destination. As there's always a chance of finding the missing person/people further en route to that destination, never leave a prearranged route unless this is necessary to ensure the safety of the group.
4. Call qualified reinforcements to help with the search.
5. Two adults should remain on the route for as long as it is safe to do so or until help arrives
 - Adult 1 - at the place where the group first noticed that someone was missing
 - Adult 2 - at the last stopping place

If a searcher hears the distress signal, he/she should proceed in the direction of the sound. It is not a good idea to whistle in response as this can confuse the other searcher. When homing in on the sound, the searcher should shout repeatedly that the lost child/children should stay in one place. Once full voice contact is made (eg searcher and child/children can communicate by shouting), the searcher should emphatically repeat the instruction to stay in one place. A child who is anxious to be reunited with the party will rush frantically and this is not a good idea on many types of terrain. Also it is normally easier for an adult to sensibly deal with physical barriers causing separation than it is for a child.

Relationships with Parents and Schools

In order to promote an educational formula alternative to the summer green school Equilibrium needed to work in the orbit of mainstream education and to interact with teachers, school directors and educational managers. However, our strategy for dealing with educational politics is of no relevance to this manual and this section focuses on the issue of Relevant Permission and steps that are needed to cater adequately for Safety, Security and Transparency when working with children.

A recent tragic transport accident involving a school party and the prevailing national tension regarding child trafficking have led to institutional sensitivity (and, if the truth be told, overreaction) to the whole issue of adults interacting or, more particularly, traveling with children away from the structured confines of school or the social welfare system. Although the current apprehension formed the backdrop to the execution of The Forest in the City it is no immediate relevance to this manual.

Keeping Parents Informed

Below is an extract from Equilibrium's mission statement -

❖ **Engaging with Families**

To sustain a family orientation and to carry the educational experience into the wider community

Equilibrium focuses on two core issues -

1, the integrity of any community is dependent on the integrity of the families of which the community comprises.

2, the maintenance of this integrity is a crucial component of parental responsibility.

With these issues in mind, we place great emphasis on the sanctity of parental choice with respect to their children (in so far as that choice does not jeopardize the safety and / or impinge on the rights of the child or acts to the detriment of other members of the community). When interacting with the young participants in *The Forest in the City*, the issue of parental awareness was of paramount importance. This extended further than simply ensuring that parents knew where their offspring were. We wanted the children to share their experience as far as possible with their families. A core issue when working with the various groups was the great extent to which they were encouraged to discuss the various experiences and personal outcomes with parents, brothers, sisters and peers. As far as possible, Equilibrium avoids creating the situation in which we work with children in a style of capsule that separates the activity from family or community.

Most of the time we were working with young teenagers and it is certainly true that children in this age range tend to enjoy an amount of free movement around the city and actively seek independence from their parents. Nevertheless, Equilibrium took steps to ensure as far as possible that parents knew when their offspring were in our care. In addition, we introduced monitoring systems sufficient to record arrival and departure and to account for the movement of our various charges when in our custody. When working in locations remote from the children's neighbourhoods we ensured that the children returned safely to points where their parents could collect them.

When working with younger children, they were always returned into the hands of parents or recognised guardians.

Entering Unpopulated Areas

While, in reality, a teeming city contains at least as many objective dangers for children as wild areas, working with children in unpopulated areas means that

- You are creating physical distance between the various children and their family / community
- You are creating a gulf in a psychological sense because the children are removed from their parent's normal arena of activity in which their stock responses are relevant.

While you do encounter hill-walkers, hunters, alpinists and camping enthusiasts in Ruse like any other city, the majority of urbanites have a limited understanding of wild areas and are, therefore, apprehensive about the transportation of their children into unpopulated regions. Adult city-dwellers believe they know how to operate in the city and it is entirely natural for them to devalue or overlook urban dangers while misrepresenting or exaggerating the risks associated with the open countryside.

Equilibrium wanted to compose small groups for two expeditions -

1. "Trees and Human Survival" (understanding how forests can yield shelter, food, water and medicinal assistance to those lost in the wilderness) - a programme extending from Friday night until Sunday evening involving the accommodation of the group in a village house and excursions into the adjacent woodlands. The group would camp overnight in a forest clearing.
2. "Trees are Amazing!" (understanding the remarkable capabilities of trees and their major contribution to the balance of nature) - a daylong programme in the Rusenski Lom Natural Park.

