Losing our way? The downward path for outdoor learning for children aged 2–11 years

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Abstract:

This paper draws on three related empirical studies in the South West of England: a survey of outdoor experiential learning opportunities, examining attitudes, practice and aspirations of practitioners and children in educational and care settings for children between 2–11 years within a rural county; a follow-up series of five case studies; and an ongoing ESRC funded study of outdoor learning practice across the transition between Foundation Stage and Year 1 in two city-based schools. It charts the journey of outdoor learning from early years to primary practice in England and indicates the 'navigational tools' used by practitioners and the possibly rocky terrain that still lies ahead. The source and nature of values in outdoor learning, the decline in outdoor learning opportunities, the emphasis placed by staff on obligations and expectations of national guidance *vis à vis* their own personal beliefs and other barriers to outdoor learning are considered. It also reflects upon the changing landscape of the primary curriculum in England in the wake of recent reviews and a subsequent change in government that has decided to leave the National Curriculum and testing regime as it is. The author argues that multiple benefits for children of outdoor learning should encourage policy-makers and practitioners to reverse the decline in provision and ensure that children maintain opportunities to learn outside the classroom throughout their primary schooling.

Introduction

Historically, learning outside a classroom is how most people learned world-wide. Schooling was not for the lower classes or for undeveloped countries and learning for the majority of people was literally 'on the job', simply serving the purpose of making them capable of performing necessary (and usually quite specific) work. In some respects then, it is odd that we have come to 'do learning' in special buildings between certain hours with regular breaks from 'learning' called playtime and holidays, when, in fact, much of our learning continues to happen in the temporal and spatial interstices around that context (Illeris, 2009). Of course, *what* we learn in these different places may be very different. Learning outdoors addresses broad aims for education such as physical wellbeing (Hetherington, 2001), emotional and social wellbeing (Millward & Whey, 1997) and deeper levels of learning (Laevers, 2000); while some might argue that what schooling does best is teach children to be pupils (Waite & Pratt, 2011). Nevertheless, the classroom or indoor setting is now so firmly regarded as the usual place for learning that significant government efforts and research evidence about how the outdoors may enable learning (Department for Education & Science [DfES], 2006; Rickinson, Dillon, Teamey, Morris, Choi, Sanders, & Benefield, 2004) are needed to redress the balance from the dominant core subject standards performativity agenda in England (Gorard, Selwyn, & Rees, 2002) and elsewhere (Burbules & Torres, 2000). Furthermore, following years of delivery modes for teaching, a turn to 'nature' may rather be perceived as 'unnatural' for some children and teachers. A universal welcome for its characteristics cannot be guaranteed (Waite & Rea, 2007), yet many young people are reported to value relevance, enjoyment, variety and choice in their curriculum (Lord, 2006) and it could be argued that these qualities are inherent in much outdoor provision (Waite, 2010).

This paper considers the source of values in outdoor learning; the decline in outdoor learning opportunities through the primary years; the emphasis placed by staff on obligations and expectations of national guidance *vis à vis* their own personal beliefs; the suggested changes to the landscape of the primary curriculum in England in the wake of the Rose *Independent review of the primary curriculum* (2009), which advocated greater cross-curricular work and a subsequent change in government that has decided to leave the National Curriculum and testing regime, at least for the present, as it is. It charts the journey of outdoor learning from early years to primary practice in England; it considers the 'navigational tools' used by practitioners and the possibly rocky terrain that still lies ahead. It argues that the multiple benefits for children of learning outdoors should encourage policy-makers and practitioners to reverse this decline in provision and ensure that children maintain opportunities to learn outside the classroom throughout their schooling.

Tracing the steps—methods

Three studies underpin the argument advanced in this paper. Study 1 examined current practice and aspirations for outdoor learning for 2–11-year-olds in a rural county of England and explored how aims for outdoor learning related to practice. The research comprises a largely quantitative survey of outdoor provision sent to all 1,933 settings for care or education of children aged between 2 and 11 years (439 primary mainstream and special schools) in South West England. It included open-ended questions to probe values and aspirations of staff. Further details of its methodology and findings can be found in Waite (2009). Study 2 entailed rich qualitative case studies of five settings, selected from the survey responses to represent different types of provision: childminder; pre-school; day nursery; a Foundation Stage within a school; and a primary school. We selected case study sites by the level of engagement apparent in the survey responses, an enthusiasm both of the students and teachers involved in the [. . .] way of working; for it to seem to improve learning; and for changes in practice to feel doable and sustainable over time (Fielding et al., 2005, p. 5).

