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Schools emerging from lockdown: maximising opportunities for outdoor learning in primary schools

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The benefits of taking learning outside

It is an understatement to say that the lockdown associated with the Covid-19 crisis has presented a challenge, but the education sector has been particularly affected especially for primary aged children. Partial school closures, remote learning and supporting children, staff and parents during this anxious time have all put the teaching profession under immense strain. The knowledge that children have had differential access to learning is giving rise to concern about 'learning loss' (Willis, 2020), and further possible disruption to curricular delivery and test schedules during 2021 is evident.

Teaching mastery

One silver lining to this cloud of uncertainty is a resurgence of interest in the natural world. Nature has benefited from a respite from human-induced environmental pressures (Gallagher, 2020), and, now that nature has been 'rediscovered' and 'revalued' by families and teachers alike, there seems to be a reluctance to return to destructive



pre-Covid practices (Ambrose, 2020); spending time in green spaces has been recommended by the UK government to 'benefit both your mental and physical wellbeing' (UK Government, 2020). The primary sector, too, is awakening to the benefits of taking learning outdoors beyond Early Years. We know that outdoor learning (OL) has a positive effect on children's engagement with and enjoyment of learning, on their social skills and on their behaviour (Waite et al, 2016). Loynes et al (2020) found

that outdoor residential in year 6 had an impact on knowledge understanding and application in relation to numeracy and literacy, especially for lower achieving pupils. The same experiences also impacted significantly on the full range of non-cognitive outcomes measured. Similarly, the Natural Connections project in the West Country, supported primary schools in implementing learning in their school grounds, identified substantial health, learning and social and emotional benefits (Waite et al, 2016). It is also

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known that it improves students' connection with nature which, in turn, encourages pro-environmental behaviours (Alcock et al, 2020). When taking into account the added benefits that social distancing is easier to achieve, and the coronavirus is harder to spread, in outdoor contexts, the case for extending outdoor learning in schools would seem to be made. Outdoor experiences can be adapted to both thematic and subject based approaches and have been demonstrated to be effective in all subject areas with improvements in knowledge retention and acquisition. These findings have also been found in Denmark's 'Uteskole' approaches (Mygind et al, 2018) and Swedish experiments combining fantasy with outdoor learning (Furmark, 1999). Again, these outcomes are amplified for lower achieving students.

While schools and teachers with established OL practices are likely to agree with our views, however, those who are new to OL may find

that the thought of taking curricular learning outdoors can be daunting. Introducing a new way of teaching can be challenging at the best of times, and the requirements accompanying Covid-19 add a layer of complexity to the proceedings. However, senior leadership teams and classroom teachers suggest that, with appropriate advice, planning and a reflective strategy involving all staff, embedding the outdoors into teaching and learning is not so difficult (Ager, 2018).

Fundamental considerations

Whatever the motivation for making the most of the space and opportunities that outdoor spaces provide, it is necessary to address the basics first. According to Ager (2018), an essential underpinning for any approach is the support from the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) providing sustained enthusiasm, training, a whole school collaborative and reflective approach and essential

resources, backed up by in-school or external specialist advice and experience. Waite et al (2016) identify the support that can be accessed by asking other experienced school teams to mentor new initiatives or by schools working together to develop programmes. Other schools have collaborated with local outdoor providers who can act as on the job trainers whilst delivering sessions for students in partnership with staff. A whole school approach can support less experienced colleagues and shares learning amongst staff. Those who are new to teaching outside may well have anxieties when it comes to supervision, managing risk or linking activities to the curriculum, so SLT 'permission' to experiment is a crucial step to embracing OL practices. It is worth noting that pupils will also be learning how to study outdoors, and may need plenty of support in the early stages. For example, students from a Co Durham primary school developed problem solving and collaboration by progressive experiences of erecting their tents for a camp. Over time, the students moved from watching staff do it to working out how to do it themselves to helping younger students learn how to do it.

Covid-19 adds a further layer of complexity. Social distancing means that any activity involving physical contact is either avoided or not possible, and the same is true for any activity that requires transferring equipment between participants. Cleaning kit after use can be time-consuming and staff intensive, and for some items is just not possible. Increased expectation that time will be spent outside adds additional pressure to creating and delivering a

Taking time to work out how to get ready to go outside, establishing behaviour expectations, learning how to work together and look after each other will pay dividends later on.

