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Residential Outdoor Learning in Schools: 'Next' Practices

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This paper discusses the results of a survey of 210 English, Welsh and Scottish schools carried out in Spring 2009 by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF). It is further informed by the PHF Learning Away Evaluation Report (Kendall and Rodgers 2015). This reports on the findings of a five-year study of the benefits of residential experiences for young people in school undertaken with 63 schools. (Learning Away; 2015). These schools also took part in the larger survey. The purpose of the survey was to identify 'next' practice in residential education as perceived by school staff. These practices were identified for their intentions to respond to a number of criteria derived from an analysis of recent policy initiatives from the government department responsible for education. This paper focuses on those practices identified by the survey as outdoor learning residential experiences. The schools were self-selecting and either already offered outdoor learning as an approach or aspired to do so.

The 210 schools surveyed included 60 secondary schools, 142 primary schools and 8 special schools. The survey included schools from a wide geographical spread across England, rural and urban settings and a range of social contexts. The data was collected from schools through a study of documentation including reports, evaluations and proposals for outdoor programmes, visits and interviews with staff and a focus group of selected teachers.

The survey was conducted at a time of change in educational provision that has given schools more flexibility over what and how they teach including significant encouragement to adopt a thematic rather than subject based approach to the curriculum at least until the age of 14. In addition a new emphasis had been placed on certain curriculum themes of possible relevance to outdoor learning. These were 'Health and Wellbeing' and 'Sustainability'. As part of these policy changes a Government initiative called 'Learning Outside the Classroom' (Learning Outside the Classroom, 2009) was launched in order to encourage experiential approaches to learning out of school including outdoor learning. The purpose of the survey was to identify how schools were responding to these and other changes by capturing their ideas for their 'next' practice, that is what they were aspiring to do outdoors and how they were planning to make use of it. The criteria used to identify practices that were relevant to these policy changes were:

- The **integration** of the outdoor experiences with the curriculum and the life of the school as an **entitlement** for all students and so offered as part of the school day or week;
- A **progressive** programme with a sequence of co-ordinated outdoor learning experiences from age 4 to 18;
- A programme offering a **wide range of outdoor learning experiences** integrated with other experiences;
- **Ownership** of the outdoor learning programme by the staff of the school;

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- A strong commitment to active **student involvement** in the planning, provision and evaluation of the programmes.

The data collected under the themes of integration, entitlement and ownership identified trends in the management of aspects of school life and will be discussed first. Evidence for the remaining topics of progression, the range of activities, student involvement and, again, integration and ownership, concerned trends in curriculum content and approach. These will be discussed second.

Structural Factors within Schools

Ownership. All the schools surveyed wanted more control of the outdoor learning experiences, what they were and how they were developed for educational outcomes. The reasons given for this were several. In some cases staff were alert to a long lasting wariness on the part of staff and parents about the safety of outdoor activities. The legacy of the multiple fatality in Lyme Bay in 1993 (Bradford, 2000) was explicitly referred to. Senior staff felt that trust needed to be restored in the providers of outdoor education experiences and that, in some cases, this was best done by school staff who were in an active relationship with parents, could involve them in the programmes and could adapt programmes to allow for their concerns.

Another common explanation was that outdoor centres could not provide enough places for all students from a single year group let alone for a progressive programme involving several years. At the same time parents and carers could not always afford what was perceived as expensive provision. As a result the schools were planning to develop their own cost effective, local provision involving staff, parents, older pupils and volunteers with a more limited input from specialists. This claim is supported by a recent survey of the capacity of outdoor education centres (CRG Research LTD, 2008). The report concluded that bed spaces are limited, used to near capacity and can reach only a small percentage of school aged children. It is clear that, if an expansion of provision is to take place, it will need to be in partnership with new organisations or provided by the schools themselves. This trend is already contributing to changes in the nature of provision, a factor that will be discussed below.

The commonest explanation offered by school staff for taking ownership of their own outdoor programmes was that this was the most effective way of ensuring a full and effective integration of the outdoor experience with the curriculum and with classroom based activities. Several schools reported difficulties negotiating appropriate programmes with outdoor education staff from specialist centres who were sometimes perceived as out of touch with the curriculum and modern teaching methods. Interestingly, specialist staff from outdoor centres who were also interviewed reported difficulties in helping schools to understand how they could make better use of the outdoors in ways that would support their curricular. Staff in both situations identified the need for better partnership working and especially a better awareness of the world of the other practitioner.