They were not chosen as examples of the 'best' way to provide for outdoor learning, but because their engagement with outdoor learning made them especially well placed to raise issues for debate. The case study of a primary school that informs this paper used photographs, videos, observations, interviews with staff and focus group interviews with children to create a narrative of how successful outdoor learning had evolved and was maintained in a mainstream school for pupils aged 4 to 11 years. The third study on which this paper draws is an ongoing Economic and Social Research Council funded project[1] looking at the opportunities afforded by the outdoors for alternative pedagogies in the transition between Foundation Stage[2] and Year 1 (Waite, Nichols, Evans, & Rogers, 2009). This last project employs observation, teacher and child interviews, video and audio recording in two urban schools in South West England. Audio recorders are worn in small felt bags by four 'target' children aged 4–6 years in two classes in Foundation Stage and two classes in Year 1 at each school as they go about their business in and out of the classroom. Thus they pick up, from the child's perspective, the interactions between peers and adults as they engage in learning. This offers fine detail of how pedagogies are co-constructed in this essentially highly mobile context.

Starting points—where do values come from?

One of the factors which seem to be influential in practitioners' valuing of outdoor learning for children in their care is personal experience in their own youth. A large proportion of respondents in Study 1 offered stories of their own significant memories which, as Chawla (2006) suggests, may influence later attitudes to the outdoors. A total of 241 (72%) of the 334 respondents to the survey of outdoor practitioners shared memories of the outdoors. There were commonalities across these personal stories with 100 or more incidences in reported memories, including social aspects, specific outdoor contexts, adventure, risk and challenge and active investigation (Waite, 2007). Three other themes appeared less frequently: 'creativity' (73), 'sensory experiences' (51) and 'space and freedom' (42). Overall, the memories shared were overwhelmingly positive (195), while 40 portrayed neutral affect and only six reported a negative experience. This suggests that, in line with previous research (Chawla, 2006; Elliott & Davis, 2004), memories of the outdoors are usually positive. When something has been enjoyed personally, it is likely that this will affect the attitude to provision of similar experiences for others, so one might anticipate greater report of outdoor provision for the children in these practitioners' care.

It should, however, be acknowledged that response to the questionnaire is also likely to have over-represented those with positive views of outdoor learning. The relationship between personal memories and outdoor provision is mediated by the values expressed through practitioners' aspirations and aims for their practice and these included opportunities for: freedom and fun; ownership and autonomy; authenticity; love of rich sensory environment and physicality (Waite, 2009). From comments in the questionnaires and the case studies, the potential for learning appeared to be rooted in the following values: relevance, enjoyment, variety and choice. These are qualities that Lord (2006) suggests highly engage children and are therefore beneficial for learning (Pascal & Bertram, 1997). In addition, these affective aspects are likely to be memorable and influential in valuing the outdoors in the future; demonstrably for many adults in our survey, they were. (For more detailed discussion of the relationship of values to practice, see Waite, 2010).

Yet despite strong indications of valuing the potential of outdoor learning (Table 1), it is clear from our survey responses in Study 1 that there is a marked decline in the use of the outdoors between the Foundation Stage, early years of schooling, Years 1 and 2, and Key Stage 2 from the age of 7 years.[3] While a higher proportion of teachers rated the potential for learning outdoors more positively than pre-school practitioners, this was not reflected in the activities made available for children in many schools. It may be that the higher proportion of 'pre-school' practitioners who rated potential as low, experienced practical difficulties such as not having adjacent outdoor areas.

