TO WHAT EXTENT CAN THE EXPERIENCE OF OUTDOOR LEARNING CONTEXTS PREVENT PERMANENT SCHOOL EXCLUSION FOR OLDER LEARNERS? A VISUAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract

We report on a one-year project that focused on outdoor learning experiences for learners 12 - 14 years of age in a woodland environment in the UK. We wanted to investigate the ways in which experience in the outdoor environment could potentially mitigate school factors such as practitioner values and attitudes, learner motivation and engagement [1] that contribute to the processes of permanent school exclusion and therefore examine the claim that outdoor learning could provide an 'alternative' to using exclusion as a disciplinary sanction [2].

Permanent school exclusion has been rising in the UK since 2014 and the number of permanent exclusions in England in 2016 rose from 6,685 to 7,720 pupils in 2017 [3] and it is particularly prevalent in the age group involved in this project. While some argue that outdoor learning is often evangelised as a panacea for the shortcomings of school environments, particularly for very young learners [4], we draw on the work presented in [5] to make a case for the ways in which outdoor experiences can contribute to the learning needs of older learners at risk of permanent exclusion.

We analysed a sample of 102 photographs taken by the project team during the practical sessions in the woodland. We devised a set of categories for coding the images based on our theoretical and pedagogical concerns, and from our reading of empirical literature. Two members of the project team tried out our initial coding categories with the sample in order to check for exhaustiveness and exclusivity, and to try and avoid overlap of codes [6]. Photographs were then coded independently by the four members of the project team using the agreed coding framework. We ask critical questions about the ways in which space, risk, resources, outdoor pedagogies and adult identities can be mobilised to support the learning needs of young people who find school a difficult place to be. In this presentation we will use a selection of photographs to demonstrate that our approach to Visual Content Analysis, drawing on [6] in using a methodologically explicit approach to analysing visual evidence, can produce results that are valid and theoretically 'interesting'. We interpret the implications of our analysis for educational professionals who want to learn more about preventing permanent exclusion.

Keywords: outdoor learning, school exclusion, inclusion, visual content analysis

1 INTRODUCTION

Permanent school exclusion has been a feature of disciplinary practice in educational contexts in England since 1986. Since 2006 the UK Department for Education (DfE) has kept extensive records from each Local Authority in England related to numbers of fixed term exclusions, permanent exclusions, reasons for exclusion and demographic information related to age, gender, ethnicity and free school means status. The school census collects exclusion information two terms in arrears. For example, the summer school census collects information on exclusions occurring during the autumn term. Data is collected two terms in arrears to allow time for any independent reviews panels when parents appeal a decision to permanently exclude. Schools submit their school census returns via the Department's data collection software "COLLECT" [7]. Since 2006 and until 2017 (when the latest figures are available at the time of writing), permanent school exclusion has apparently reduced by over forty percent in response to the UK Labour Government and Coalition Government foci on

reducing school exclusion, and up until 2014 figures suggested permanent exclusion had been on a downward trend nationally. However, the overall rate of permanent exclusion from school increased from 0.08% of pupil enrolment in 2015/16 to 0.10% in 2016/17 and the number of permanent exclusions in rose from 6685 in 2016 to 7720 pupils in 2017. Gill et al. argue that these figures significantly underestimate the actual number of children in a precarious position in relation to their educational placement [8]. The official figures equate to an on average figure of 40.6 pupils permanently excluded from school each day in 2016/17, up from a figure of 35.2 per day in 2015/16. Gill et al. [8] relate this to an entire classroom of pupils each day being permanently excluded from a mainstream school placement. 83% of the total permanent exclusions happen in the secondary school phase. Of this group, 57.2% are in year 9 (aged 13-14 years of age) and to reinforce the challenges around preventing permanent exclusion in this age range, 25% of all permanent exclusions were for pupils in this year group. According to the DfE data, children who are eligible for free school meals (FSM) are four times more likely to be permanently excluded than those who are not eligible for FSM. Black Caribbean pupils are three times more likely to be excluded than the whole pupil population with Asian ethnic groups having the lowest rate of permanent exclusion.

