



# Research Associate report

**Tom Pether, Head of Teaching and Learning, Blackawton Community Primary School, Devon**

Resource

**Leadership for embedding outdoor learning within the primary curriculum**

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## Disclaimer

In publishing Research Associate reports, the National College is offering a voice to practitioner leaders to communicate with their colleagues. Individual reports reflect personal views based on evidence-based research and as such are not statements of the National College's policy.

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# Abstract

This study considers a range of leadership strategies that can be employed to successfully embed the use of the outdoors in children's learning throughout their primary school education. Within the current context of the potential for greater flexibility in curriculum design, school leaders have the opportunity to exert greater influence over their particular school's approach. This might include a greater emphasis on learning outdoors.

While the study considers the potential value of outdoor learning, its main emphasis is on how school leaders have successfully incorporated the outdoors into their school's curriculum. The study identifies seven key themes central to such work:

1. Community involvement
2. Partnerships (external agencies)
3. School improvement planning
4. Leadership of teaching and learning (curriculum, progression)
5. Use of research
6. Continuing professional development (training to support staff)
7. Leadership for vision and culture

Each of these is explored and tips for development are offered to the reader based on findings.

# Introduction

The government's impending review of the national curriculum proposes slimming down the level of prescription and encouraging professional decision-making:

**The new National Curriculum will set out only the essential knowledge that all children should acquire, and give schools and teachers more freedom to decide how to teach this most effectively and to design a wider school curriculum that best meets the needs of their pupils.**

DfE, 2011

This offers opportunities for school leaders to consider their school curriculum afresh. In the last 10 years, many primary schools have actively embraced the potential of using the outdoors as a learning resource, partly in response to such developments as government publications, organisations that promote its inclusion, the focus in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) on outdoor learning and increased focus on environmental sustainability.

So how might school leaders who wish to develop this aspect of learning embed it in their curriculum? How can learning outdoors become a significant part of the culture of a school curriculum and how might this be sustained?

This study looks at how headteachers have led the development of learning outdoors through examining the leadership strategies that have placed it at the core of a broad-based curriculum. There have long been those who have believed that learning outdoors should not be 'just another subject, but rather a medium for an approach to learning and personal development that can be applied to virtually every subject or area of educational experience' (Hargreaves et al, 1988:77).

If, in addition, outdoor learning is associated with learning about sustainability, it could be viewed as having developed from the pedagogical to being a part of a moral obligation to equip children to manage their futures in a sustainable way:

**As a custodian of future generations, education is uniquely placed to make a significant contribution to a sustainable future for every child, and it has a responsibility to make that difference.**

Porritt et al, 2009:6

The 'outdoors' can be interpreted in a range of ways within education, from outdoor learning environments in the EYFS to adventurous activities involving external providers. For the purpose of this study, however, the research questions have been concentrated on the development of the culture of using outdoor learning spaces within or close to the school grounds.

In recent years, both the DfES (2006) and Ofsted (2004) have highlighted the importance of the use of outdoor education and resources relating to this are currently supported on the DfE's website. The recent Tickell review into the EYFS (2011:27) recommends that 'playing and exploring, active learning, and creating and thinking critically are highlighted... as three characteristics of effective teaching and learning'. Implicit in this statement is, one could safely argue, that such activities are carried out outdoors as well as indoors.

There is a substantial list of organisations offering support and initiatives such as Play England, Forest Schools, Eco Schools, Learning through Landscapes, the National Trust and Growing Schools. The outdoors, one might state, is no longer the realm of progressive or creative schools but part of the mainstream approach to education and preparation for the workplace.

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When interviewed as part of this research, Professor Nicholas Gair, Chairman of the Association of Surgeons of Great Britain, school governor and author of *Outdoor Education: theory and practice* (1997), said that:

**All major industries and companies are investing money for teambuilding and management training using the outdoors. If they're prepared to do that, it's logical we should be using these strategies in schools.**

He went on to say:

**The skill set that you derive from outdoor learning includes everything that society determines is valuable.**

The potential impact on pupils was summarised by a local authority adviser interviewed:

**Increasing evidence through the school improvement agenda shows that learning outside the classroom increases pupil engagement, improves achievement, can progress attainment and links to improved attendance.**

This study offers primary school leaders who wish to develop or further explore their school's outdoor learning potential the opportunity to consider the leadership approaches other school leaders have used to realise this.