How did we go about organising the groups?

We applied the following criteria for selecting 5 children with a total lack of relevant experience -

- Rapport with David's 11-year old son, Vihren, whose outdoor enthusiasm and competence saw him appointed as a "mini-facilitator"

- Rapport with and implicit trust in David who would lead the activities
- An aura of physical competence and self-sufficiency combined with attentiveness
- Restricted age-range
- Concern for others

On this basis, candidates were identified and invited. This "hand-picking" was essential for sessions that were very different in nature from the other group activities. Indeed, they were somewhat beyond the boundaries suggested by project title - *The Forest in the City*. However, we were concerned to venture in this direction with the support and cooperation of parents, in order to raise certain issues that we'd like readers of this manual to absorb. In essence, this was an exercise in taboo busting.

- Although never more than minutes from a competent support team with which he maintained contact, David spent long periods (including an entire night) alone with a group of six children - three boys and three girls - in unpopulated areas.

By breaking the rules - our *own* rules - regarding supervision, we were demonstrating the margin of safety that exists when children are fully supervised when undertaking outdoor Experiential Education. We wanted to expose the fallacy at the centre of the culture of trepidation that exists and is largely sustained by the institutional protectors of child welfare. The following is an extract from an Equilibrium brochure prepared prior to public lectures in support of Equilibrium's programme -

A plea on behalf of young adventurers

"An adjunct to the accent placed on control and regulation within both education and recreation, is the demonization of many natural / rustic phenomena that lie beyond spitting distance of the village barbecue. Many a parent browbeaten by the institutional protectors of children's welfare... will reflexively equate Wilderness with Danger - **every** snake is poisonous, **every** tic bears Lyme's disease, **every** village dog bites.....Thus, the mildly anarchic impulse that would carry youthful adventurers into the wilderness where they'd perspire or get chilled, they'd get filthy or sodden is painfully difficult for many guardians, institutional or familial, to countenance.

Babies are born with a built-in sixth sense to help them interact fully with the world and handle its dangers. Does it really make sense for parents and teachers to suppress that natural ability in children? We stigmatize children with special needs, kids who are "handicapped", without realizing that we are actually handicapping all our children.

We should stop now!"

(David Bisset, EQ Chairman)

We also wanted to create scenarios in which the usual educational criteria applicable in mainstream education were of practically no relevance. In a public lecture, David expressed his concern in the following terms -

"Strong young characters do not grow out of classroom didactics relating to Life Skills. Books and formal didactic teaching provide only information. Life Skills are reduced to formulae.

What happens when life skills are reduced to formulae? We end up living in a world in which governments must instruct mums and dads in parenting skills. We employ HR experts to tell managers how to deal with the people they employ. We employ PR experts to tell public figures how to communicate with people. These abilities should evolve naturally from instinct based on breadth of experience."

Parental Consultation

Before both ventures, David, Galya and Dima met with the parents and discussed the activities at length.

Full written consent was obtained.

Immediately following the activities, we held informal get-togethers at which the children were re-united with their parents, brothers and sisters and shared their experience with them. On this basis, the respective adventures were imbedded into the shared consciousness of the family.

Interaction with Schools

For most activities, young teenagers came from two established child-to-child clubs in elementary schools and a fledgling club to which Equilibrium had been providing technical support. The established clubs had routines in place and clubrooms in the schools. Historically, their activities took place during the afternoons as they attended classes in the morning. We established a Friday afternoon schedule and the combined groups (representing the three schools) met at a venue provided by Equilibrium that was both sufficiently spacious and easily accessible by all concerned.

Existing relationships with the school directors permitted access to the schools and provided the ability to access children who were not club members. Above, we made reference to the clay moulding session that took place during school hours at Sredna Kula with the permission of the director and the cooperation of a number of teachers.

At no time did we endeavour to take children out of school during class hours. The complexity of the procedures for obtaining permission and the onerous regulations pertaining to transport for school trips are widely recognised. Equilibrium had no desire to take issue with this regulatory framework in the context of the project. We were concerned to demonstrate a workable alternative to the green school. If students can be removed from school for the purpose of attending green school, they can be removed for the purpose of community-based Experiential Education. We chose to avoid bureaucracy in this area so that we would be better disposed to deal with the other bureaucratic issues that were unavoidable.

