



Education! Education!



JUSTIN DILLON AND HIS CO-RESEARCHERS
DESCRIBE THE OUTCOMES OF SOME MAJOR
ACTION RESEARCH INTO LEARNING IN THE
'OUTDOOR CLASSROOM'

What does learning in the outdoors involve? What are the benefits of outdoor experience – and learning? What approaches are effective? What are the benefits for teachers and schools? How can what happens in the 'outdoor classroom' be best integrated with the 'in-school' curriculum? The

research summarised in this article explored these questions during 2004–2005. The study was funded by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), the Countryside Agency, and Farming and Countryside in Education (FACE).

A range of successful practice in out-of-school education exists already, and several initiatives,

such as 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'. We therefore wanted to expand and deepen what is known about how educators plan, carry out

and evaluate such experiences.

We observed and interviewed primary and secondary pupils 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 instructors and centre staff, helping them to improve their own practices. We also organised focus groups and seminars with leading providers of out-of-classroom education.

What does learning in the outdoor classroom involve?

We found evidence across a range of subjects, contexts and ages that education in the outdoor classroom can involve working with others, practising new skills, undertaking practical conservation and influencing society. Such out-of-school education can involve learning about nature, society and the interactions

engaged in these learning experiences, such personal and social developments were highly significant. Outdoor educators, school teachers and pupils 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. One teacher commented:

I think the perceived benefits over time are sustained in that [they] give 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.

However, pupils also referred to the development of more personal

under five main headings:

- The intrinsic value of the experience itself – going to a farm is worth it simply because children can experience a farm.
- The actual outdoor context – visiting a farm is different from reading about a farm.
- Opportunities to use teaching approaches that complement education in the classroom – for example, milking a goat.
- The opportunity to integrate a range of ideas – for example, using literacy, numeracy and science.
- The learning itself – some learning outcomes can be better achieved through a visit.

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

- Teachers could take account of the context of the experience by, for example, being aware of

Out! Out! Out!

between the two. Learning activities initially appeared to focus on the learning of 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 seen as the primary benefits of working outside the school.

What are the benefits of outdoor learning and experience?

We saw evidence that children's outdoor learning can include: knowledge and understanding; attitudes and feelings; values and beliefs; actions and behaviours; personal and social development. For many teachers and pupils

skills, such as increased confidence, improved social skills and a greater belief in personal efficacy, and some to the – sometimes unexpected – understanding that learning could be fun. As another teacher said:

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 parents and carers and say 'I want to go, it's not far'.

What approaches are thought to be effective?

The prime reasons for schools using the outdoor context fell

children's fears and phobias, and finding out whether they have been anywhere similar.

- Teachers could promote good learning by using a range of teaching strategies that take account of the children's needs and backgrounds.
- Teachers and centre staff might work together with groups in school and outside in order to learn from each other.
- Teachers and centre staff could work together to develop a wider range of learning opportunities than are used at the moment.

Such strategies might provide sources of new ideas or tools for planning, structuring and evaluating outdoor classroom

activities. For example, teachers and centre staff at Spitalfields City Farm in London have been working together looking at ways in which a farm visit can be used for teaching citizenship. Children discuss their basic needs (for example, food, medicine) and compare their needs to those of the animals that they see at the farm. The visit is evaluated on the day by the farm staff using a quick, end-of-visit activity and the teacher consolidates, builds on and evaluates the visit through follow-up work back at school.

What's in it for the teachers?

Teachers welcomed the opportunities that work outside the classroom gave them to observe the expertise of outdoor educators and to learn from the different styles of teaching they employed. Teachers improved their subject knowledge and acquired new skills and ideas that could be applied in their own classrooms. Teachers also appreciated interacting with their pupils in relatively relaxed, informal environments. They were often very specific about curriculum content, about the type of activities they planned, or about what they hoped, in general terms, that their pupils would achieve. However, teachers were less specific about identifying the wider social and personal outcomes of their planned activities. They had a broad idea of outcomes but did not usually plan activities specifically to meet them or try to evaluate in any systematic way whether these were achieved.

How can outdoor learning be integrated with the school curriculum?

Staff at outdoor education sites recognised the importance of preparatory work with teachers. In most cases, preparation involved communication and/or planning with teachers about the focus and content of the visit. Preparatory activities in school, however, tended to be limited to

practicalities and not to issues of curriculum, pedagogy and evaluation. Exceptions to this practice were seen in some 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 make connections between the outdoor experiences and a range of subjects including art, science, history, ICT and English, as well as cross-curricular work in PSHE and environmental education. In several cases, however, teachers would have liked their follow-up work to be more extensive than proved possible given the time and curricular constraints.

Potential constraints

Constraints included situations where outdoor visits took place after (rather than during) a related module of class work; where competing curriculum pressures limited the opportunities for extended follow-up work; where pupils did not see outdoor visits as connecting with their on-going learning; or where not all members of a class or a year group were able to take part in an outdoor visit. Certain kinds of activities were difficult to replicate or build on in the school environment, and outdoor educators usually had few opportunities to support follow-up work in schools.

Implications

We believe that teachers could be more aware of the range of outdoor learning sites and what outdoor education opportunities they offer, for example, by looking at the *Growing Schools* website. Teachers, teacher educators and providers could be clearer about how (as well as what) education in the outdoor classroom can contribute to learning, by, for example, keeping abreast of good practice in the field. There is, for example, evidence that novel experiences do not always lead to effective learning: sometimes the

novelty is a barrier to learning, so teachers need to prepare children for what they might find daunting or threatening.

Teachers and other outdoor educators should consistently help pupils to understand how what they experience in the outdoor classroom connects to, extends, and reinforces their in-school work. School governors, head teachers and teachers need to enhance the extent to which such education is embedded into the routine expectations and experiences of the school. They need to ensure it becomes an established and normal part of 'what we do here', by, for example, developing schemes of work that utilise the environment more than is now the case. 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.

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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