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# Literature review

I have never heard of anyone involved in the education system in the UK being asked the question 'why do you want to teach indoors?', whereas every teacher I know who has suggested taking their students outdoors has been asked why they wanted to do so. I make this observation to suggest that we should apply critical thinking to the assumptions of teaching and the status quo. If there is a widespread assumption amongst teachers, teacher-trainers, Local Authorities, politicians and society that all teaching (with a very few exceptions such as PE) always takes place indoors, then it will seem odd if anyone questions this. It will simply not occur to anyone to ask the question 'why indoors?'

Higgins, 2009:4

Known theories of learning and development date back as far as the ancient Greek period and throughout time there have been educational theorists and psychologists who have expounded the fundamental and crucial role nature and outdoor experiences play in the developmental maturation of human beings. As Pound (2005) explains in *How Children Learn*, in the 16th century Comenius (Komensky) talked of developing schooling through play, and learning through the senses. He established a branch of philosophy called pansophism, meaning 'all knowledge', which gives equal weight to knowledge, spirituality and emotional wellbeing in the pursuit of learning and development.

There is growing concern that, for a raft of reasons from educational trends to fears over health and safety, children are missing out on the vital learning that can only be offered by the outdoors. In *No Fear*, Gill (2009) writes about the role of risk in childhood, arguing that certain types of risk help children to learn through the acquisition of practical skills, and in understanding how to manage risk safely and keep themselves safe. He also states that children have a natural appetite for risk that should be catered for through educational and free play opportunities, while avoiding exposure to greater, unmanaged risk:

**Advocates for children's play assert that active outdoor play always involves some risk, but that the risks are greatly outweighed by the health and development benefits.**

Gill, 2009:16

Gill claims that children build their character and personality through facing risk, build their self-reliance and resilience, their adventurousness and entrepreneurialism, and ultimately that learning to deal with risk and challenge is 'an essential part of living a meaningful and satisfying life' (Gill, 2009:16).

Louv (2009:100) has also explored the potential effects of children missing out on an education that embraces the outdoors, describing how the lack of these opportunities can result in what he terms 'nature deficit disorder', which can have detrimental effects on child development:

**As nature deficit grows, another emerging body of scientific evidence indicates that direct exposure to nature is essential for physical and emotional health. For example, new studies suggest that exposure to nature may reduce the symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and that it can improve all children's cognitive abilities and resistance to negative stresses and depression.**

Louv, 2009:35

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It is suggested that the use of the outdoors in school is not only beneficial to the child but to the adults too:

**The benefits of the outdoor classroom are clearly not confined to students. Teachers noted improved relationships with students, personal development in the teaching and curriculum benefits.**

Dillon et al, 2005:31

If outdoor learning is to be used successfully as a route to achieve this in schools, there has to be a positive approach to using the outdoors from the start of a child's education:

**The attitude and behaviour of adults outdoors has a profound impact on what happens there and on children's learning. It is therefore vital that children have the support of attentive and engaged adults who are enthusiastic about the outdoors and understand the importance of outdoor learning.**

DCSF, 2007:2

However, the initial impetus to develop outdoor learning in the early years can sometimes fade as children move up the school. This, for example, has been highlighted by Waite:

**The sharp fall in outdoor opportunities for learning noted in mainstream schooling in our study, particularly from age 6, suggests that practitioners' values are being diluted by other pressures.**

Waite, 2009:9

To guard against this, it is suggested that its integration in curriculum planning and distributed leadership are important so that the culture of using the outdoors is sustained throughout the school. According to Dillon et al:

**This requires measures such as making outdoor experiences a regular structured part of the annual curriculum for all year groups; engendering strong support for outdoor education from senior managers, governors, teachers, and parents.**

Dillon et al, 2005:5

The authors go on to state that the former three have key responsibilities to embed the use of the outdoors by the school so that it becomes culturally established.

The routes to achieving and embedding such a culture is therefore seen as a collective approach, not down to one individual and this is supported in Birney and Reed's (2009) study of the leadership of sustainable schools. They conclude that:

**The reports from the schools show there is no single approach to set about it or one person who can take it on and be successful by themselves. If a whole-school approach is to be achieved, and the partial status of sustainability is to be overcome, then it cannot be a journey that is travelled alone.**

Birney & Reed, 2009:45

They go on to state that the successful embedding of such initiatives has to acknowledge the importance of distributed leadership.