Our interviews with staff in the current study (3) suggest that some adults are less enthusiastic about the outdoors and this is not so surprising given the fact that all the teachers in this study and many of those in Study 1 stated that they had had very little or no input in their training on the use of the outdoors. Yet, local circumstances sometimes supported increased use of it. For example, where there is enthusiasm in the senior management of schools, this can exert a powerful influence. As one teacher explained:

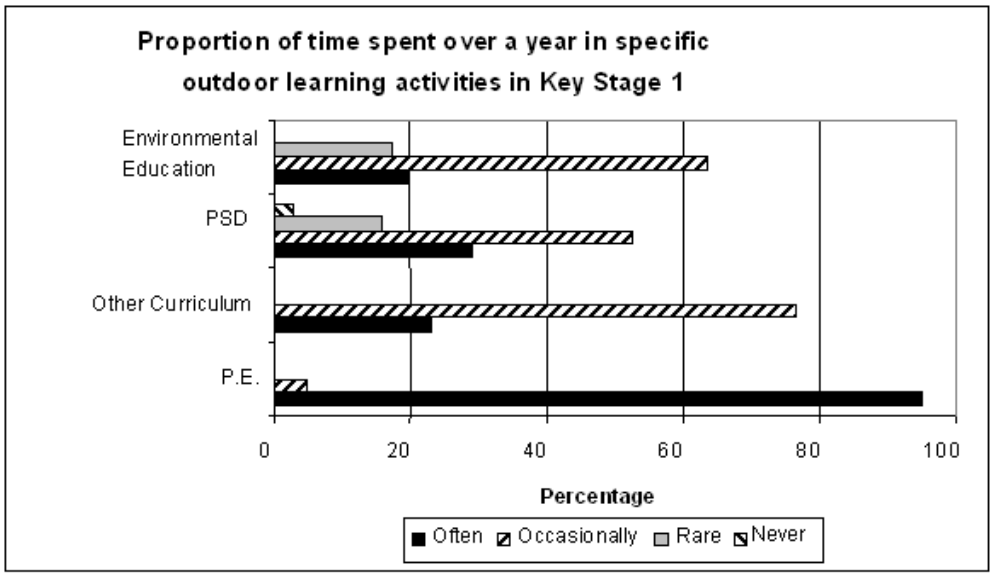
> I think it's really nice for them to get outside and use the outdoors, they love being outside, they learn quite nicely, they're really interested in looking at what's around them, especially at this age. So I try and use it as much as I can within my planning . . . because I've been influenced, *I've been told that's how we work and that's what we do* (Foundation Stage teacher, School A, Study 3, emphasis added).

So, local socio-cultural expectations about the use of the outdoors may serve to override personal disinclination or other external barriers to this powerful pedagogic approach. Children's preferences may be acknowledged and valued. For example, in the primary school in Study 2, pupils were included in the planning group to develop outdoor provision. They also maintained their ongoing involvement in how the outdoors could support learning through the school council and cross-age 'family' groups of pupils and teachers that regularly suggested how the resources might be improved. However, generally these various starting points of personal and local influences appear to flow into a common pattern of reduced provision following the move from early years to primary provision.

The decline—the reduction in opportunities for outdoor learning

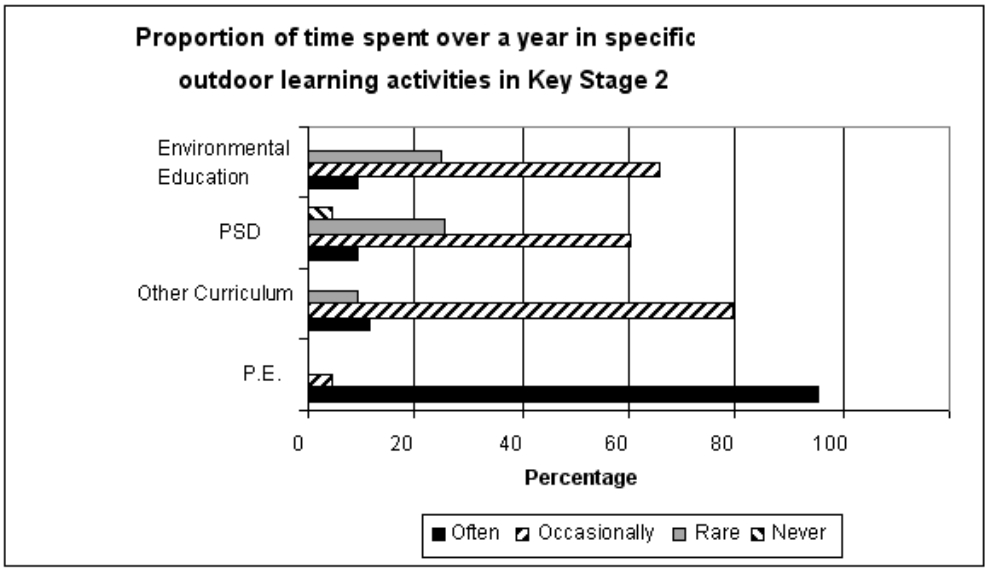
There appears to be a trend for declining provision of all forms of outdoor learning experiences between early years and later stages of primary education. Figures 1 and 2 depict the percentage of time that Key Stage 1 (n = 55 schools) and 2 (n = 56 schools)[4] children are spending in different learning areas. The pattern of how schools use time spent outdoors at Key Stage 1 can be seen in Figure 1. PE is clearly the most dominant with nearly all schools reporting that this often (weekly) takes place. Other curriculum areas such as maths, science and geography are occasionally (several times a term) covered in 80% of schools and covered weekly in about 1 in 5 schools at Key Stage 1.