Broadly, permanent school exclusion is defined as a disciplinary measure whereby a pupil is removed from school premises and is not permitted to have access to the usual teaching and learning opportunities within that same institution, as others of the same age would expect to receive. Pupils may have received fixed term exclusions prior to the sanction of permanent exclusion and/or experienced other disciplinary measures, but the children we worked with in this project are those now at risk of being permanently removed from their current placement. It is sometimes the case that children have been excluded from more than one placement and could be either in another mainstream setting or attending alternative provision. In the UK currently, schools and Local Authorities are obliged to provide education after the sixth day of exclusion in the case of a longer-term fixed term exclusion or a permanent exclusion. Even if school policies suggest that exclusion should be used as a last resort, reserved for only the most serious and persistent offences research evidence suggests that minor offences can also provoke this type of punishment [9]. The most common reason for permanent exclusion in mainstream state funded primary and secondary schools was persistent disruptive behaviour with 35.7% of all permanent exclusions in this category in 2016/17. Gill et al. [8] argue that these figures are the ‘tip of the iceberg’ and with over 48,000 pupils currently in alternative provision across the UK there is obvious disparity between what is considered to be an ‘official’ exclusion and therefore recorded in the school census and what happens to pupils who are ‘removed’ from school in other ways. Schools must only operationalise and record permanent exclusion as outlined in the DfE Statutory Guidance and it is not lawful for schools to ask pupils to ‘go home and cool off’ or ask parents to keep children at home, although recent evidence has come to light in relation to this practice of ‘off rolling’ as a way that schools ‘hide’ the true extent of pupils excluded from full time education [10].

The prevention of the permanent exclusion of pupils from mainstream education settings in England and Wales is a pervasive policy and practice issue since the subsequent educational outcomes for those pupils permanently excluded are often poor. What to ‘do’ with pupils who are excluded from school remains a challenge. The absence of children and young people from full time education has prompted concerns about the impact of permanent exclusion across the life course and there is a wealth of research evidence that shows that those who are excluded permanently from school are more likely to be at risk of exposure to criminal involvement, social exclusion, unemployment and substance abuse. In 2011, the UK House of Commons Education Select Committee reported that only 20% of pupils who had received a fixed term or permanent exclusion achieved 5 or more GSCEs - Grade A* - C or equivalent - in Year 10 or 11, compared to 58% of children not excluded. The thrust of research in this field over the last twenty years has, therefore, focused towards exploring ways to prevent permanent exclusion by looking factors such as curriculum modification and alternative education settings. Research has demonstrated that while schools can and do offer supportive strategies to try to prevent permanent exclusion, the capacity for long term intervention is sometimes limited by lack of resources, inappropriate curriculum provision and limited teacher expertise in this area [11-14]. The 2002 UK Education Act outlines the responsibilities that Local Authorities have in respect of their statutory duty to ensure that children and young people excluded from mainstream settings remain in education of some form, but it is often outside of the capacity of the Local Authority to provide such specialised support and so the need for Alternative Provision (AP) i.e. education outside of mainstream school settings, has become more common across the UK. A reoccurring theme across our research relates to the way in which provision for pupils who are vulnerable to school exclusion needs to be designed in ways that enable individuals to experience a flexible range

of teaching and learning approaches [11], creative and innovative approaches to engage with learning and assessment and the ability to choose their own 'entry level' into to learning tasks to support confidence and feelings of success [13]. The importance of staying within a local community, rather than being excluded out of their own geographical area is also an important finding from work we have done related to the role of partnerships between school, alternative providers and the local community [12, 14]. Therefore, the potential of outdoor learning opportunities, as part of an inclusive education continuum of provision to prevent permanent school exclusion for older learners, is in our view something that requires further investigation.

The project team was established in 2015 in partnership with an outdoor learning provider in the South West of England. The overarching aim of our work was to design an outdoor learning curriculum focused on Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) subjects and aimed specifically at Key Stage 3 (Ages 12 -14 years). We were keen to explore the affordances of a curriculum that was STEM focused, as opposed to the more generic outdoor learning or using adapted forest school approaches that are commonly used in schools with much younger learners. An additional feature of the project was the experience of our team working with the young people and the outdoor learning provider. Prior research [11, 13] had also suggested that young people at risk of permanent exclusion have high expectations of the people teaching them and preferred to work with people they deemed to be 'experts'. While the project was led by an experienced researcher and educator, two members of the project team were doctoral researchers who had expertise in Mechanical Engineering and Physics. This provided an interesting dynamic throughout the project in terms of the ways that the young people behaved and responded to those adults they deemed had expertise in STEM in the outdoor learning context.

For the purposes of this paper, we focus on a visual content analysis of a sample photographs taken throughout the project. We considered the following questions:

A. What school factors (that contribute to the process of permanent school exclusion) are different and/or mediated by experiencing an outdoor learning environment?
B. In this project, how are 'pedagogies for the outdoors' evident?
C. How can outdoor learning experiences be mobilised to prevent permanent school exclusion for older learners?