Navigating Civic Society

We have already mentioned Equilibrium's working relationship with the museum and the director's providing access to its personnel, premises and resources. We are also grateful to the director of the city's library for allowing its use for a public presentation relating to the project.

These were the easy parts. However, our project would impact on the cityscape because we wanted to install signs containing information about significant trees and, in so doing, to construct a type of urban eco-trail starting from the city's tourist information centre where we would provide a window display and brochures explaining our endeavour. All this demanded that we seek permission from the relevant authorities.

The design of the tree signs and window display needed to be approved by the city architect. In addition, the text of the tree signs needed to exclude anything that would constitute advertising which gives rise to complex formalities and financial charges.

The installation of the tree signs required the permission of the experts in the municipal department dedicated to environmental protection. As a matter of courtesy we discussed the issue with the park authorities.

Liaison with the city's tourism authority took account of the fact that the Tourist Information Office was operated by a specific organisation representative of tourism operators and those responsible for cultural heritage sites and was a distinct function within the overall supervision of tourism activity and infrastructure. We needed to communicate at two levels as it were - at the level of information office and at the level of tourism planning for the city.

Ideally, we would have liked to convene a planning meeting involving all the authoritative bodies in one place at one time. This would eliminate the need to repeat the same information again and again in different offices. This wasn't practicable - the mayoral election was pending and people were preoccupied.

The following are useful things to remember when communicating with local government and dealing with municipal bureaucracy -

- Don't assume inter-departmental communication or lines of contact between agencies. Take personal responsibility for communicating with all official bodies.
- Make appointments to talk to the actual decision makers and don't depend on junior staff as intermediaries between you and their seniors or departmental heads.
- Obtain permission / approval from the most influential officials before approaching the others as this can help you obtain positive outcomes.
- As far as possible, obtain notification of formalities in writing and try to corroborate details - someone may have failed to tell you about something important. In addition, individuals sometimes put their own personal spin on something or set conditions that they have invented purely for the sake of personal convenience or to pander to their sense of personal status.
- Be well prepared for meetings but divulge only as much as you need to.
- If faced by refusals or obstructions, demand written explanations or proof of your non-compliance with the relevant regulations.
- Ask how long formalities will take and don't accept vague answers. React vigorously to delays.

Appendix 1

Games and Activities

Ice-breaking

Catch the Forbidden Word - As children are entering give each one a set number of tokens, i.e. sweets or dried beans. After everyone has arrived explain that no one is allowed to use the words "I" or "me" (or choose your own words) for the next 10 minutes. If someone catches another person using one of the forbidden words, they can take one of that person's tokens. At the end of the ten minutes, have everyone tally their tokens and whoever has the most is the winner.

This game works well with all age groups as children love to catch adults using the forbidden words. Since the facilitators are likely to do most of the talking at the start of a session, they are the likeliest victims. In addition, if the first activity of the day involves stating names and having each person say something about themselves, tokens are likely to fly back and forward very quickly.

Me and You - Invite the children and fellow supervisors to form a circle. Ask for a volunteer to start. This person states his / her name and demonstrates a personal sound or gesture / sign - "My name is Dima and this is my sound / this is my sign."

Proceeding in a clockwise direction the second person identifies himself / herself in a similar manner, shows his / her sound or sign and then points to the first person stating - "That is Dima and this is her sound / this is her sign."

The third person identifies himself / herself by names and sound / sign and then refers to the two preceding talkers and so on.

Obviously, in a large group there is a risk of forgetting names and sounds / signs although confusion adds to the fun.

My House - This game is a variant of **Me and You**. The first speaker says - "I'm Dima and in my house I have a....." - and the game proceeds from there.

Exploring the World of Trees - Games and Activities

- **Counting the rings to identify the age of a tree**

Materials - A variety of cross-sections cut from the trunks of different trees sourced from a forest area or timber yard.

To ensure the rings could be counted easily, Venci deliberately sought samples taken from trees of reasonable girth representing fast-growing species.

- **Creating small "herbariums"**

Materials - A wide variety of woodland material sourced from a park or forested area

Herbariums can be presented in a variety of ways from which the children should be free to choose - a boxed arrangement, a wall-hanging or collage, a scrap book etc The children should be encouraged to interpret their presentations and identify the components,

- **Creating primitive tools and implements (digging devices, bows and arrows, ornaments and fashion accessories etc)**

Materials - Sticks, branches and other woodland material / a variety of hand tools

The use of hand tools demands strict supervision as does the testing of anything that involves sharp points or projectiles.

