

Research notes

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Engaging and learning with the outdoors:

a summary of the outdoor classroom in a rural context
action research project

**'It was a fun way of learning ...
at school they just show you
things...'**

Primary school pupil

**A primary school pupil said:
'When we were at the
chickens, I remember [the farm
educator] said that the female
chicken can have eggs and we
can eat them, but if the female
chicken mates with the male
chicken they can make a baby,
an egg with a baby in it.'**

Introduction

What does learning in the outdoors involve? What are the benefits of outdoor learning and experience? What approaches are effective? What are the benefits for teachers? How can what happens in the outdoor classroom be integrated with the school curriculum? The research summarised in this document explored these questions and others. The study was undertaken in 2004 and the early part of 2005 and was funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the Countryside Agency, and Farming and Countryside in Education (FACE).

Background

The background to the research included a concern that opportunities for young people to engage in effective outdoor learning appear to be declining. There are also concerns that children's low levels of understanding about food, farming and sustainability might have important consequences for society in general.

A range of good practice in outdoor education exist already and several initiatives, including those introduced under the **Growing Schools** programme, have provided examples of innovative, interesting and safe work. However, despite these successes, recent research has highlighted the need for stronger evidence of learning in the 'outdoor classroom'. Our research sought to meet that need.

The research

Our aim was to expand and deepen what is known about how educators plan and evaluate outdoor education. We observed and interviewed students and teachers in school grounds, on farms and city farms, and in outdoor study centres across England. Part of the study involved action research with outdoor educators, helping them to improve their own practices. We also organised focus groups and seminars with leading proponents of outdoor education.

What does outdoor learning involve?

We found evidence across a range of subjects, contexts and ages that outdoor education can involve working with others, practising new skills, undertaking practical conservation and influencing society. Outdoor education can involve learning about nature, society and the interactions between the two.

Student activities initially appeared to focus on learning specific facts or skills. However, many teachers later acknowledged that other outcomes (learning about oneself and learning about working with others in particular) not only emerged but, in some cases, became the primary benefits of working outdoors.

Helping everyone to respect, protect and enjoy the countryside

As one teacher remarked:
'The shared experience, it's not only for us and the children. I saw some children talking to each other that would not normally talk to each other, it's not a big deal but it bonds children together as a class, a kind of community feel about it.'

Another teacher commented:
'I think the perceived benefits over time are sustained in that it gives the children ... a wider view of the countryside, an informed view. ... They ... have plants pointed out to them, trees, flowers, birds, what's going on around them, why things are happening at a particular time of year. I think it's adding to their general knowledge, their view of the world. That's the biggest benefit.'

What are the benefits of outdoor learning and experience?

We saw evidence that student outcomes can include: knowledge and understanding; attitudes and feelings; values and beliefs; activities and behaviours; personal development and social development. For teachers and students engaged in the learning experiences, an awareness of such personal and social developments also emerged.

Outdoor educators, school-teachers and learners provided many descriptions of curriculum-related outcomes in terms of increased knowledge and understanding of geographical, ecological or food production processes and of the development of values and beliefs about the environment.

However, young people also referred to the development of more personal skills (increased confidence, improved social skills and a greater belief in personal efficacy) and, for some, to a (sometimes unexpected) understanding that learning could be fun.

What approaches are effective?

The reasons for using the outdoor context fell into five overlapping aspects of outdoor education. These aspects focused on the value of the experience itself; on the outdoor context; on opportunities to use teaching approaches that complemented education in the classroom; on the opportunity to integrate a range of ideas, and on learning itself as being the prime reason for choosing a context.

We have identified four important strategies for supporting learning in the outdoor classroom:

- (i) **Taking account of the context of the experience:** acknowledging students' experiences; curriculum requirements; safety considerations and wider learning goals;
- (ii) **Promoting good learning design:** being aware of a range of teaching strategies and using novel ideas that take account of the learners' needs and backgrounds;
- (iii) **Promoting professional learning:** enabling individuals or groups to do something new or differently by learning from experience; and,
- (iv) **Working with communities of learners and practitioners:** supporting learning and change through expanding resources, opportunities and accessibility to the outdoors.

These strategies might provide sources of new ideas or tools for planning, structuring and evaluating outdoor classroom activities. Further exploration of the issues they raise will prompt thinking and conceptual clarity when planning and evaluating developments to support outdoor learning.

What are the benefits for teachers?

