

Colyer, Sarah and Colyer, Loz (2008) Should there be LESS outdoor learning in South African schools? Horizons, 44 . pp. 28-31.

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Should there be LESS outdoor learning in South African schools?

by Sarah and Loz Colyer

We think there should. OK, so LESS is a small UK based charity that stands for Limpopo Education Support Services. It combines provision of creative teaching ideas and resources for schools in the Limpopo region in the north of South Africa with voluntary, self-funded teaching placements for trainee teachers. This year 25 trainee teachers were involved in various projects, one of which was developing outdoor activity opportunities and resources in three rural schools.

Background

The South African PE curriculum consists largely of rugby and cricket. The aim was to introduce a number of other sports, including orienteering, and to demonstrate some creative teaching techniques for these. The pupils in each school took part in a progression of orienteering exercises alongside various PE sessions on outdoor gymnastics, dance, football, netball and hockey.

The charity's aim is always to make a sustainable impact, so a significant amount of effort went into providing the South African teachers with the resources and (in particular the confidence),

to continue to deliver new activities, or existing ones in more creative ways. For the orienteering the project provided basic equipment (compasses, markers, punches etc), maps of each school and teaching plans.

In addition, for one very under-resourced remote school the project provided several low ropes elements in the school grounds, and a heavily subsidised short residential course accompanied by some trainee teachers at Bush Pigs Outdoor Education Centre.

Similarities and Differences

The pupils clearly enjoyed anything that was new and outdoors. However in evaluating the impact we felt it was unclear whether this was because of the activity itself, because it made a change from classroom work, or because the trainee teachers brought new ideas, resources and a level of lesson planning and differentiation. It is impossible to know for sure, but make an impact we certainly did, and even more rewarding was the realisation of the impact the experience had on us.

In South Africa there is no curriculum requirement for outdoor and adventurous activities and Bush Pigs, run by Kim Wilson to provide courses with a strong environmental theme, is one of very

few outdoor centres there. Talking with visiting staff from other schools at the centre, it was clear that they look for personal development and pupil independence outcomes from the outdoor residential, just as we do, but find it hard to justify time away from school unless there is a significant environmental element to the course. This is perhaps something we can reflect on in the UK, where we need to strengthen the rationale for the inclusion of residential visits within the already overburdened school timetable. The potential for cross-curricular work as part of an outdoor or residential experience is enormous and often overlooked in the attempt to offer an action packed experience. On the one hand we should offer opportunities to experience new activities which many would not get otherwise, on the other there is definitely more scope to raise awareness of environmental issues and understanding of the impacts we are having on our landscape.

One of the key lessons for us, both working at this remote school and during the residential, was that hazards were not highlighted, and did not need managing in the way we would in the UK. Bare feet confidently climbed over barbed wire cattle fences around the school, and walking near large drops didn't come with barriers and stern warnings. To the pupils the dangers were obvious and a normal amount of care was all that was needed, which illustrated the issue of whether our education system has gone too far in its wish to protect pupils (and teachers) and thus taken away some of the common sense that once prevailed. Activities like 'game drives' wobbling along on mountain bikes next to the electrified game fence, to see rhino, were certainly new for both the South Africans and us. We were amused to learn that following a risk assessment they had introduced helmets for this activity!

Another eye-opener was to find that game hunting is actually regarded as one of the best methods of conserving wildlife in the area. 'Trophy hunting' (stalking only the largest of the herd at the end of their breeding potential) provides an income for private landowners that is far more than is possible from ecological tourism or agriculture. This is enough for landowners to justify actively managing game on their land and using carcasses from kills to feed local residents, reducing the level of poaching. This took some understanding and, to our surprise, was not just the view of the professional



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hunters at the lodge where we were staying but also that of Kim, our environmental outdoor education expert.

Reflecting on the more traditional PE element of our experience, we found a number of similarities but certainly a few differences. The teaching of Games, in this case cricket and hockey, in one school was similar to our teaching techniques prior to the introduction of the national curriculum – the main focus being on the “game” situation and very little focus on skill development. While one PE teacher was very reluctant to hand over his best cricket team, (understandably given the prestige of the sport in South Africa), other non specialist teachers, working with the majority of pupils, were eager for ideas and support.



The creative programmes delivered by the UK trainee teachers probably made little impact on the “more able” pupils, but did noticeably improve the skills and motivation of the average and under achieving children and brought back a sense of “can do” into their vocabulary.