Contributors within this distributed approach might go beyond the staff team. When initiating and sustaining a culture of using the outdoors, school leaders could be encouraged to think about the benefits of using their local community. All stakeholders are seen as benefiting from such initiatives. For example, in the executive summary of a review of research on outdoor learning, Rickinson et al state:

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There is significant evidence that social development and greater community involvement can result from engagement in school grounds projects. Students develop more positive relationships with each other, with their teachers and with the wider community through participating in school grounds improvements.

Rickinson et al, 2004:3

From a leadership perspective, it could be offered that, to help this embedding, teachers need to be reassured that they will be supported in their outdoor learning activities. There is an acknowledged fear among some teachers of taking risks, from the perspective of their own practice and in terms of the health and safety of children being outdoors. This has been highlighted by Ofsted (2004:5) as a combination of 'teachers' insecurities in subject knowledge and fears of litigation'.

Teachers' fears around risk are being increasingly recognised and efforts have been made to clarify expectations so that a balance can be struck between the safety of children and their entitlement to explore the opportunities provided through outdoor learning. Dame Claire Tickell in her review of the EYFS states:

**I recommend that clear guidance is included in the EYFS about the amount of paperwork that should be kept in relation to risk assessments. I also recommend that practitioners should not have to undertake written risk assessments in relation to outings, but instead be able to demonstrate, if asked – for example, by parents or during inspection – the way they are managing outings to minimize any risk.**

Tickell, 2011:41

Having established some viewpoints from the existing literature on the place of outdoor learning within the curriculum and its leadership within schools, the report now offers a series of findings under the following headings:

1. Community involvement
2. Partnerships (external agencies)
3. School improvement planning
4. Leadership of teaching and learning (curriculum, progression)
5. Use of research
6. Continuing professional development (training to support staff)
7. Leadership for vision and culture

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# Methodology

The study followed a qualitative research methodology, using a semi-structured interview approach. This style allowed for further probing and a more detailed level of response, supported by a set of open-ended questions that allowed comparisons to be made between responses. The respondents were sought from a range of contexts and were identified through personal contacts. When conducting interviews in the school settings, opinions of children were sought as well as those of leaders. These interviews were carried out between autumn 2009 and the end of 2010.

The four schools visited, all in the south of England, were a mix of urban and rural, and advantaged and disadvantaged.

Formal interviews were carried out with the following:

- Headteacher 1 (Somerset)
- Headteacher 2 (Somerset)
- Headteacher 3 (Devon)
- Headteacher 4 (Surrey)
- University associate lecturer, faculty of education (outdoor learning specialist)
- Local authority adviser for geography
- Local authority adviser for EYFS
- University senior lecturer in education (geography and outdoor learning)
- Professor of education, outdoor specialist and school governor
- Teacher and L3<sup>1</sup> Forest School practitioner
- Advisory teacher for outdoor education

Five key questions were asked in interviews:

1. What were the drivers that made you decide to invest time, energy and resources in your outdoor learning space?
2. How have you ensured outdoor learning has a consistently high profile within your school curriculum?
3. What measures have you taken to involve the wider community?
4. What strategies have you used to enthuse and empower any reluctant staff?
5. What advice would you offer to other school leaders hoping to embark on similar projects?

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<sup>1</sup> L3 means a practitioner is qualified to plan and deliver sessions, and manage and train others.

# Findings

## Community involvement

Good use of outdoor space goes, according to those interviewed, much further than the school itself. It was stated that the creation and maintenance of an exciting and inclusive outdoor space within or around the school could pay enormous dividends in terms of social capital and community involvement. Many of the interviewees were impressed by the huge variety of skills members of their communities have been more than happy to offer, very often for free. By developing an outdoor learning space in Devon, the local community around my own school has produced a landscape designer, arboreal specialist, numerous professional gardeners and an expert in the design and construction of straw bale houses.

Friends organisations and PTAs were seen by interviewees as vital contributors to the development of outdoor learning, providing funds, publicity and labour. There were also many funding opportunities offered through grants from various local organisations which schools applied for. Parents and members of the community were acknowledged as providing time and expertise for what was often a complex process.