Teachers welcomed the opportunities that visits gave them to observe outdoor educators and to learn from their expertise and different styles of teaching. Visits enabled teachers to improve their subject knowledge and to acquire new skills and ideas that could be applied in their classroom. Teachers also appreciated interacting with their students in relaxed, informal environments. They reported benefiting from the break from the normal teacher-pupil relationship.

Teachers and other practitioners were often very specific about curriculum content, about the type of activities they planned, or about what they hoped, in general terms, that young people would achieve. Teachers were less specific about identifying the wider social and personal outcomes of their planned activities. Teachers knew of the broader range of outcomes but did not usually plan activities specifically to meet them or try to evaluate if they were achieved in any systematic way.

'It's just being somewhere where the children have headspace without the constraints, I think it is being somewhere where they are unfamiliar, it can be unnerving but exciting as well. Being out in an environment like that is like giving gifts to children for just being there and also it encourages [them] and they will go home full of it to their parent and careers and say "'I want to go, it's not far".'

Primary school teacher

'There was this lad, digging away like mad, working really hard and the teacher says to me, "You should have seen him yesterday...he was throwing chairs at me in the classroom".'

Year 10 pupil

How can outdoor learning be integrated with the school curriculum?

Staff at outdoor education sites recognised the importance of preparatory work with school teachers. In most cases, preparation involved communication and/or planning with teachers in terms of the focus and content of the visit. Preparation activities by teachers with students in school, however, tended to be limited to practicalities and logistics as opposed to issues of curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation. Exceptions to this finding were seen in schools that were preparing for longer residential visits or where outdoor educators were funded to undertake outreach work in schools prior to visits.

In terms of follow-up work, teachers were able to see and make connections between the outdoor experiences and a range of subjects including art, science, history, ICT and English as well as cross-cutting curriculum areas such as PSHE and environmental education. A teacher visiting a field centre commented that: 'Our learning, it doesn't stop with that day. For me it is a building block, so the learning that will happen today could be learnt next week or on subsequent days'. In several cases, however, teachers would have liked their follow-up work to be more extensive than was possible.

We found a number of challenges for curriculum integration including outdoor visits taking place after (rather than during) a related module of class work; competing curriculum pressures limiting the opportunities for extended follow-up work; students not seeing outdoor visits as connecting with their learning; not all members of a class or a year group being able to take part in an outdoor visit; certain kinds of activities being difficult to repeat in the school environment; outdoor educators having few opportunities to support follow-up work in schools; and teachers wanting students to have a 'special experience' that is different from what usually happens in school.

As to how such challenges might be tackled, our research highlighted a number of areas in need of attention. Most importantly, there is a need for schools, local authorities and outdoor providers to recognise that it is short-sighted to try to increase the amount of time spent in the outdoor classroom without also seeking to maximise the extent to which such work is integrated with other work in schools.

Recommendations

We recommend the following as priorities for action.

1. The DfES, local authorities and other agencies should aim to further raise school staff awareness and understanding about the range of outdoor learning sites and what the outdoor education opportunities they offer.
2. The DfES, local authorities and other agencies should seek to further develop school teachers' confidence and capacities to work with students in outdoor contexts (both by themselves and with outdoor educators).
3. School governors, headteachers and teachers need to enhance the extent to which outdoor education is embedded into the routine expectations and experiences of the school, so that it becomes an established and normal part of 'what we do here'. Such an initiative would require the status of the full range of personal outcomes of outdoor experience to be raised substantially.
4. All involved in outdoor education should further develop their awareness and understanding of the national [school] curriculum and how outdoor education can contribute at different key stages to realising its goals.
5. Teachers and other outdoor educators should consistently aid students to understand how what they experience in the outdoor classroom connects to, extends, and reinforces their in-school work.

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6. Schools, local authorities and outdoor providers need to optimise the extent to which work out-of-school is integrated with work in school before they try to increase the amount of time spent in the outdoor classroom.
7. All concerned need to be much clearer about how (as well as what) outdoor education can contribute to pupil learning. This should involve a greater conceptual understanding of ways that students can learn in the outdoor classroom.
8. All decisions about the organisation of teaching in the outdoor classroom should take ideas about how students learn into account when considering what they will focus on and the experiences they will have.
9. Government departments and research funders must take seriously the need for a stronger and more accessible evidence base on outdoor learning. The recommendations of the recent Learning Working Group concerning innovative programmes of development and research deserve the attention of practitioners, policy-makers and researchers within the outdoor learning field.

Further details

The full report can be downloaded from the **Growing Schools** website:
<http://www.teachernet.gov.uk/growingschools/support/detail.cfm?id=25>

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