Entitlement. Many schools believed that ownership of their own programmes was the only way to offer an affordable entitlement to outdoor learning that was both inclusive of all students and progressive with outdoor experiences throughout the year and in each year of a child's career as a student as the ideal. Whilst this often meant

extending the school day including, in some cases, the provision for overnight stays, programmes were expected to occur during school time at least until the age of 14. A variety of approaches to the management of the school day were suggested to allow for this trend. Some schools planned to collapse the timetable for certain weeks of the year in order to provide out of school and residential experiences for all students. Some planned to use an extraction model releasing certain individuals, year or subject groups from the everyday routine. Others planned to make use of local facilities within the structure of the typical school day. Some secondary schools intended to change their approach to timetabling overall as they adopted a thematic curriculum more familiar in primary schools leaving large parts of each day flexible for a range of teaching and learning provision including the outdoors.

After 14 years of age, for some, the demands of public examinations were still perceived to end the possibility of offering an entitlement to outdoor programmes shifting any provision into weekends and holidays as enrichment activity. However, a number of schools were developing the use of outdoor learning as a vehicle for new public qualifications recognising personal and social development outcomes. In one case it was hoped to extend the provision of these awards beyond low achieving students to all students. In some cases public awards were being considered or developed for 14 and even 11 year olds based on this model.

Integration. The strongest trend identified in the survey was the aspiration to use outdoor learning as a means to support the curriculum and the wider social life of the school. In secondary schools the encouragement to develop thematic approaches to the curriculum was offered as the most important policy shift that supported these objectives. Outdoor learning was reported as offering a rich source of experiences readily integrated with most aspects of the curriculum and experienced as ‘real and engaging’ by students. Recent case studies and evaluations were offered in support of these claims.

One example described how underachieving mathematics students went with their teachers on a 5 day long outdoor residential experience. Mathematics was taught conventionally for an hour at the beginning and end of each day with, in this case, no attempt being made to integrate the content of these classes with the outdoor experiences. The rest of the day was led by the specialist outdoor staff and focussed on giving the students and staff experiences of success and achievement and so, it was claimed, raising their self-esteem. The results, objectively monitored through internal tests, were, as the organiser put it, that ‘5 days at the outdoor centre was worth a term of maths teaching in the school’. Over the week all of the students had caught up with the best performers in their class and, in some cases overtaken them. The study claimed that this standard of performance was maintained by the participants throughout the year and that, for some of them, this had had an impact on their achievement in other subject areas.

Another school provided the results of a 10 year long study of an alternative curriculum programme aimed at ‘those children unlikely to gain any passes in public examinations, highly likely to truant and at risk from marginalisation and engagement in anti-social and criminal activity’. The outdoor programme offered an alternative to conventional subjects for approximately one third of each school week. Like the first case study, it focussed on students experiencing success and engagement in real

experiences from outdoor and adventurous activities to conservation tasks. The reported impact was rapid with a 90% reduction in truancy documented by the end of the first term of the programme. This included school days on which the alternative programme was not offered. The study goes on to describe how, after 2 years, students who were not expected to pass examinations were sitting and passing English. The staff then developed explicit links between a range of subjects in the school and the alternative outdoor programme achieving, within 5 years of its introduction, an average of 3 passes. The report indicates that this was sufficient to gain entry to further educational provision and implies that this pathway was followed by a significant number of students. As such the programme claimed to make a major contribution to reducing exclusion, anti-social behaviour, criminal activity and raising the aspirations of the young people involved. Interestingly, as a result of the success of the alternative curriculum programme, the school has made a progression of outdoor experiences an entitlement for all students at the school. This example reflects wider trends in which schools describe their aspirations to change their current enrichment programmes into entitlements.