**It was done by parents, it was done by teachers, it was done by everybody.**

Headteacher 3

This process began in a variety of ways, often starting with an audit of skills to be found within the school community, including parents and governors as well as the wider community. The information from these audits helped school leaders assess where skills were abundant and where extra support and leadership might be needed. In all cases, efforts were made to reach the wider community from the start through publicity in local newspapers, websites, open evenings and well-publicised fundraising events.

**We've done a lot in terms of information evenings, showcasing what the children have done, lots of photos and an open day.**

Headteacher 1

This initial energy had to be sustained through regular updates on progress in letters to parents and a steady stream of events to show that something was happening.

**We've had 'Groundforce' weekends and opened up the woods.**

Headteacher 4

The engagement of the local community with outdoor learning initiatives was seen as a strategy through which their sustainability could also be secured. This included practical help and maintenance, especially during holiday periods.

**The Cubs and Scouts use our outdoor facilities. They help look after things and bring ideas for future development. It helps keep it sustainable.**

Headteacher 2

This continued engagement also helped to monitor the availability of grants to sustain outdoor learning projects.

**We got a grant for the pond. Part of the conditions for that was to involve the local community – which means the investment goes in and it's in everyone's interest to keep it going.**

Headteacher 2

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Many of the interviewees echoed the belief that the development and maintenance of vibrant outdoor spaces in schools created a route through which some parents, who might otherwise have been reluctant to enter the building or go into a classroom, could get involved in their children's school experience and community.

**We've had parents coming in to help who wouldn't have set foot in the school before.**

Headteacher 4

All the headteachers interviewed stated that one of the most powerful ways to draw parents and community into outdoor learning projects was through the excitement and engagement of the children.

**Children are going home buzzed up. [The outdoor learning days are] the highlight of the week, so parents are wanting to know what's going on.**

Headteacher 3

Opening up outdoor learning was seen to create a very positive and wholesome image for a school. All the headteachers interviewed reported the overwhelmingly positive feedback from their communities, echoing the experience of one headteacher:

**I've had a lot of visits from parents for next year who are from out of catchment because of what we do – it's becoming so much part of the school's ethos.**

Headteacher 1

### **Top tips**

- Audit the community for useful skills.
- Look for community members to source funding.
- Use the community to maintain spaces during the holidays.
- Use the outdoors as a strategy to engage less involved parents.
- Make the most of wholesome publicity.

### **Partnerships (external agencies)**

There are many initiatives and organisations such as Forest Schools, Learning through Landscapes and Eco Schools which have been used by school leaders as a springboard to launch outdoor learning. Some of these were evident in this study's schools. These were found to offer structures around which culture and practice could be developed as well as reassurance to unsure teachers that they were embarking on a planned and organised path.

**It can offer heads a trigger that gives people a system to follow. There is a curriculum and code of practice – health and safety is big in Forest Schools, because it has to be.**

Teacher and Forest School leader

**We worked very closely with the [Blackdown Hills] partnership looking at where food comes from. As a result of that the school had a food co-operative and they sold food boxes to parents. I've got parents here who run a gardening club and we use the produce to make healthy meals; we're a Healthy School.**

Headteacher 2

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However, many of the interviewees cautioned against using one external organisation to the exclusion of all others, or deterring the school itself from planning its own approach. They mentioned the importance of ensuring that these providers were not the sole drivers for outdoor learning and that leadership of it should be distributed throughout the school staff to fully embed the culture. Some school leaders voiced concern that if an external provider were to withdraw, the school would be left without provision. To avoid this, it was believed to be best to involve several external partners. These might include large, national organisations as well as local groups. This provision was universally underpinned by investment in training for school staff.

**We're not solely concentrating on Forest Schools, so it's less precarious.**

Headteacher 1

Schools identified many organisations that offered funding. All the schools visited had put considerable energy into the bidding processes for grants, often with parents and governors preparing the bids themselves, thus taking the burden away from school staff. This process opened up avenues of funding in times of tight budgets, but also brought in members of the community who wished to contribute. The school leaders stated that external providers and organisations were also keen to be seen to have supported such initiatives, often asking to be mentioned in publicity or on websites.