Figure 1.



Interestingly, as shown in Figure 2, coverage of other curriculum areas outdoors becomes less often the case at Key Stage 2 where about 1 in 10 schools report that it is rare (i.e. occurring only once or twice a year). There is also a marked difference in the prevalence of personal and social development (PSD) outdoors at the two key stages; while PSD takes place often in about 30% of schools at Key Stage 1, by Key Stage 2, this has dropped to only 10% of schools claiming that it takes place often, with about a further 5% reporting that it never occurs. Some 1 in 4 schools reported weekly environmental education at Key Stage 1 compared to less than 1 in 10 at Key Stage 2.

Figure 2



Older children at primary school did not experience any of the types of outdoor curriculum experienced on a daily basis according to the 51 schools responding to the 6–11 age group survey in Study 1. Physical activity was the most common activity reported as occurring weekly or more. About 80% of children aged 6–11 years had experience of other curriculum areas outside a few times each term. About 60% had outdoor opportunities for personal and social education several times a term. This could be attributed to the perception that less time is available in a busy curriculum for addressing curriculum and personal, social and health goals outdoors as children move nearer to the summative standard assessment tests. For a quarter of children aged 6–11 years, environmental education outside was rare. The low incidence of outdoor environmental education is surprising given a growing focus on the environment in broader society and this pattern may already be changing in response to these increasing concerns, within the constraints of competing subjects that are emphasized through testing. One of the schools in our current study (3) has a whole school focus of ‘the environment’ this year, which may reflect other initiatives such as Eco-schools and Sustainable School and Healthy School awards. This appears to be a function of dynamics between values and perceived requirements and further emphasizes the need for the support of the head teacher if an investment in outdoor learning is to be made.

The observed decline in outdoor opportunities for learning may be because concentration on core subjects in the national curriculum creates pressure on the broader curriculum for schools. It may also reflect a distinction between 'play' and 'work' in school settings, so that playful learning is not valued as highly as more direct taught learning, despite the importance (and current lack) of enjoyment in learning reported in the UK (Lord, 2006; Lumby, 2010). The decrease in other areas of the curriculum being addressed outdoors may also be due to a shift from Foundation Stage areas of learning to more subject-based curricular goals within the school setting, so that holistic discovery pedagogies are no longer seen as appropriate to meet more tightly defined goals, resulting in a narrowing of the curriculum. In Study 3, we are currently exploring the transition between the Foundation Stage and Year 1 of primary school in Economic and Social Research Council funded research (Waite, Nichols, Evans, & Rogers, 2009). In support of the decline we noted within Study 1, our initial findings in this ongoing study indicate that from about 30% of our observations of pedagogy in Foundation Stage classes taking place outdoors, this falls to about 10% in Year 1 classes. This is despite the fact that the teachers are arranging as much of their outdoor activity as they can to fall when we are in school observing and so these figures probably represent an inflated estimate of time spent outside. In addition, it focuses on the group of children who are just leaving Foundation Stage and entering Key Stage 1; their Year 1 teachers are consciously trying to smooth the transition through increased outdoor provision and play-based learning. As one teacher describes,