Curriculum Content and Approach

Progression and Range of Activities. As mentioned above, many schools reported the desire to take control of their own outdoor learning programmes. This trend is especially strong amongst primary schools. The combination of a search for outdoor experiences suitable for younger students and also deliverable locally and by relatively inexperienced teachers has led to a shift in the traditional content of an outdoor experience. The most significant trend has been and, according to this data, will continue to be the growth of Forest Schools (Forest Schools Network, 2009), an approach to learning out of doors that has been adopted and adapted from Danish educational practices. It provides a regular, low cost outdoor element amenable to a thematic approach to the curriculum and available for early years and primary school students. Staff felt able to contemplate the professional development necessary to provide this programme or comfortable employing local specialists to support them.

This highlights another aspiration which is to ‘drive down’ the age at which students gain their first and frequent outdoor experiences to nursery and early years (4 years of age or younger). This trend reflects the policy objectives of providing a quality learning experience for early years children and also links with the increasing claims being made by lobby groups that outdoor experiences are an important aspect of the entitlement of a child contributing significantly to health and well being.

A structural element not identified above but of some significance here is that schools are increasingly working in clusters that is groups of schools pooling resources and working to similar educational objectives and philosophies. These might be a group of like-minded primary schools, a secondary school and all its feeder primary schools or all the schools of a town or district. As a result proposals for progressive outdoor learning often began with 4 year olds and continued through to 14 or 16 year olds. Two particular benefits as perceived by staff were highlighted by the survey. The first was that the more outdoor learning that was provided the more could be gained from later experiences as students became familiar with the approach and became skilful with the learning techniques. Many schools aspired to developing projects designed

and carried out by groups of students supervised rather than directed by teachers. One example involved older students from 3 primary schools researching a topic on an outdoor learning day and so becoming the 'experts'. They would then present their knowledge both to other students from their own class and younger age groups, and in the other schools in the cluster, sometimes with the use of technologies such as video and computers.

A common aspiration was to provide outdoor learning experiences at the transition from primary to secondary school with pupils from both schools taking part. The programmes emphasised group work and social skills and aimed to develop mentor/mentee relationships between the students. In a number of cases this approach was tandemed with the introduction of a thematic approach to learning in the first year of the secondary school partly as a way to reduce the impact of the transition that research indicates can act as a major stalling point for some students.

A sub-group of the primary schools surveyed were already committed to 'Education for Sustainability' and had placed this as a core theme in their curricular. This was often linked to the Eco-Schools initiative (Eco-Schools, 2009). This project supports schools in using its activities such as waste management, energy use and meals provision as vehicles to explore curriculum topics linked to the growing encouragement to address sustainability education. Outdoor learning, sometimes linked to a Forest School, was proposed as a way to deepen and enrich this work.

Integration, Ownership and Student Involvement. It was reported in the survey by many senior teachers that the pedagogic approach to teaching and learning in the outdoors develops generic learning skills that can transfer into the classroom. Specific teaching strategies that were mentioned were group learning, problem based learning, discovery learning, student led enquiry and creative learning. Thematic learning that was planned, conducted by and evaluated by classes of students was widely mentioned. The outdoor experiences were identified as providing a context and a model for both students and teachers to explore new ways of teaching and learning together. However, it was felt that, until recently, policy failed to encourage the adoption of this pedagogic approach in the classroom despite the belief held by teachers that it was an effective way of engaging all students in learning and of raising the standards of achievement across the full range of subjects. This emphasis on student centred learning as a teaching strategy outdoors and in the classroom is reflected in many of the comments already made above.

One further dimension present in the survey was a strong link to the policy of 'extended schools' that is the encouragement of activities that engage with and involve parents in the education of especially early years or marginalised children. One proposal was from a centre for the education of teenage children excluded from school for behavioural reasons. Their approach was to offer courses to the parents of these children such as literacy or numeracy programmes. This they had found gave the parents both the skills to support their children and the motivation to encourage them to attend school again. Camping trips were seen as a further way to create better relationships between parents and their children and provided an informal way to offer role models for these relationships by integrating them with other families.

Two other programmes were teaching mothers to picnic with their children, an approach that had a significant impact on the informal outdoor learning opportunities provided by the family. This approach reflected a wider theme in which schools were increasingly articulating their belief in the role of families in providing much of the outdoor (and other) experiences that contribute to child development and, at the same time, offer experiences that inform school-based activities. The key was felt to be the need to reduce the barriers between school and family life in order to create a more congruent community wide learning environment for young people.

Discussion.