2 METHODOLOGY

Our project was based on the premise that the study of permanent school exclusion brings with it a range of theoretical, methodological and practical perspectives that make a designing research within what may be called a 'traditional' paradigm problematic. Instead, we argue that the decision to situate our data analysis within the field of visual methods, allows us to take account of a range of interdisciplinary perspectives in relation to the study of exclusion in education contexts and to take advantage of the wide range of data collection methods and analytic practices related to working within a Visual Studies framework. We argue that this then has potential to offer a *different* account of permanent school exclusion and the ways to prevent it, more firmly rooted in an analysis of the oppressive and discriminatory aspect of this widely use disciplinary practice.

We were interested in the ways that the nexus of visual methods and Education could offer new insights and new ways of thinking about the issue of school exclusion [15]. It positions both teachers and pupils a 'knowers' beyond identities constructed and reconstructed within schooling context and it offers an opportunity to 'make visible' the processes of school exclusion as well as inclusion, in a way that other methods do not necessarily afford. For example, the critical visual analysis offered by looking closely at the photographs in this project demonstrated something about the ways the 'excluded child' is produced differently in a context that is not classroom-based. We considered it to be important that since the outdoor context offered important opportunities to 'see' pupils at risk of exclusion experiencing successes in learning and we were keen to use a method that afforded this way of highlighting positive behaviours in a learning environment. Taken together with other data collection methods (such as observation, interview and reflective evaluations at the end of the project), the inclusion of visual data reconstructed the learners we worked with as capable, creative and capable of engaging in STEM based tasks on a sustained and challenging level. Hall's work on representation influenced our work in that by paying attention to the visual aspects of the outdoor context for education, we could explore how the world is socially constructed and represented in

meaningful ways for learners and educators working outdoors and to perhaps more clearly notice the ways that an outdoor learning context can mitigate the school factors that contribute to the process of permanent exclusion from school [16]. Our work is situated within an 'interpretivist framed visual data' framework [17] which means that we advocate an approach with which we are concerned not to distort or stretch any meaning we may derive from our analysis of photographs, but rather we are working in a way whereby reflexive and critical close engagement with the images was crucial. The photographs were not necessarily a 'real' representation of what happened throughout the project, but instead were a literal and metaphorical 'snapshot' of the key features of the learners' experiences that were interesting in exploring. At all times we were careful to consider the context in which the photographs were produced and for this reason we incorporated a two-phase approach to our analysis. We began with a visual content analysis of the selected sample of photographs [6], moving on to a more detailed and reflexive analysis of ten photos selected by the team. Aware of the criticism that visual analysis of visual methods is not useful if taken at 'face value', we were persuaded by Banks and Zeitlyn's assertion that all visual data has 'manifest and latent content' [18], meaning we could take account of what we call our 'educator's gaze' – as individuals with expertise and experience in outdoor learning contexts we could discuss 'meaning' in the photos in relation to what we knew what happening at the time the photograph was taken and relate this to what had been happening before or after the photo was taken. In this way, we found that the use of visual method supports experienced researchers to look *more carefully*, look *differently,* and to look more *reflexively* at practices that we have become very accustomed to seeing as part of our everyday work as educators and researchers interested in outdoor learning. Visual Content Analysis, drawing on [6] provided a methodologically explicit approach to analyzing visual evidence that could produce results that are valid and theoretically interesting'.

The project began with a planning and preparation phase whereby the project team designed a STEM scheme of work based upon the National Curriculum for England and Wales. Drawing on the team's education experience and STEM expertise we focused on designing activities that met the learning outcomes of the National Curriculum but that could not ordinarily be delivered in a classroom environment. Once the scheme of work was agreed by all project team members, two local secondary schools were recruited to take part in the project. The schools committed to attending six sessions over the course of three months during the summer term. Each school selected a group of pupils of mixed ability selected on the basis that they had either found difficulties in engaging in STEM based activities in classroom-based work or had experienced more generalised difficulties in school engagement. School A attended with a group of 12 pupils aged 12-13 years of age and School B attended with a group of 6 pupils aged 14 years of age. The smaller group in School B was due to the fact that the group was made up of pupils with more complex needs and it was felt that ensuring a positive experience for these learners was paramount, rather than parity in group numbers across the school groups.