> I hadn't been in year 1, I hadn't been in there since my training, I was in year 5 before so we both kind of said in the first term we need to try and keep it varied and play based and not so structured being conscious of the big jump and we're kind of trying to do that now from foundation to year 1 with that intervention programme in the Summer term we bring the foundation children in because it is a big change to have that structured session but it's weather permitting isn't it? We've got no covered area as such so . . ., but yes I think I realised how important it was, whereas before perhaps I would have just gone into year 1 and thought well *it's year 1, knuckle down and lessons all the way* (Year 1 teacher, School A, Study 3, emphasis added).

This clearly demonstrates how gaps may open up between intentions and practice.

Although aware of the 'big jump' that the transition between Foundation Stage and year 1 represents, the teacher expresses how, without the support of a local emphasis on transition arrangements, she might simply have taken on relentless standards expectations through more directed teaching regardless of the children's developmental readiness.

Different destinations—the aims for education

A total of 145[5] responses to the survey in study 1 stated that their purpose in using outdoor learning as 'following Foundation Stage Curriculum Guidance'. This is further indication that governmental guidance when coupled with inspection criteria is a strong determinant of the opportunities offered by practitioners (Waite, 2009).

However, other motivations may have operated, particularly for respondents from primary provision where outdoor learning is less emphasized. Benefits reported as deriving from outdoor activities included personal (125), learning (115) and social (67). However, it is fairly surprising that only 25 respondents commented on the health benefits of outdoor activity given current mounting concern about obesity in children in the UK. Perhaps this reflects that outdoor activities are valued for more complex benefits than simply 'letting off steam', the physical nature of the activities. Broad aims for education reflected in the respondents' comments implied rich benefits were attributed to outdoor activities beyond narrow learning outcomes.

However, given these attributions, what accounts for the sharp downward turn in using outdoor environments for learning as a child progresses through primary education? What *is* the destination towards which primary school teachers are currently directing their efforts?

Maps or route plans?—The role of guidance

Many staff in schools appear to take curriculum guidance as a directive (Passy & Waite, 2008) and therefore may take less account of local factors and their own values. However, as discussed earlier, while the Early Years Foundation Stage guidance is referred to by early years practitioners in all our studies as '*what must be done'*, this guidance is also congruent with practitioners showing sensitivity to individual children's interests and schema, encouraging them to create individual learning 'maps' such as Personal Lines of Development (Whalley, 2007). Conversely, for staff working with older children, the Primary National Strategies seem to operate more like a satellite navigational system, seen as a series of prescribed actions presented in a linear way, with OFSTED[6] ensuring compliance with the intended route and telling teachers and schools if they have gone the 'wrong way'. With a broader appreciation of the 'lie of the land', in effect mapping the child's needs within local socio-cultural and historical contexts, a number of alternative paths could be taken from A to B.

Intended learning outcomes may thus be achieved in ways that allow the teacher and pupils to make informed choices based on personalized responses to particular learning styles and local contextual factors. More frequently, the pressures of the National Curriculum combined with standards assessment appear to encourage a channelled linear learning path to be taken. Time for the 'scenic route', including creativity, environmental awareness or social benefits, may be seen as impossible in a tightly packed curriculum with school-wide consequences for failure to meet expected targets.

New vistas—the effect of new policy frameworks

However, a new vista may be opening up through the incoming UK coalition government and initiatives that have been gaining momentum recently at grass roots level.

