

## Make Room for the UNEXPECTED



In appreciation of active learning • By Cullen Curtiss

### What would you think if you came upon 10 or so

6-year-olds and an adult gathered on top of a large pile of dry piñon wood, flapping their arms and making squawking sounds? Two children flap away from the pile, dive toward the ground, claw at the air and then return to the pile. Others are opening their mouths to “receive” whatever has been clawed and captured. The language is only that of differently pitched squawks. The adult is engrossed in the scene as well, jerking his head about with his eyes wide open.

Or if you came upon a group of five absolutely silent 12-year-olds transporting 10 glasses of water over a series of contiguous, unsteady logs ... without using their hands?

Would it occur to you that these were adventure-based learning (ABL) classes designed to increase social-emotional awareness and deepen understanding of subject matter? The program provides guided, goals-oriented, cooperative recreational games and activities in the outdoors, not only to deepen students’ knowledge of academic topics, but to enhance interpersonal skills in a fun, experiential way.

Adventure-based learning — also referred to as experiential or expeditionary education — emphasizes active learning with the goal of exploring character development and deepening academic skills. Broadly, it’s neither recess nor camp, though it generally takes place outdoors, fostering a deep appreciation for the world outside traditional walls. Several Santa Fe schools and programs are part of a growing movement to incorporate this form of learning (see box on next page), building on research conducted by EL Education, a partnership between Harvard Graduate School of Education and Outward Bound. This research demonstrates that situations offering adventure — and, importantly, the unexpected — effectively enable children to discover their abilities, values, passions and sense of responsibility.

As Stuart Pendleton, director of Rio Grande School’s adventure-based learning program, says, “When children explore the outdoors, and take appropriate risks in a ‘challenge by choice’ environment, the results are always worthwhile.”

The results have been so worthwhile that Rio Grande, an independent school serving students in preschool to sixth grade, has expanded its 11-year-old ABL program this year and is in the process of identifying how deeper adoption of it can strengthen the school’s academic program.

As one of eight co-curricular classes (otherwise known as Specials), Rio Grande’s ABL is offered to all students in the school’s nine grades (two levels of pre-K, and kindergarten through sixth grade), once a week for an hour. Because each of the eight co-curriculars is integrated into each grade’s curriculum, col-

laboration among educators is essential. Pendleton, who taught previously in the fifth/sixth grade classroom, knows the advancing curriculum

well, but is thrilled

with the added planning time he

has this year to work with classroom teachers to

identify subject areas that best lend themselves to ABL activities.

For instance, expanding on the third grade’s lessons on landforms in their classroom science unit, Pendleton guided the students to experiment with erosion on a variety of different topographical features on the campus. “They created rivers through the dirt,” he explained, “[then] we walked down scree-covered banks, built rock barriers, created shelters and observed water flow, wind and foot traffic over the course of a few sessions. The third graders brought knowledge from their core classroom work that informed what they actually witnessed. And the third-grade teacher reported that ABL brought erosion to life in the classroom. She said, ‘The concept of erosion cemented for them in a way it would not have had we just talked about it in class.’”

Time for reflection is built into each activity of the ABL program, Pendleton explains. “With pre-K and kindergarten, it’s a circle and whole group sharing or debriefing. With sixth grade, it’s journaling. Regardless, it’s essential to reflect on what we’ve learned and to put no rules around the nature of what we learned.”

The unpredictable elements of adventure-based learning require a teacher to adapt plans and expectations. “I usually have an outcome that I want,” Pendleton said, “but the teachable moment might be one I do not expect, such as on a leaf identification hike when a kindergartner tripped and fell into a cactus. We all gasped, but he just stood up and began calmly pulling the spines out of his hands. I asked everyone to consider how they might have reacted and all declared they would be crying. As a group we reflected on the child’s resilience, and the child adopted a new feeling about himself. Of course, I could not have planned that

Adventure-based learning activities at Rio Grande include team-building initiatives, creating habitat for endangered species, hiking Atalaya Mountain, and overnight retreats at Glorieta Camp.



Photos by Stuart Pendleton





amazing outcome. Did the students learn very much about leaves that day? Not as much as I had expected, but they learned a lot about one another."

A fourth grader, known for mildly disruptive behavior in the classroom, was discovered to be a natural leader during the endangered species habitat-building unit. "The students gravitated toward his brilliant ideas," Pendleton says. "Suddenly, there was a new and exciting dimension to his character that he and his fellow students recognized."

With ABL, there is a different measure of success for every student. One student in fifth grade clearly felt uncomfortable in the outdoors. "She did not know what to do with the change in topography or ground composition," Pendleton said. "She was either too cold or hot. She stuck near me, and I would gently

redirect her to a group of kids who were progressing well on some aspect of a project, so she could see what the momentum felt like. Since August, she has come so far. She seems excited now, though still cautious. For some students, the growth comes in sharing a sled. For some, it's being able to speak up in a group. For some, it's just the act of being outside."

Pendleton is excited to embolden the weekly ABL curriculum for all grades, while deepening his expectations of outcomes for the fourth to sixth grades on their overnight excursions, to Valles Caldera, Glorieta and Cottonwood Gulch respectively. He's also looking forward to the ABL component of RGS' Summer

Camp (weekly, June 6 through July 29, offered every afternoon and all day in the final week of camp), taking advantage of the school's five-acre campus in the foothills and nearby destinations, including the Santa Fe Botanical Garden.

Pendleton's credo boils down to this: "When you give children an occasion to increase self-awareness, gain insight, think critically, accept responsibility, develop trust and challenge personal boundaries, you've essentially given them all they'll ever need."

*Cullen Curtiss is director of admissions at Rio Grande School.*



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