Alma School, now an all black school in what was originally a white school during apartheid, receives virtually no funding as it is considered by the authorities still to be a “white” school. Here we experienced the highlight and also most humbling moment of the whole placement. To give a flavour; the school has approximately 400 pupils, one classroom was a former garage with no windows and a twisted, rusty, up and over, garage door. Another was previously a shed. It had one football, one cricket bat and ball (all leather covering long since gone). We arrived with some cones and 12 new footballs and offered to put on an after school football session for anyone interested. To our amazement we were greeted by literally hundreds of children walking across the field to join us for football – not all of these were children from the school either, word had certainly got out. Twelve footballs and a few

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cones don't go far in that situation but the enthusiasm more than made up for this. We discovered a group of girls eager to play netball with one of the balls. This school had floodlit netball/tennis courts –although they were locked up and never in use as there was no electricity or equipment. Once we got access we were staggered at the girls ability – far superior to any team I have taught in this country, was it natural ability or sheer enthusiasm? One thing we were certain about was their level of fitness over our own pupils back home, and this level of fitness resulted in a significantly higher skill base.

Outdoor gymnastics (no hall in the school as every available space was taken up by a desk) consisted of large tractor tyre and sand. The pupils would run up, use the tyre as a springboard and somersault to land on their feet. Car tyres also made good hoops in another school for younger children, and turned on their end and sunk into the ground made a good "beam" to balance across. It was certainly back to basics, but with a little creativity in lesson planning the results were impressive and made us question how many expensive, and often unnecessary, purpose made resources we have at home.

Orienteering was something for all the school to participate in. Speed wasn't a problem and interestingly a good sense of direction seemed evident in a number of pupils. British Schools Orienteering claim that 55% of schools now partake in the sport. We showed a number of our non-PE trainee teachers that it really is a sport for all and more enjoyable than cross-country running for the average child, so hopefully they will help promote the sport in more UK schools as a result of seeing it's effects in South Africa.

The South African pupils were just as keen to undertake the variety of orienteering exercises as they were to play football. Never before have we seen so many children running around a course with beaming smiles on their faces. It may take some time before South African schools can boast to

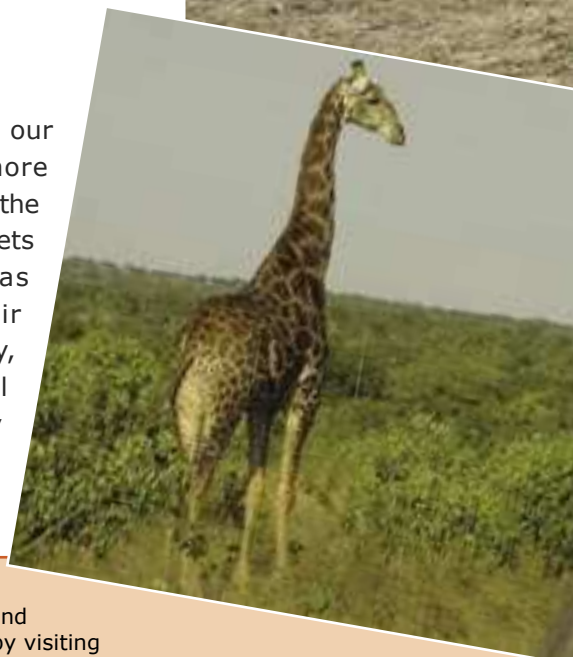
be anywhere near the 55% mark, but we can only hope we've made an initial start. The project left a permanent course with 40 controls and a variety of maps for different standards of course. Most importantly we had shown the teachers some coaching techniques and they were confident that they could continue with this after our departure.

We returned with a reminder that pupils can thrive and develop in the outdoors with very basic resources - enthusiasm on the part of the pupils and the teacher goes a long way in making these outdoor activities successful and worthwhile. The trainee teachers returned with increased confidence in their own abilities and an appreciation of the need to be, above all, flexible and resourceful. And we all returned home reminded that we are fortunate to have a high standard of education in the UK as a result of the resources and training available.

Although often criticised, our education is so much more creative and enriching than the rote learning and worksheets still used in many areas of the world where their priorities have, of necessity, to be more fundamental to survival and day to day living. ■



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More info.

Find out more about LESS and how you can contribute to it by visiting www.limpopo-ed.com

Bush Pigs was set up as a charity over 20 years ago by Kim Wilson. The trainee teachers funded their own placements and undertook them out of term-time.

Author's Notes

Sarah Colyer is a senior lecturer in Physical Education at University of Cumbria, covering both Primary and Secondary PE and specialising in OAA and Gymnastics. She also enjoys the challenge of teaching and promoting PE to all the non-specialist primary students.

Loz Colyer is the Deputy Head at Tower Wood Outdoor Education Centre, run by Lancashire County Council, delivering outdoor courses to primary, secondary, youth and adult groups. He is also involved in coaching Orienteering and both are members of Lakeland Orienteering Club.

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