- **Will it float or will it sink?**

Materials - A variety of materials sourced from trees (different densities and sizes) and suitable containers filled with water.

Testing the buoyancy of objects in water can lead to spillage - choose an appropriate venue and consider having the kids bring spare clothing.

- **Bridging the gap**

Materials - Woodland material sufficient for the construction of a bridge supplemented by items for fixing / tying

Crossing water is especially challenged and demands solid, cooperative effort. Choose shallow water with protruding rocks for support (or else ensure there are transportable rocks in the vicinity).

- **Clay moulds from tree bark**

Materials - A variety of tree bark (dry but supple and unlikely to fragment), modeling clay.

Patience is required - the clay cannot be successfully removed from the bark until it is dry. It is a good idea to combine this activity with something else that the group can do while waiting. The moulds can be decorated with poster paint and a variety of objects.

- **Amazing facts about trees**

Materials - Unusual / unexpected facts gleaned from books, magazines or websites

Ideally, the children should participate in the search for material to share with the group.

- **Hunt the Trees**

Materials - Lists of cryptic clues referring to the appearance of particular trees dispersed across a "hunting area"

Equilibrium played this game in Ruse's Lipnik Park. The previous week, David and Galya had identified distinctive trees within the park boundaries and devised clues and a hunting route. These were tested by Elena and Dima before working with the kids to ensure as far as possible that the clues could be solved without too much difficulty.

- **Giant Crossword Puzzles**

Materials – Crossword grids and related riddles on the subject of trees for the children to solve

- **Trees in Folklore and Traditional Practice**

Materials - Information about legends, beliefs and rituals / Details of traditional practice (folk medicine, domestic routine etc)

This is potentially a massive area of research. David chose a restricted number of themes from Bulgaria's past and demonstrated both lines of continuity to the present day and parallels in other cultures. He also took pains to link the other activities to folk belief, tradition and aspects of Bulgarian culture through the ages.

- **Tree Photography**

Materials - 35mm film cut into sections for distribution to young camera owners

Different themes can be applied - The Four Seasons, Unusual Trees, Big and Small etc

- **Festive Event – Indoor Forest**

Equilibrium shaped an entire Xmas party attended by at least a hundred children and adults around the theme of the changing seasons.

Most of the decoration was sourced from scrap material with the expenditure being dedicated to refreshments, music and public address system and consumables like adhesive, paint, candles, Bengal sparklers, artificial snow.

Four support pillars inside the museum building were converted to trees using cardboard boxes, fabric and a variety of scrap materials. Each tree represented a different season. In a similar fashion, a giant Xmas tree was built and decorated.

As a party game, the children added the final, seasonal touches - placing birds in the branches, adding foliage and flowers, dusting the winter tree with snow (polystyrene grains).

Candles were dispersed to create atmosphere.

Note

At no stage in the project was material stripped from living trees - we used only what could be found on the ground.

Appendix 2

The Gatekeeper

Example of Gatekeeping

I have been given the job of showing a new employee how to transfer information between computer files. I must have shown her how to do it a dozen times today. How am I supposed to do my own work when she keeps asking questions about stuff I've already explained?

I say to her: "Look, it's simple. You click here. Then you select the next record, highlight it, then do this." (I quickly type in a sequence of commands). "Then cut-and-paste to the other file. Understood?"

Of course, I walk away before she has the chance to say - "No". Five minutes later, she comes back to my desk again.

I'm playing "gatekeeper". I've been using the computer system for years. My colleague has been using it for two hours. What is "obvious" to me needn't be obvious to her. Life would improve for us both if I just took the time to show her **properly**... but this demands that I stop blaming her for not knowing what I know - for not knowing what she can't know until I give her the appropriate information in an appropriate manner.

Summary

The Gatekeeper: I have information, knowledge, experience, ability and I act accordingly.

The Victim: I do not have that information, knowledge, experience, ability and I act according to my limitations.

Everyone starts out incompetent in certain tasks and they can't do better unless they are genuinely encouraged to find their own power and their own responsibility within them. They certainly won't be able to do this unless they are allowed to learn.

Gatekeeping means preventing us from learning because essential information is withheld. Alternatively, it involves a form of teaching or instruction that is inappropriate for us.