Sessions began with a check in and reminder about expectations of learning and behaviour by the Outdoor Learning lead. Doctoral researchers would then lead on specific activities, relating the learning to their own area of expertise. The project lead would take a non-participatory role, instead taking field notes and observing the sessions. The schools and learners involved in this project gave permission for their photos to be taken but care was taken to explain that photos would be securely stored on password-protected accounts and not stored on data sticks or mobile devices. Photographs would not be distributed or shared with others outside of the project and photographs included in the final sample for qualitative analysis either did not show learners faces or the identity of pupils was obscured using appropriate photo editing software. The project lead and doctoral researchers took photographs when learners were engaged in activities, partly to capture pupils 'in action' but also not to disrupt learning. 304 photographs were taken over the course of the project and the first phase of analysis involved an initial sweep to remove photographs that were blurred, deliberately posed or not well taken (e.g. elements missing or cut off). This resulted in a sample for analysis of 140 photographs. We then devised a set of categories for coding the images based on our theoretical and pedagogical concerns, and from our reading of empirical literature (see Figure 1). Two members of the project team tried out our initial coding categories with the sample in order to check for exhaustiveness and exclusivity, and to try and avoid overlap of codes on two occasions [6]. Photographs were then coded independently by the four members of the project team using the agreed coding framework. We focused critical questions about the ways in which space, risk, resources, outdoor pedagogies and adult identities can be mobilized to support the learning needs of young people who find school a difficult place to be. What follows is an overview of the visual content analysis phase of our work and

our initial findings. We intend to report elsewhere on the qualitative, thematic analysis of a smaller sample of project photographs.

3 RESULTS

Our analysis of data from this project is ongoing at the time of writing and so here we report on initial findings from the first phase of the visual content analysis where four members of the project team analysed the first fifty photographs from the sample. One member of the project team compared and contrasted consistency of coding across the four analysts to check for agreement against the coding framework as shown in Figure 2. Total agreement in coding was denoted in yellow and agreement between three out of four analysts was shown in blue. It was then possible to count the maximum number of 'agreed photographs' that has appeared against each code and to derive a percentage figure to inform our interpretation.

Theme	Codes	Photo No.
Space/Place ***These codes relate to who is learning and where the learning is taking place. We are looking to be able to discern, in detail the specific features related to group size, gender, spaces and places***	1.1 Group size - one to one (could be one adult & one pupil or one pupil & one pupil)	
	1.2 Group Size - Small group (1-3 people in the photo)	
	1.3 Group Size – large group (4-6 people in the photo)	
	1.4 Group Size - Whole group (6+ in the photo and could be combination of adults and pupils or just pupils)	
	1.5Gendered – all girls	
	1.6 Gendered – all boys	
	1.7 Outdoor classroom	
	1.8 Tree house	

Figure 1. Coding categories related to Space/Place used in the visual analysis.

In considering 'What school factors, that contribute to the process of permanent school exclusion, are different and/or mediated by experiencing an outdoor learning environment?' our initial findings suggest that there are many aspects of the outdoor learning environment that mitigate exclusionary practices. We considered themes of space and place, resources and adult roles/identities in relation to this question. Much of the work that went on within the project was based in open space with little 'classroom' work done, despite the fact that the site had a covered shelter that looked like a formal classroom space. Our analysis showed that in just 20% of the images pupils worked in the classroom structure with all other work done outside of this space. This is obviously in stark contrast to the usual amount of work done outside during a lesson when most or all work would be done within a classroom space. Thirty one out of the fifty images were coded as showing pupils working in collaboration in small groups or as part of a larger group showing that there was little work done on an individual level. This challenges the idea that learners who find school a difficult place to be cannot or will not collaborate with other learners, and as part of our wider reflections we noticed how little opposition there was to being asked to work with peers in many of the challenging activities planned by the doctoral researchers.

When reflecting on the question 'In this project, how are 'pedagogies for the outdoors' evident?' our analysis of the sample illustrated that the project demonstrated the concept of 'pedagogies for the outdoors' being utilised in our work. It might seem obvious to state this, however, project team members have all had experience of outdoor learning merely replicating school practice outside, with the context for learning being different while pedagogical approaches remain the same or similar to classroom practice. Our analysis showed that in 64% of the images analysed no adult was present or involved in task direction, with 48% of the tasks captured in the photographs being 'child initiated'

activities. Taken with 42% of the images showing 'child managed risk' while carrying out activities we suggest there is an interesting theme of pupils taking responsibility for their learning and safety, with less adult intervention than they may experience in a school classroom. 50% of the photographs in the sample were coded as clearly demonstrating experiential learning with twenty three out of the fifty photographs we analysed demonstrating values and convictions of outdoor learning i.e. what could be observed in the photographs could not or would not be seen happening in a school classroom. For us, this indicated some congruence between the aims and values we hoped to instil via the activities we designed and the experiences of the pupils who came to work with us.