### Top tips

- Use external providers as a stimulus for projects.
- Ensure external providers are not the sole inspiration or vehicle for developments.
- Encourage school community partners to lead bidding processes.
- Offer publicity for offers of funding.

### School improvement planning

The school leaders and specialists interviewed for this study were united in their belief that to fully exploit the advantages presented by a dynamic use of the outdoors in the curriculum, schools had to enter the process with commitment and enthusiasm. If the use of the outdoors for learning was to be a success, it was imperative all staff were engaged.

**Some schools will come to it through the Healthy Schools agenda, lowering obesity, physical education route. Others will get into it through the sustainable schools, environmental education ethos. Others will come to it through a more pragmatic [approach], embarking on learning and teaching activities which will motivate children more, and get them in school more, and challenge them more.**

Local authority adviser

Whichever of the above reasons provided the motivation to push forward a curriculum that embraced the outdoors, all the interviewees were convinced of the importance of long-term planning, not only in the initiation of outdoor learning but for its maintenance and sustainability.

**When we're making decisions on a whole-school level, it has to factor in to what we do.**

Headteacher 1

The interviewees all agreed that placing the outdoors at the centre of school improvement plans clearly demonstrated commitment from leadership, not only to the ideas but to the investment that was required.

**You've got to be prepared to financially back these sorts of things.**

Headteacher 3

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Thorough and ongoing financial planning was seen to be a safeguard against the possibility of creating an endless money sink:

**Once it's embedded in what you're doing, you're not constantly shelling out for little add-ons.**

Headteacher 1

Financial, logistical and curricular development planning also needed to take account of the long-term nature of outdoor learning projects in schools. Unlike a building, which has completion when signed off, outdoor learning projects developed and grew. This was seen to be a positive aspect.

**It's better if it's not all done at once – like a garden, it's got to keep growing and changing. That keeps everyone excited and involved. It's sustainable.**

Headteacher 2

The sustainability of using school outdoor space was recognised as being a serious issue. Many interviewees were very aware of the importance of ensuring plans took into account the future of their outdoor projects.

**We haven't got massively big grounds so long term we need to look at where we go off-site.**

Headteacher 3

Many interviewees also advised including in the development plan more resources for the continuing professional development (CPD) of teachers than they had initially expected. This CPD was seen by a local authority adviser as central to ensuring there was no gap between effective and novice practice:

**There is a gulf between what we want and the position of the practitioners. You have to teach teachers first so they feel comfortable. They don't [necessarily] know what it is they should be doing.**

Local authority adviser

The development plan also played an important role in targeting the growth of whole-school involvement from all staff. This often consisted of guidelines that clearly demonstrated commitment to the institution of the culture of outdoor learning. Many interviewees recommended the inclusion in the development plan of explicit expectations as to how much time teachers were to use the outdoors. This would, for example, be evidenced in teachers' curriculum planning.

**Target in the development plan to have a certain percentage of learning outside the classroom which is set in stone.**

Headteacher 4

**Our little drip-feeding saying actually you will go out – your class will be expected to be outside for an hour of learning.**

Headteacher 3

## Top tips

- Embed outdoor learning in the development plan for all to see.
- Demonstrate commitment and develop sustainability with thorough financial planning.
- Create a development plan that offers a clear calendar and structure for all staff to follow.
- Budget generously for staff CPD.
- Take into account the way outdoor projects grow so that development planning responds to this and is ongoing.

## Leadership of teaching and learning (curriculum, progression)

The legislation setting out the amount of time children in the early years of primary education should be outdoors has meant that this stage of schooling has been at the forefront of using such spaces and developing the school culture of using the outdoors. Interviewees cited Foundation Stage colleagues as being helpful in gaining both confidence and inspiration to use the outdoors more. It also helped promote continuity from the Foundation Stage onwards.

**Starting at Reception/Year 1 means those children will be used to that way of working.**

Headteacher 2

However, it was also stated that tapering off outdoor learning in the later years of primary school could devalue the initial experience and deny the benefits to pupils beyond the Foundation Stage.