The Manifesto for Learning Outside the Classroom in the UK (DfES, 2006) offers official affirmation for outdoor learning and has gained the support of many organizations but its rather thin theoretical underpinning does not make the rationale or potential methods for promotion of learning in outdoor contexts clear. This potentially diminishes the support it can offer in the face of a continuing performativity agenda. The recent reviews of the English primary curriculum have suggested that cross-curricular study which makes use of learning contexts outside the classroom should gain more prominence (Alexander, 2009; Rose, 2009). However, these exhortations have been sidelined by the incoming government and will not now become policy nor will they become enshrined in guidance documents for a new Primary Curriculum as planned. Alexander and Flutter (2009) cautioned that superficial tinkering with the aims of the curriculum without radical attention to assessment processes will do little to transform teaching, so the outlook for promotion of learning outside the classroom throughout the primary years looks rather less promising with the continuation of the testing regime. The current government has extended an invitation to all schools to become academies which purports to offer greater freedom from the National Curriculum and independence for schools in determining how their children learn, yet national testing will continue. So, given our findings regarding the powerful influence of assessment and curriculum guidance that details what will be measured, this apparent freedom may not have a significant impact on uplift in outdoor provision.

Obstacles in the path

A concern remains, therefore, about the gap between potential and actual use of the outdoors for learning stemming from this powerful influence of performativity. Further rocky terrain lies ahead because of other perceived obstacles in the path of providing outdoor learning. In Study 1, funding (131)[7] was the most commonly mentioned barrier in developing outdoor learning, and it has just been confirmed by government that no additional funding for Learning Outside the Classroom will be forthcoming. A further 102 respondents commented that 'attitudes' prevented the potential of outdoor learning being realized. For example, one teacher commented:

> Money, time, lethargy from other people and lack of motivation and enthusiasm. Too much paperwork to do and not enough time for practical child centred activities. Health and safety restrictions (Study 1).

In some settings (71), the nature of the outdoor space available to them was perceived as a barrier and a further 36 respondents commented on other external forces, such as the weather, being responsible for not meeting their aspirations. Some 18 respondents commented on the safety of the space available as a barrier.

> All learning is important, but . . . we have little chance of a safe outdoor environment (Study 1).

A risk-averse culture (Furedi, 2002; Humberstone & Stan, 2009) can further depress the freedom teachers feel to offer activities that they may nevertheless believe are beneficial for children. As one of the respondents to our survey pointed out:

> It is a resource which has become a bit of a taboo to older children. Risk assessment is naturally a consideration but can be restrictive if overdone. Child to adult ratio can reduce this natural risk and allow children to enjoy the outdoor environment and learn to take risks as part of their development. Problem solving is developed in the greater freedom offered by the outside (Study 1, p. 1026).

This is an example of a noted obstacle that some teachers overcame in order to provide outdoor learning. A further complication for some practitioners in our study appeared to be that, despite their interrelationship (Malcolm, Hodkinson, & Colley, 2003), linking inside (formal) and outside (informal and non-formal[8]) learning was challenging, so that it was not always apparent how they might make use of experiences outside within the more formal requirements of the curriculum. Some of the ways in which such tensions might be mitigated are summarized in the next section.

Continuing the journey onward and upward—acknowledging multiple benefits

Since the focus of our research studies to date have been on the learning opportunities for children afforded by the outdoors, I focus here on some of the key pedagogical benefits that have emerged through the studies described in this paper. They are reported here in support of my argument for continuation of such opportunities for outdoor learning for children beyond the Foundation Stage. Space precludes me rehearsing some other well-established benefits for children mentioned in the Introduction such as physical, social and emotional wellbeing.

In examples of successful outdoor learning in our studies, staff responded contingently to children's interest and learning needs, making themselves key resources in facilitating children's access to outdoor learning opportunities. In Study 2, one teacher described 'squirrel moments', where something unexpected caught the children's imagination. The skill of the teacher was then in developing the potential of this engagement of children's attention to support their learning. Another teacher described how the sight of a hedgehog scuttling along the edge of the playground led to many learning opportunities.

> A month or so ago the kids were all stood in a long line with me watching this hedgehog. I have never seen anything like it! Moving from the playground area across to the wild area and scurrying and I've never seen a hedgehog move so fast and they were just enthralled and so of course immediately that happened we went straight into the classroom and we talked about wildlife, hedgehogs, you name it, I got the *Hodgeheg* book, about the hedgehog that gets a bang on the head and then does everything—all its words go back to front—like me at the moment! (Laughs). But it is a catalytic boost to the children's idea about how to look after the planet (Art co-ordinator: Study 2).