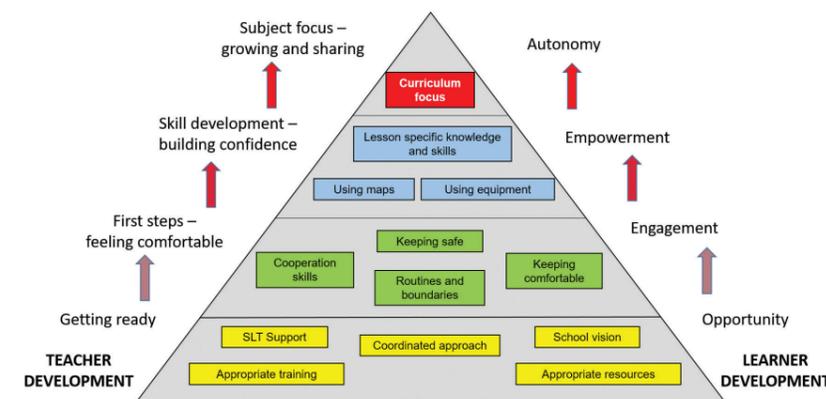


Figure 1. Outdoor learning and teacher development (adapted from Harvey and Byrne, 2019)

meaningful curriculum, so having a plan to follow is essential.

Practical strategies and approaches

Taking learning outdoors is a matter of employing a methodical approach, seen in Figure 1. A whole school approach provides a sound foundation for a coordinated plan, which is necessary in the light of limited access and resources. Once the school's OL vision is established, the next stage is to audit what you have: what opportunities do the school grounds offer? Not every school has access to green space, and it can sometimes be difficult to envisage a playground being used for outdoor lessons on a regular basis, but there are numerous resources available that will help and inspire from window boxes and raised beds, group problem solving kits for tasks that can be led by students, access to local parks and allotments and pop-up Outdoor Learning providers. (also, see resource links below). Assessing the possibilities in terms of short-, medium- and long-term goals provides a useful framework to help prioritise planning and training.

Thinking about how you could take what you already know or do outside can be an achievable first step. Aspects of geography and science, for example, lend themselves very easily to outdoor learning; using direct experience as a stimulus for writing, speaking and listening activities is also relatively straightforward to plan, and generally needs no additional resources. Early years play can be stimulated by an improvised mud kitchen. KS1 students can carry out bug hunts or build cardboard box camps for a sleepover. KS2 students can make maps and then use them to set orienteering challenges. KS3 students can learn the science and art behind growing and preparing food and KS4 students could partner with the local paper and become journalists researching a local environmental issue that becomes a centre spread.

Resources for Outdoor Learning do not necessarily need substantial investment. An 'outdoor learning kit' for each child that includes a clipboard and something to write with is a good starting point. Useful items such as magnifying glasses or maps could be plentiful enough to allocate one to each pupil but, if this is not possible,

some careful rotations of equipment could allow for a suitable quarantine period between uses.

The opportunities for sessions linked to movement around the grounds means that a map is a valuable item. It is possible to get the local orienteering club to map your grounds for you at relatively low cost, but you can also start with a satellite image as a basis that you – or the children – then adapt to make your own. Comparing the reality with the potentially out-of-date image, measuring distance to create a scale and deciding on what should be in the key are all geographic and mathematical skills. Working with students to make your own map is another option.

Knowledge, skills and confidence

Much of adopting an OL approach is about confidence. There can be a tendency to focus on technical skills as essential, but this is only true when you want to deliver specific activities such as shelter building, fires or orienteering. To take learning outside requires exactly the same teaching skills needed for teaching PE outdoors – the establishment of routines and boundaries, safety management and appropriate supervision. Taking time to work out how to get ready to go outside, establishing behaviour expectations, learning how to work together and look after each other will pay dividends later on. These core aspects, once embedded, become normal practice and open the door to achieving specific curriculum goals (Robertson, 2014).

It is also worth spending time as a whole staff looking at the risk-benefit

process for taking learning outside. Many of the risks can be overcome with straightforward measures such as clear briefing, and those that need some direct action can be identified early. Your OL adviser may be able to offer advice (OEAP, 2020). Open discussion and problem-solving go a long way to building confidence, so it can be useful to get individual doubts and fears out into the open; it is highly likely that more than one person will be having the same thought. Bad weather is a common concern, but it need not stop access to the outdoors. Adapted buildings or improvised shelters made from cheap tarpaulins can provide a short-term solution; waterproofs for all are a more costly but longer-term solution.

Conclusion

Establishing OL throughout the school does not happen overnight but, by following a carefully thought-out approach that has SLT support at its foundation, it is possible to build staff confidence and competence through progressive engagement with OL. Our experience is that, with support from a variety of quality resources, including books, online resources and training packages, staff soon develop their own ideas and resources for taking learning outside. Evidence suggests that OL can be 'a powerful vehicle for developing teacher practice and increasing their satisfaction with their working life' (Waite et al, 2016, p.76) – which, in the context of the current teacher recruitment and retention crisis (Ovenden-Hope & Passy, in press), offers a timely and supportive opportunity for schools, teachers and pupils.

The next Bulletin will be published in December 2021

Pen Portrait

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