Theme	Codes	Reviewer 1	Reviewer 2	Reviewer 3	Reviewer 4
Space and Place	1.1		1; 20 26 38 39	11,27,29,31,42,44,45, 48,49,	26,38,39,47
	1.2	1,7,8,9,11,18,19, 20,21 ,23,25,26,27 ,29,31,38, 39,41,42, 43,44,45,46, 47,48,49,50	2;8;11;18 19 21 25 27 29 31 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50	1,2,8,18,19,20,21,25, 26,38,39,43,46,47,50	6,7,8,9,10,11,17,18,19 ,20,21,25,26,27,28,29, 31,33,37, 41,42,44,45,46,48,50,
	1.3	3,6,10,15,16, 17,22,23,28, 30, 31,33,34, 36,37	6;7; 9; 10, 16 17; 22; 23; 24 28 30 32 33 34 36 37 41	3,6,7,9,10,16,17,22,23 ,24,28,30,32,33,34,36, 38,39,41	2,3,16,22,23,24,30,32, 34,36,
	1.4	14	3; 14, 15	14,15	14,15
	1.5	7,8,17,47	2; 17 26 47	8,17,26,27,45,47,48, 49,	6,7,8,26,27,41,45,46, 47,48,49
	1.6	25,38,39	25 38 39	25,29,31,38,39,42,43	9,25,28,29,31,38,39, 42,44
	1.7	11,14,15,17, 44,45,47,48	4;11; 14, 15 17 44 45 46 47 48	3,11,14,15,17,43,45, 47,48,	4,11,14,15,17,44,45, 46,47,48
	1.8	2,3,34	2;3 34	2,3,	2,3,34,

Figure 2. Outcome of visual analysis for Space/Place-related codes on a sample of 50 photographs.

Our initial analysis indicates that the outdoor learning context in our project offered many of the key features of an inclusive approach to preventing permanent exclusion. The fact that the teacher role/identity can be configured in differently outside, offers the potential to build productive and positive relationships with learners who have otherwise been at the end of relationship breakdowns in school. The ability to plan activities in open ended, large scale ways with 'real world' problems to solve, lends itself to the use of choice so that pupils can build their own routes to task completion and to experience success more regularly. Finally, the opportunities for absorption in tasks that we witnessed in practice and then coded in the sample of photographs, demonstrated that there are valuable opportunities for older learners at risk of exclusion to rebuild their sense of self as a learner.

4 CONCLUSIONS

Our analysis demonstrates that learning outside offers many opportunities for the adoption of a range of pedagogies that support the relational and affective aspects of learning – e.g. involvement, changed roles of teachers/adults, challenge around risk and therefore trust. Our analysis of the photographs taken during the project suggest that practices that appear to exacerbate exclusive practices in school classrooms, such as poor teacher/pupil relations, lack of engagement with curriculum content and limited opportunities for creative STEM learning, appear to be mitigated within the outdoor environment. The lack of an adult presence in learning activities in many of the photographs was interesting in relation to the amount of control and surveillance that pupils at risk of school exclusion are usually subjected to in a classroom context. This raises questions about trust and the management of risk when working with pupils at risk of exclusion, and if it is not possible to offer

opportunities for less surveillance for the majority of the time in the schooling context, opportunities to work outdoors seems to be crucial in enabling pupils to experience time away from the gaze of educators.

The importance of outdoor learning in challenging entrenched negative associations about pupils and pupil identity should not be underestimated in our view. Our analysis of the sample of photographs showed that there were no examples of unsafe or negative behaviour during tasks (even when pupils were unaware, they were being photographed) despite adult concerns related to the use of axes, knives and saws for some activities. Pupils involved in the project had opportunities to be creative, to be playful and to fail in a safe and trusting environment, in ways that we know they did not regularly experience in their usual schooling context. The photos demonstrate engagement and willing participation in some challenging work that shows that pupils at risk of permanent exclusion are not the educational 'lost causes' some might consider them to be.

Finally, the photos clearly demonstrated many examples of complete absorption in learning. This is a learning behaviour not normally associated with pupils at risk of permanent exclusion as they are often characterised as incapable of focused attention on tasks or task completion [1]. While the idea of absorption in learning something that is often associated with in early learning contexts (e.g. flow – [19]) there were some palpable and powerful examples of a connection to activities and the outdoors that these learners clearly enjoyed experiencing.

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