

and commitment to understanding and improving the health of a native natural community. These stewardship experiences are enhanced by pre-visit, on-site, and post-visit activities that are specifically designed to provide students with the necessary awareness and knowledge to understand the purpose and rationale of their stewardship activities.

### **Educational Strategy of the Mighty Acorns Curriculum**

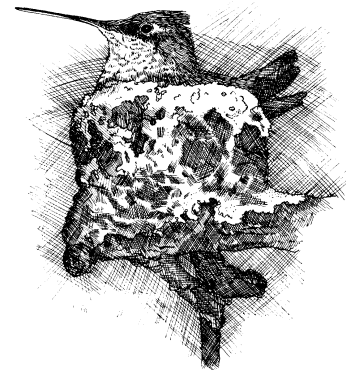
There are multiple educational strategies that could be used to reach the five environmental education objectives. The one that best fits the goals and criteria of the Mighty Acorns program is the theory of experiential education. Three reasons the theory of experiential education fits the Mighty Acorns program so well are:

1. Experiential education is designed around experience (Joplin, 1995).<sup>3</sup>

One of the unique aspects of the Mighty Acorns program is that urban students who may have never been in a natural area repeatedly spend time participating in stewardship activities in a prairie, woodland, or wetland. The mission of the program is in fact to “introduce young people in the Chicago Metropolitan area to nature through stewardship and exploration in away that fosters a personal connection to our natural areas.”

2. Experiential education is based on the assumption that all knowledge must begin with the individual’s relationship to the topic. (Joplin, 1995)

The Mighty Acorns program is designed to allow students multiple opportunities to develop a relationship with natural environments and the process of restoring them. Furthermore “as seasons and years pass, the Mighty Acorn experience influences the lives of the schools taking part. School gardens have sprung up featuring plants long since extirpated from the neighborhoods. Seeds are collected, planted, nurtured, and cherished as beautiful and meaningful components of the schools’ curriculum.” (From Peter Leki, a Mighty Acorns volunteer)



3. The involved paradigm of experiential education explains that everything is connected to everything else. (Joplin, 1995)

This is paralleled in the study of ecology, which is the overarching content focus of the Mighty Acorns program. The study of ecological principles repeatedly reinforces the theories of the interconnectedness and interdependence of all life. Through the Mighty Acorns program, teachers who once taught units focusing only on rainforests can now focus on local ecosystems with actual visits to our globally endangered oak savannas. Endangered species units, once preoccupied with the charismatic orangutans and Siberian tigers, can now be expanded to include our own locally imperiled species, from the Cooper’s Hawk to the prairie white fringed orchid to the river otter.

Gibbons and Hopkins<sup>4</sup> created a framework of experiential learning that delineates ten distinct levels: simulated, spectator, exploratory, analytical, generative, challenge, competence, mastery,

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<sup>3</sup> (Joplin, Laura, *On Defining Experiential Education—3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 1995)

<sup>4</sup> (Gibbons, Maurice, and David Hopkins, *On Defining Experiential Education—1<sup>st</sup> Edition*, Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall Hunt Publishing, 1980)

personal growth, and social growth. The three-year experience in the Mighty Acorns program is intended to provide increasing experiential activities and challenges as students progress.

At level I, students are largely involved in simulated, spectator, and exploratory experiences, which include listening to stories, putting on plays, and conducting experiments. This type of activity is exemplified by the level I spring post-visit activity, “Flute’s Journey.” In this activity students read a story based on the life of a wood thrush and the perils he encounters growing up, migrating to Central America, and then migrating back to his home. It deals with the variety of threats the bird faces, including habitat loss and fragmentation, migratory bird food sources, pests such as the brown-headed cowbird, and pesticides. The story also illustrates the theme of competition, which is the focus for the next level.

At level II students participate in activities that are analytical in nature and those that are generative (learning by doing) or challenge-based. In the fall level II pre-visit activity, “Connecting Past and Present,” students build a vision of presettlement Illinois and reinforce their recognition of community types through the reading of historical accounts. They become familiar with the process of change by sorting a series of pictures into a sequence. This is followed by field observations of their present-day community remnant and a comparison to presettlement conditions.

At level III, students engage in competence and mastery experiences as well as experiences of personal and social growth. This is addressed through the spring level III post-visit activity, where students examine the values of biodiversity through time by mapping historical episodes on a “Time Values Chart.” Students then reflect on their own feelings about biodiversity developed through the participation in Mighty Acorns.

### **Core Concepts of the Mighty Acorns Curriculum**

The content of the student activities was developed integrating the core concepts of ecology with the 4<sup>th</sup>, 5<sup>th</sup>, and 6<sup>th</sup> grade State of Illinois Learning Standards.

- Level I curriculum focuses on the concepts of adaptation and interdependence.
- Level II curriculum focuses on the concepts of community and competition.
- Level III curriculum focuses on the concept of diversity.

A personal experience with natural communities coupled with knowledge and skills is a powerful combination. Today’s students will be called upon to make decisions about complex environmental issues in the near future. To make such decisions responsibly, they will need more than just knowledge. They will need a personal, visceral connection to the natural world that can occur only through experience.