The unpredictability of the natural world is a feature that can be harnessed to rekindle excitement and curiosity in the children and provide a motivating experiential starting point for further curricular development and environmental attitudes. Staff also appear to value the outdoor environment strongly for the chance to observe the whole child in contrast to their more narrowly-focused teaching role within the classroom. Rather than responding (or not) to adult questioning, the children offer ideas and questions spontaneously.

> Some children will come up with questions and discuss things when they are not in a classroom setting, but they don't say much because it's new to them—especially if we go on a school trip such as when we went to Plymbridge Woods. So I think it allows you to see a different side to them. Assessment-wise as well, because you get things out of them that perhaps if you were sat in the classroom, saying well what can you see in the woodsand you know, they kind of switch off. Whereas if you are in there, you know, some of them really come to *us.* I think it gives you more opportunity to get to know them all round rather than just one to one in the classroom where it's just you and the room. Also, how they work together in their groups and their friendships and it's quite interesting just to sit back and observe (Year 1 Teacher, School B, Study 3).

Acknowledgement of the potential contribution that outdoor learning could make to better assessment and understanding of the whole child might give its use more credence, given the current emphases on evidence and assessment and we are currently engaged in some research to explore this.

It is also interesting to note in the comment above, the children's differential responses to the new context for learning. Through observation in different contexts, teachers may become aware that certain children prefer the security of the classroom, while others come alive with the stimulus of experience. Thus they can adjust the range of available experiences accordingly, resulting in more personalized and expansive pedagogical approaches, which will support children's interest, motivation and learning.

The support that outdoor experiences offer in terms of speaking and listening skills, also featured in the above comment, has been noted in several other studies (Maynard & Waters, 2007; Murray & O'Brien, 2005). By disrupting the usual power relations in the classroom and norms for questions (by the teacher) and answers (made by the pupils and judged to be correct or otherwise by the teacher), the discourse can become more open, exploratory and playful. Furthermore, the sensory complexity of outdoor contexts tends to elicit a rich vocabulary in children's descriptions (Waite & Davis, 2007).

As well as this general support, outdoor learning may be particularly beneficial for children who struggle to maintain concentration in more formal classroom settings and actively seek out ways to introduce direct experience into their learning. As one respondent (198a) in Study 1 explained, the outdoors is

> a place where children can be noisy, space to move and have a sense of ownership over their learning and experiences. Children should be allowed to enjoy the rain and cold if they want to, play in the mud and explore nature. Many children learn best when they can learn through direct experiences and through physical, fun activities which can take place outside. All children's learning styles need to be addressed including those who don't learn well sat at a table with pencil and paper.

Some behavioural issues that disrupt learning might therefore be addressed by better matching to learning preferences in an environment that allows more flexible pedagogies (Huggins & Wickett, 2011).

The experiential approach might also lead to the development of more independent forms of learning. Another respondent in Study 1 extended the benefits of outdoor contexts to the adults who taught the children.

> Adults and pupils need to interact with the world around them in a relaxed and open manner. Learning outdoors can add awe and wonder to knowledge and experience. Chance occurrences can provide unique opportunities to observe closely and explore ideas, events, cause and effect in a highly motivating way. The rigid structure of the classroom is removed and all can participate, thus generating confidence and self-esteem.

The rigidity of classroom roles and norms of behaviour sometimes appears to be dissolved in participatory pedagogy outdoors, characterized by more open relationships and mutually constructed ways of thinking about, rather than delivering, knowledge (Rogers & Evans, 2008), but as we have noted above, this can create tensions if teachers are concerned that children acquire certain 'bits' of knowledge in order to do well in tests. Recognition of the both short and longer term importance of positive attitudes towards learning might be to lessen this tension. However, as Humberstone and Stan (2009) also note in their study of wellbeing, issues of power and performativity, common in classrooms, may leak into outdoor environments and diminish potential learning opportunities and support for wellbeing.

