



Outdoor Learning in Scotland: Issues for Education

Moray House School of Education Election Briefings

Education from early years to 18
Research and Practice Contributing to Policy

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Key points for consideration

Recent Scottish studies (Higgins & Nicol, 2013; Christie *et al.* 2015; Mannion *et al.*, 2015) and further international research has identified that well structured outdoor learning:

- facilitates children's development in school grounds, local areas and on residential courses,
- supports learning in all aspects of the school curriculum from 3 to 18,
- provides opportunities for pupils to guide their own learning and develop critical thinking skills in ways elusive in the classroom,
- raises children's awareness of environmental and sustainability issues, resulting in understanding and promoting an ethic of care for our planet (directly linked with the concept of 'learning for sustainability')
- has direct health and wellbeing benefits.

This leads to high rates of 'enhancement of challenge, enjoyment, personalisation, relevance, breadth and progression' of learning (Mannion *et al.*, 2015).

Despite this, the quality and quantity of outdoor learning continue to be very limited (Higgins & Nicol, 2013), particularly within schools in disadvantaged areas, where students potentially could benefit the most and where the attainment gap is the greatest (Mannion *et al.*, 2015).

Briefing

For over 50 years outdoor educational experiences have been a highly valued feature of Scottish education, delivered primarily but not exclusively through a network of residential centres with a focus on three frequently integrated areas: 1) outdoor activities, 2) environmental education and 3) personal and social development. The past 10 years has seen a growing understanding in Scottish education of the benefits of outdoor learning in ways not yet mirrored in the rest of the UK or overseas. This development is based on strong research, much of it conducted by Edinburgh University; learning from the Nordic countries but adapted and developed to take account of Scotland's particular needs and contexts. The breadth of the opportunities identified by this research is emphasised by the term itself; 'outdoor learning' – essentially a reminder that whilst traditional approaches remain valuable, learning directly outside the classroom can be an effective 'every-day' experience in the school grounds or local area. Whatever the focus, an experiential and adventurous approach to learning is a central pedagogical theme. It is usually interdisciplinary, integrated across these areas and often practical, interactive and reflective with the role of the teacher being to encourage students to take responsibility for learning.

Recent policy guidance

The journey through education for any child in Scotland must include a series of planned, quality outdoor learning experience. (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010, p. 6)

'Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning' (Learning and Teaching Scotland,

2010, p. 7) emphasises the role and significance of outdoor learning in learning and teaching:

The core values of *Curriculum for Excellence* resonate with long-standing key concepts of outdoor learning. Challenge, enjoyment, relevance, depth, development of the whole person and an adventurous approach to learning are at the core of outdoor pedagogy.

Further support comes from the link between outdoor learning and 'Learning for Sustainability' (Scottish Government, 2012) and both are emphasised in the recently published key guidance 'How Good is Our School 4?' (Education Scotland, 2015).

Despite policy support and professional development opportunities the absence of a coherent understanding of the nature of outdoor learning and its benefits by education authorities and teachers continues to limit quality and quantity of young-people's outdoor learning experiences (Higgins & Nicol, 2013). Further, residential outdoor provision is now primarily delivered by commercial organisations and charitable trusts rather than as mainstream provision by local authorities, with few education professionals (in contrast to outdoor skills coaches) teaching the courses.

School curricula often actively favour a theory-based approach rather than practical work, and fail to identify the benefits of learning in a more appropriate location. School grounds are frequently less than ideal to encourage teachers to use them for educational purposes, even when new schools are designed and built. Further, there has been little formal encouragement to establish and maintain standards of outdoor learning experiences, for example through HMIE school inspections, and outdoor centres are very rarely inspected. All of this is in stark contrast to the very successful approach of Nordic countries where outdoor learning pedagogy is central to formal education and culture throughout, and indeed beyond, the period of statutory schooling.

Conclusions / recommendations

- **Increase provision:** The wide variation in pupils' outdoor learning experiences (Higgins & Nicol, 2013; Mannion *et. al*, 2015) is inequitable and needs to be addressed through a concerted approach to highlight the multi-dimensional benefits of outdoor learning across the whole 3 to 18 age range, and not simply in the early years.
- **Raise awareness:** There are substantial health benefits of both greenspaces and the lifelong benefits of physical activity through outdoor recreation and adventure tourism, and these industries significant contribution to the economy of Scotland.
- **Increase training opportunities:** Initial teacher education should feature outdoor learning experiences in all TEs and in all curricular areas. Education Scotland should both provide and support continuing professional development, working with GTCS and other providers to establish a research informed approach to such provision.
- **Ensure the design of school grounds supports outdoor learning:** That 'school buildings, grounds and policies should support Learning for Sustainability' is a Scottish Government (2012) commitment. Action should be taken to ensure that school outdoor space can contribute to a much wider range of outdoor learning opportunities, to maximise their learning potential.
- **Inspections:** School inspectors should help schools raise their awareness of the benefits of the outdoors and other locations, and the pedagogical approaches pertinent to these in student learning and development, and indicate that these will feature in inspections of schools, residential and other providers.

References

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Further information

Professor Peter Higgins

Professor of Outdoor & Environmental Education
and Director of the United Nations Centre for
Education for Sustainable Development (Scotland)

Moray House School of Education

Tel: +44 (0)131 651 6573

Email: pete.higgins@ed.ac.uk

www.ed.ac.uk/education

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