**It's no good the children in Reception having that sort of experience, then they go into Year 1 and they're back in a box again.**

EYFS adviser

To develop a whole-school culture of using the outdoors, the importance of continuity and progression was a common theme. Whether school leaders have opted for a curriculum that focuses on outdoor skills or a more holistic approach that aims to integrate the outdoors into all spheres of learning, they all stated the importance of demonstrating progression from previous learning. This, according to the EYFS adviser, should stem from the guiding question:

**Are we sure, before we do anything inside or outside the classroom, about what children this age should be challenged to do intellectually?**

EYFS adviser

Many school leaders stated that the development of a curriculum that makes learning outdoors a structured and explicit expectation throughout the school is important for both teachers' and children's understanding and engagement in the school's culture. For some school leaders this meant there was a clear expectation that outdoor learning be clearly identified in lesson plans and regularly integrated. The importance of clear roles for adults was also highlighted:

**The adults must be clear and comfortable about their roles outside. There's still a feeling that outdoor play is about children letting off steam and bikes and trikes and adults walking around with cups of coffee just supervising.**

EYFS adviser

As the children got used to the culture of using the outdoors and their skills expanded and developed, interviewees talked about the necessity of the curriculum being able to adapt and grow, just as the outdoor space would. One headteacher described this as continually 'upping the ante'. Another headteacher recognised that changes such as the seasons, plant growth and wear and tear of a school's outdoor space would play a large part in determining where the curriculum might go. It was seen that the curriculum could therefore, to a great extent, be built around the environment.

The provision of a curriculum, such as Forest Schools, that sets out a progression of skills has been used by some leaders as a seed from which a broader curriculum might be developed.

**We used Forest Schools to get us started but now it's just a part of what we do.**

Headteacher 1

Some headteachers stated that they had encountered parents who were less than enthusiastic about the school's developments and needed to be won over so they might embrace the culture. This illustrates again how the leadership of the school has to fully demonstrate its thinking behind and commitment to outdoor learning and its place in the curriculum.

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Some parents... just thought we'd be going out for half an hour in our wellies and wasting curriculum time.

Headteacher 1

Parental concerns associated with risk needed to be addressed not only through reassurance but through explanation of its importance to child development.

### Top tips

- Account for the ongoing development in pupils' skills so that the level of challenge in curriculum planning increases in response to this.
- Plan for the effects of increased usage of environmental resources over time as outdoor spaces are used more intensely.
- Engage the support of Foundation Stage colleagues for ideas and advice.
- Set out the expectations for teachers and children, with clear curriculum progression.
- Consider linking with organisations such as Forest Schools, which have their own curriculum that might be used as a framework for wider curriculum development.
- Consider how to promote outdoor learning with parents and address concerns they might raise.
- Don't think 'why outdoors?' Think 'why indoors?'

Advice on how to set up an outdoor learning curriculum can be found on the Learning Outside the Classroom website at: <http://lotc.org.uk/plan-deliver-lotc/policy-and-curriculum-planning/>.

### Use of research

Interviewees saw the use of research as adding integrity to the process of developing a culture of learning outdoors. This was seen as a strategy for not only reassuring teachers that what they were embarking on was a researched initiative, but for the whole school community. The communication of current thinking on the benefits of using the outdoors in education was used in developing a positive culture:

We send out newsletters that drip in bits about research into the benefits of the outdoors.

Headteacher 4

Good communication of the benefits of using the outdoors with all stakeholders was seen as essential to creating and maintaining enthusiasm. Once generated, it was felt this momentum would sustain the project within the minds of the community. It was seen as important that these projects evolved through the years so there was a steady stream of developments to engage not only the community but the children. School leaders made sure they were aware of the latest research and were communicating it outwards to encourage a feeling of excitement and growth that would further embed and sustain the place of the outdoors in the school culture.

The perceived risks around the use of the outdoors were seen by interviewees as an example of where the successful communication of research could be used to allay the fears of teachers and parents. It was seen as important that all involved were aware of the measures being taken by the school to assess and manage risk, and that these were informed by authoritative research and governmental advice. Extracts from Gill's (2009) book *No Fear*, which examines the importance of calculated risk-taking in child development, were used in one school to reassure parents and staff that the approach was an important part of children's learning.

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I've used Tim Gill's work to give integrity to what we're wanting to do here. People need to be reassured that there are well-researched reasons why we're getting the children to experience these things in this way.

Forest School practitioner

Many interviewees said they had been surprised at how much reassurance the children had needed to convince them of the benefits of outdoor learning. Even though most children were drawn to the outdoors, many leaders expressed surprise at how ill-equipped some were to deal with a different way of working. Some children needed permission to get muddy, so school leaders found themselves using similar communication strategies with the children as they had with parents and staff.