There was no discernable pattern to the type of or context for the schools engaging in the survey. They ranged from across age groups and types of schools including nursery, primary, junior, middle, secondary and special schools, academies, grammars and comprehensives, rural and urban settings, schools in Trust status and those with no direct control of their budgets, schools with a wide range of social backgrounds in their catchment areas, schools recognised for their high standards and successes and schools in special measures because of their low performance against national targets.

A number of senior teachers interviewed during the survey expressed the view that, when structural factors such as those identified above are more supportive of school based initiatives, or as one teacher put it, ‘when they let us get on with being the professionals that we are with the best interests of the children from this community at heart’ then curriculum and pedagogic changes followed more readily. This might indicate a latent aspiration to work in certain ways perhaps based on the local knowledge of teachers about what they believe to be of value as educational processes and outcomes and what they believe works as effective approaches to achieve these ends.

The policy shifts that were identified by many staff as helpful in raising their aspirations for ‘next’ practice were several. A significant aspect was the degree to which schools now have more control of their budgets. Several of the schools visited were in ‘trust’ or academy status that is in receipt of their funding directly from the Government without the intermediate step of the local authority. This was perceived as a major liberating factor that released schools from regional policies and priorities and more able, in their view, to develop an educational service appropriate for their community. As an example one primary school in trust status was planning to build a new school to a high order of ecological building standards including the development of the school grounds as an outdoor classroom and a residential wing to the building for it and other local schools to use for the provision of a diversity of residential experiences including those focussed on outdoor learning.

A second national trend that was identified as beneficial was a relaxing of central Government control over teaching content and method. This was perceived to have the effect of bringing about a renewed engagement of staff in planning a more creative and thematic curriculum and employing a more diverse range of teaching methods. Related to this was the frequent mention of the valuing of student centred teaching approaches such as Outdoor Learning by quality audits. A recent Ofsted (the Government department responsible for standards in schools) report (Ofsted, 2008)

was widely referred to as of major significance in encouraging schools to aspire to the introduction of more and better Outdoor Learning. It famously suggested that, 'even when it (Learning Outside the Classroom) is done badly, it is still worth doing' and this comment was often remarked upon.

A number of other factors were also mentioned including the support of local partner organisations seeking to collaborate on provision, good leadership within the school and the development of student councils and their role in providing an evidence base for 'what works'. All these have been recently supported by central government policy.

Teachers suggested several policies that would, in their view, further support the trends they aspire to. That most often mentioned was the further and robust recognition of outdoor learning as an important entitlement. To this end it was suggested that a higher priority would be placed on outdoor learning by schools if it were audited in school inspections. Lastly, the lack of preparation in initial teacher education for learning outside the classroom was seen as a significant barrier to introducing outdoor programmes as it marginalised some teachers from the approach and placed an extra cost and time burden on schools providing the necessary professional development.

The most visible trend was the desire by so many schools to make outdoor learning an entitlement on such an integrated basis transforming outdoor learning from a one off special experience for some students in a far away place to an everyday local engagement for all. All that can be said about the approaches and the purposes is that they have become even more diverse than previously as the creative planning of teachers engages with the perceived educational opportunities that the outdoors presents.

The links between the 'next' practices summarised here and recent policy initiatives from Government departments are various. Some trends are as a direct result of a specific policy, sometimes with outdoor learning as an approach explicit in the policy, sometimes not but nevertheless schools had found this to be an effective way to respond. Other trends identified by the survey were more serendipitous with neither policy makers nor schools realising the links, at least not in the first instance. A final set of trends proposed by schools might even be counter to policy directions. The survey suggests that, in some schools, teachers are increasingly making decisions about what should be learned and how. This can be viewed as contrary to Government led initiatives concerning best practices. In this situation the lack of emphasis on evaluation highlighted by the Ofsted report on Learning Outside the Classroom (Ofsted, 2008) will become an issue if it is not addressed. Effective evaluation, a high priority for policy makers, can provide the evidence for 'next' practices and the way in which they may be able to deliver on many policy objectives, both those mentioned above and, potentially, a number of others. Evaluation was not a strong theme that emerged from the survey. It is to be hoped that this can be addressed and that outdoor learning can justify some or all of the potential gains of 'next' practices and so become the entitlement that professionals in this field aspire for it to be.

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