The instruction can be inappropriate because -

- We need to learn in a different way
- Imbedded in the instructional material are opinions, beliefs or values that are different from our own
- The instructor feels he has the right to assess our performance of an activity that, for natural reasons, we are not capable of performing

When we fail, we are blamed for

- Being stupid or
- Being incompetent or
- Avoiding our responsibility to learn
- Being obstinate in our attitudes or opinions which are so obviously inferior to those of the gatekeeper

The gatekeeper blames us for

- Not knowing what we simply don't know (or can't know)
- Not doing something we simply can't do

- Refusing to accept something that we cannot accept

Gatekeeping Behaviour Directed at Children

When I first entered primary school I suffered profound problems. I had great difficulty learning to write and this had an impact on my ability to read and, eventually, all my learning suffered.

Because I couldn't write, I was considered to be stupid.

Because I became upset about the situation, I was considered to be unstable.

Because I complained about my treatment, I was considered to be difficult.

Why couldn't I write? Well, the rule applied in this particular class was that children should be taught how to form letters and construct words and sentences using their right hand. I'm profoundly left-handed. In those days, some people didn't believe that left-handedness was a natural condition and, unfortunately, my teacher was such a person.

In her ignorance, she acted as a gatekeeper and deprived me of my ability to learn to write properly. She forced me to accept a responsibility I couldn't fulfill - to write with my right hand. The headmaster was another gatekeeper. Despite accepting my left-handedness, he would not grant my parents' wish to have me transferred to another class, or another school if need be. Such things simply weren't done. I was, therefore, literally tortured by this teacher for an entire academic year.

Now, fortunately conditions that hinder learning like dyslexia and attention deficit disorder are recognized but there are other ways that gatekeeping strategies can be imbedded in the education of children.

Consider the bottle-and-glass philosophy of teaching that is highly didactic.

The teacher - bottle full of knowledge

Student - empty glass

Basic premise - the student must absorb information "parrot fashion", memorize it and reproduce it when examined.

However, a great deal of educational material is subject to question. The version taught represents the interpretation of the teacher, educational establishment or government.

Think of the presentation of historical events, the interpretation of literature, the exploration of philosophy, the promotion of new mathematical and scientific hypotheses.

Practical Example

Misha Glenny (part English / part Hungarian; a highly respected, award winning TV correspondent and journalist) provides an interpretation of events leading up to the April Uprising that differs quite significantly from any I've seen in Bulgarian history books. In particular, he is often negative in his appraisal of the contributions of the members of the Bulgarian Revolutionary Central Committee and many of the young intellectuals resident outside Bulgaria, the cultural icons - Levski, Botev, Karavelov, Rakovski.

I presented this interpretation to students at Ruse University and, in fact, I used additional material that made the picture even more negative.

I caused a scandal. I knew I would. However, I managed to demonstrate that my version of this historical episode wasn't any less true than the one normally presented in Bulgarian schools. It was a matter of interpretation.

My question to the students that day was - "If you wrote my version of the April Uprising in a history test, what sort of marks would you expect?"

You can imagine the response.

So, here we have another form of gatekeeping that you find imbedded in most education systems to some extent. I'm the teacher. I don't agree with you. Therefore, your answer is wrong or, at least it's devalued despite the power and logic of your argument.



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We are grateful to the Ruse city library, Lyuban Karavelov, for the provision of their facilities for our Ruse presentation.

Under the project - "Green Schooling as an Alternative to the Summer Green School" - Equilibrium worked in collaboration with the organisations listed below:

Regional History Museum - Ruse
Ruse Municipality
Glogovo Municipality, Teteven
Glogovo Youth NGO
Glozhene youth NGO, Teteven Municipality

Words are inadequate to explain the inspiration provided by Doug Scott CBE and Trish Lang during their visit to Bulgaria in support of our venture.

Arena Media Group made a very significant impact on public awareness of Equilibrium's programme. Our ongoing relationship with Arena means a great deal to us.



Registered Charity No. 1067772



Registered Charity No. SC006337

In the course of the programme, the Equilibrium team made contact with many individuals and organisations from throughout Bulgaria. Groups from other Balkan countries have shown enthusiasm for our programme. So, when we talk about EQ contributing to the expanding use of Experiential Education in the Balkans - the party has already started. We encourage readers to help us to sustain the momentum.

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