Although this is a rural locality, the children don't spend a lot of time outside. They didn't like getting wet. They kept trying to come back in the classroom.

Headteacher 2

Once the whole school was seen as being well informed as to the thinking behind the use of the outdoors and to be putting this research into action, it was seen by one headteacher as a way to raise the profile of the school and disseminate the practice to other leaders who had expressed interest. The profile of the school could also be raised by the dissemination of its own research, carried out within the school by members of staff.

One of our aims is to help other schools develop their outdoor learning. We'll have children and staff brought here to show them what we do and inspire them.

Headteacher 3

## Top tips

- Use research to provide integrity for what you are doing.
- Make sure all stakeholders are aware of this research (little and often).
- Use the research to justify calculated risk-taking.
- Inform the children as to how it may affect their learning.
- Use your knowledge to help and inspire others and raise the academic profile of the school.

## Continuing professional development (training to support staff)

All interviewees were in agreement that staff had to be trained and confident if the culture of using the outdoors was to be successfully embedded. In its initial stages, this was seen to demand that teachers be inspired, were given practical working knowledge and strategies, and that systems were in place to manage risk confidently.

For inspiration, headteachers saw the importance of staff experiencing the use of the outdoors themselves, often with an expert to guide and inspire. The strategy followed what the interviewees saw as good CPD in that it was rooted in the staff experiencing what they hoped to pass on to the children:

That's why we've decided that staff have to go out and experience it.

Headteacher 3

To start with, leaders agreed that the decision to embrace the outdoors had to be entered into with commitment and enthusiasm. CPD had to be well planned and delivered with confidence, otherwise questions might arise as to the validity of what the leadership was aiming to develop. Lack of momentum or insufficient training could, in the words of one headteacher, 'send the vibes – are we doing this right or not?'

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As well as bought-in CPD, staff meetings were regularly given over to equipping staff with the tools and strategies to bring outdoor learning into more of their teaching. Practical strategies such as the use of Brain Basher Boxes<sup>2</sup> were developed in staff meetings to give teachers tools they could use during sessions to keep one group of children engaged while they worked with a guided group, just as in a classroom-based lesson.

The management of risk was highlighted by many school leaders as an issue that presented problems for teachers and could result in their reluctance to use the outdoors for teaching and learning. Thorough risk-assessment training was seen as important not only for developing teacher confidence but as a route for leaders to demonstrate trust in their staff and empower them to experiment with their teaching. Teachers were encouraged to take calculated risks in the knowledge that leaders would support them: as one headteacher said to staff: 'As long as what you're doing is reasonable – I'm condoning what you're doing'. Risk-assessment training for all staff was also seen as a way of ensuring common agreement of what constituted risk in outdoor learning. As a local authority adviser remarked:

**What one teacher would consider a risk, another wouldn't. There is a need for risk-assessment training.**

Local authority adviser

It was notable that many interviewees highlighted the gulf between the ideals of using the outdoors and the abilities and experience of newly qualified teachers (NQTs) arriving in their schools. Due to many pressures, which will not be discussed here, teacher-training courses are able to devote only limited time to the use of the outdoors in education. It was found that many inexperienced teachers were in need of training before they were ready to fully exploit the opportunities offered through outdoor learning.

**Some teachers who've been through training working on a very objective-led curriculum don't know how to free it up. The success of learning outside the classroom lies with teacher training.**

Local authority adviser

The interviewees were unanimous in their recommendation that training for the use of the outdoors should be engaging and fun. As one headteacher said, 'If teachers are enjoying what they're doing, they're teaching better'.

## Top tips

- Make sure staff experience using the outdoor first-hand.
- Ensure CPD involves practical advice and strategies for class management.
- Deliver clear risk-assessment training that empowers staff.
- Be prepared to invest in CPD for NQTs.
- Make it fun.

## Leadership for vision and culture

Everyone who was interviewed agreed that the leadership of the school was the key to successful initiation, inspiration and development of an outdoor learning culture. School leaders were seen as those responsible for driving, holding and disseminating the vision of what the culture of using the outdoors would look like. As an associate lecturer in education stated: 'The school should reflect exactly what you're trying to do'.