These are some of the benefits reported in our studies, but practice and values do not always align. How then might practitioners become persuaded that these multiple benefits are worth the pursuit of more outdoor learning opportunities throughout primary schooling? Bixler, Floyd, & Hammitt (2002) found that the most effective way to persuade staff of the value of outdoor learning was by them experiencing it for themselves. Evaluative feedback from a research and practitioner conference (Waite, Davis, & Brown, 2006) also suggested that continuing professional development in which staff themselves get involved in the outdoors is highly effective in breaking down entrenched ways of working based on static indoor environments. As one head teacher in Study 3 explained:

> We are going to learn about allotments as a staff so that we can learn and put that into practice. It's interesting the way it came out from staff though; they were reluctant to take part; they weren't too worried; they didn't want to be bothered with gardening. I don't think it was that they didn't want to but they had no experience and they didn't want to put their hand up and say I'm sorry I've never done this but it did come out and therefore individuals got support . . . It was an eye-opener (Headteacher, School B, Study 3).

With sufficient levels of confidence in novel contexts, staff are more able to be flexible and adapt to serendipitous openings for learning. Further research is needed to establish how much of this kind of training and experience is required to influence and support positive values and confidence of practitioners.

The end of the road—in conclusion

The sharp fall in outdoor opportunities for learning noted in mainstream schooling in our first study, particularly from age 7 years, suggests that many practitioners' values are being diverted by other pressures. Where negative attitudes and lack of confidence exist, these can be modified by experiential training (Bixler, Floyd, &Hammitt, 2002), and it is suggested that this should be an element of Initial Teacher Education (Select Committee, 1 April 2010). In order for outdoor learning to become a more integrated mode of learning in the primary years as is suggested by the all-party Select Committee on Learning Outside the Classroom and the Rose Review (2009), there would need to be closer congruence between the purposes of education and the way in which success is evaluated, as Alexander (2009) also argues. However, continued emphases on measurement of core subjects, as maintained by the new coalition government, are likely to remain a barrier to the uptake of outdoor opportunities for learning because outcomes associated with learning outside the classroom are somewhat less specific and predictable. Given a measurement regime that focuses on narrow cognitive outcomes and its influence on practice, we are embarking on further research to explore the nature of assessment of learning outdoors.

Since funding was the most often-mentioned obstacle in study 1 (Waite, 2009), a lack of prioritization is made more problematic when compounded by reduced funding for what is currently seen as peripheral activity. This is a particularly real danger in these harsher economic times. On the other hand, there is increased support for outdoor learning through the all-party Select Committee on Learning Outside the Classroom (Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2010), the LOtC Council, the Countryside Alliance Foundation (2010) and the grassroots growth of Forest School provision across the UK (Knight, 2009); all of which offer some hope of a boost to provision. The new academy initiative with its promised 'freedom' for schools represents another potential avenue for greater influence of personal and locally situated values on outdoor provision, but only time will tell whether this 'freedom' operates in practice. In the shorter term, it may be necessary economically for schools that value outdoor learning to look within their staff and locally for increasing opportunities on their doorstep; while at the same time resisting the temptation to allow the classroom with its norms for greater control and structure to overtake the possibilities for a richer array of pedagogical response in outdoor contexts.

Notes

This paper has been developed from a text originally presented at the Fourth International Outdoor Education Research Conference, La Trobe University, Beechworth, Australia, April 15–18, 2009 (Waite, 2009) and reports of research, available online.

1. Economic & Social Research Council [ESRC] award, RES-000-22-3065.

2. The Early Years Foundation Stage in England runs from birth to 5 years.

3. Children in Key Stage 1 in England are aged between 5 and 7 years.

4. Children in Key Stage 2 in England are aged between 7 and 11 years. The questionnaire (6–11 years) therefore was directed to the primary phase of education following the Foundation Stage.

5. Actual numbers rather than percentages are given as respondents could offer more than one reason.

6. Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted) is responsible, amongst other duties, for the inspection of all schools and colleges in the UK.

7. Numbers reported as respondents could report more than one barrier.

8. Informal learning is defined here as without any specified intended learning outcomes, where the learner 'discovers' rather than is directed. Non-formal learning is defined here as providing a loose frame of intended learning outcomes within a less structured pedagogical context.

Author biography

Sue Waite is leader of the outdoor and experiential learning research network (oelresnet) at the University of Plymouth. She has been a researcher in the Faculty of Education, University of Plymouth for over 10 years and has published papers on various aspects of outdoor learning. Her other research interests include collaboration and affect in learning and issues around inclusion and social justice.

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