Stress response and cognitive performance modulation in classroom versus natural environments: A quasi-experimental pilot study with children

Stress during childhood can have mental and somatic health influences that track throughout life. Previous research attributes stress-reducing effects to natural environments, but has mainly focused on adults and often following leisurely relaxation in natural environments. This pilot study explores the impact of natural environments on stress response during rest and mental load and cognitive performance in 47 children aged 10–12 years in a school context. Heart rate variability measures indexing tonic, event, and phasic vagal tone and attention scores were compared across classroom and natural environments. Tonic vagal tone was higher in the natural environment than the classrooms, but no differences were found in event or phasic vagal tone or cognitive performance measures. These findings suggest a situational aspect of the conditions under which natural environments may give rise to stress-buffering influences. Further research is warranted to understand the potential benefits in a real-life context, in particular with respect to the underpinning mechanisms and effects of accumulated exposure over time in settings where children spend large proportions of time in natural environments.

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