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<sup>2</sup> Brain Basher Boxes contain pre-prepared, age-appropriate activities that children can carry out, in independent small groups, while the teacher works with a guided group.

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Headteachers were in agreement that the leadership of outdoor learning should not fall on their shoulders alone. Distribution of leadership in the drive to place the outdoors at the centre of school culture was seen as necessary to ensure it was not only sustainable, but also embedded in all areas of staff practice. This involved:

**[Headteachers] choosing the right people to train. Trying to get that person with the passion for it so they can spread the word within the staff.**

Headteacher 1

Distributed leadership was also seen as a strategy to guard against the loss of one or two experts who may leave the school, leaving a vacuum:

**It's great to have a few enthusiasts in there but it's not sustainable, you're always on the edge, people can move on.**

Associate lecturer in education

Many interviewees described the importance of integrating the children in the culture of using the outdoors so that they fully engaged with the approach and appreciated its place in their learning. As one headteacher stated:

**We involved the children in the setting up of our grounds. It's much more meaningful for them when they go out for lessons.**

Headteacher 1

When asked how she felt about using the outdoors for their lessons, an eight-year-old girl demonstrated her enthusiasm: 'It's the best way to learn – these are our best lessons!'

A clear and purposeful vision was seen as vital to drive forward an approach to outdoor learning which could in turn positively affect the overall attitude to learning in schools. A senior lecturer in education commented on visits to schools with highly developed outdoor cultures:

**I saw levels of creativity within those two schools that I haven't seen elsewhere. Another thing to say about those schools is that they both had strong leadership.**

Senior lecturer in education

Many interviewees stressed the moral imperative of a vision of outdoor learning that was closely linked to sustainability and the belief that today's children may well face an unpredictable future:

**In 25 years' time, a lot of things, in terms of markets, jobs and climates will be different. Children need outdoor, experiential learning to develop skills to cope with an uncertain future.**

Professor of education

## Top tips

- Use the children as a driver.
- Keep the vision sustainable through distributed leadership.
- Strong and purposeful leadership develops a strong culture.
- Think about the moral imperative as being central to the vision.

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# Conclusion

The intention of this study has been to consider the leadership strategies that could best be employed by primary school leaders to develop a learning culture with the outdoors at its heart.

First, the engagement of the school community was seen as a vital part of the process of successfully initiating and sustaining learning outdoors. Communities were seen as providing a reservoir of skills, from building and gardening to the sourcing of grants. The headteacher's constant and thorough communication of intentions and progress were seen as very important to successful engagement with the community.

Dissemination of current research into the benefits of the use of the outdoors in education gave such projects integrity and was seen as a powerful tool to persuade less enthusiastic members of the school community.

The use of external providers such as Forest Schools was discussed along with the benefits of the structures and stimuli such organisations might offer. A word of caution was sounded by headteachers to ensure the initiation and development of such projects did not depend on external providers, but that steps were taken to embed staff skills to foster engagement and sustainability. The distribution of leadership of such projects was seen as important for the same reasons.

Planning was seen as an important element in the successful use of the outdoors in primary schools. Headteachers not only planned for the financial investment in such projects but took account of the impact of the constant use of grounds and natural resources, looking ahead to ensure sustainability of their projects.

Interviewees mentioned the importance of investment in staff training to develop skills and build the confidence of staff. It was noted how some NQTs had little experience of using the outdoors in their teaching. Training was also seen as very important to equip teachers to manage the risks of working in the outdoors. The importance of risk management revealed links with the development of staff confidence and the reassurance of the wider community. Again, strategic use of research was seen as one way of providing a vehicle to manage these issues.

Finally, the strong leadership and vision of the headteacher was seen as vital to the successful management and promotion of all the above elements. The enthusiasm for the use of the outdoors from headteachers combined with the expression of a moral imperative to equip children with the skills to manage an unpredictable future provided inspiration to the whole school community for the successful development of outdoor learning.

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Triumph Road,  
Nottingham NG8 1DH  
**T** 0845 609 0009  
**F** 0115 872 2001  
**E** [enquiries@nationalcollege.org.uk](mailto:enquiries@nationalcollege.org.uk)  
[www.nationalcollege.org.uk](http://www.nationalcollege.org.uk)

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