



National
Guidance

A Review of Research on Outdoor Learning

This paper summarises the document “ A Review of Research on Outdoor Learning” published by the National Foundation for Educational Research and King’s College London (2004).

There is substantial research evidence to suggest outdoor adventure programmes can impact positively on young people:

1. Attitudes, beliefs and self-perceptions – examples of outcomes include independence, confidence, self esteem, locus of control, self efficacy, personal effectiveness and coping strategies
2. Interpersonal and social skills – such as social effectiveness, communication skills, group cohesion and teamwork

In cases where there is a focus on such measures, however, there are examples of outdoor adventure programmes yielding benefits in terms of:

1. The development of general and specific academic skills, as well as improved engagement and achievement
2. The promotion of positive behaviour and reduced rates of re-offending, and improved physical self image and fitness

Research indicates the value of programmes which:

- (i) **provide longer, more sustained outdoor experiences than is often provided;**
- (ii) incorporate well-designed preparatory and follow-up work;
- (iii) use a range of carefully structured learning activities and assessments linked to the school curriculum;
- (iv) recognise and emphasise the role of facilitation in the learning process and
- (v) develop close links between programme aims and programme practices.

Those with a statutory and non-statutory responsibility for policy relating to outdoor education should be in no doubt that there is a considerable body of empirical research evidence to support and inform their work.

Policy makers at all levels need to be aware of the benefits that are associated with different types of outdoor learning. The findings of this review make clear that learners of all ages can all benefit from effective outdoor education. However, despite such positive research evidence and the long tradition of outdoor learning in this country, there is growing evidence that opportunities for outdoor learning are in decline and under threat.

There is an urgent need for policy makers at all levels and in many sectors to consider their role in;

1. Tackling barriers that stand in the way of the provision of effective outdoor education for all students
2. Encouraging good programmes and practices and capitalising on policy developments, for example, by linking initiatives in different sectors
3. Supporting research, development and training so that good practice can be understood, disseminated and fostered
4. This has implications for action across a range of policy sectors nationally, regionally and locally, including education, health, environment and science

It has been said that fieldwork and outdoor activities have been and continue to be very safe in comparison with other activities undertaken by young people (Jacobs, 1996; AALA, 2002). Dr John Dunford, General Secretary of the Secondary Heads Association, was quoted recently as saying that:

Parents can be reassured about the precautions taken by headteachers to ensure that school visits are safe. Schools now take such care in the planning and risk assessment for all school visits that children are probably safer and more closely supervised on a school trip than on a family holiday... School visits are important in broadening the education of children, especially those from less privileged backgrounds who have few opportunities to go away with their families. I hope very much that teachers will continue to volunteer to lead school visits, so that children's horizons can be widened in this way. (DfES, 2003a)

In the aftermath of several recent accidents on out-of-school activities, the Department for Education and Skills issued guidance to schools entitled *Health and Safety of Pupils on Educational Visits* in 1998 (DfEE, 1998). Subsequently, this advice was supplemented with additional handbooks to increase the competence and confidence of group leaders and other teachers when supervising pupils on visits. The handbooks were entitled: *Standards for LEAs in Overseeing Educational Visits; Standards for Adventure; A Handbook for Group Leaders and Group Safety at Water Margins* (DfES, 2003b, c, d and e)

During the school year, 2002-3, DfES distributed £3.5 million to all education authorities in England to fund, *inter alia*, the training of school Educational Visits Co-ordinators. A "training-the trainers" course was organised by the Outdoor Education Advisers' Panel. The training is designed to improve teachers' management of risk in outdoor education.

On 25th September 2003, David Miliband MP, the Schools Standards Minister stated publicly that:

Teachers should not abandon school visits – safely conducted and properly supervised, they are an important part of any child's education. We value, and are committed to support, the professional competence of teachers who supervise educational visits, many of whom do so in their own spare time. (DfES, 2003a).

Participants recorded significant improvements in self-esteem, leadership skills and confidence (and) the key driver of this was where young people had undertaken an expedition as part of their residential experience. (Thom, 2002, pp.45, 51)

Furthermore, the follow-up interviews with participants and parents / guardians, confirmed that these effects appeared to last beyond the immediate end of the programme (ibid., p. iv)

Another relevant UK study is the 1999 OFSTED survey of outdoor and adventurous activities (OAA) in 33 schools in England (Clay, 1999). This reported that “pupils” attainment in OAA was good; they demonstrated decision-making, problem solving and interpersonal skills in a range of activities and in response to different types of challenge” (ibid., p.84). Furthermore, with respect to students with emotional and behavioural difficulties, it was noted that:

OAA provided many opportunities for them to build their confidence, skills and abilities in both cooperative and competitive situations. (ibid., pp. 84-5).

There is a well-developed research literature relating to outdoor adventure education. The key findings relating to impacts can be summarised as follows:

Strong evidence of the benefits of outdoor adventure education is provided by analyses of previous research. Looking across a wide range of outcome measures, these studies identify not only positive effects in the short term, but also continued gains in the long term. In other words, **“it seems that adventure programs have a major impact on the lives of participants, and this impact is lasting”** (Hattie *et al.*, 1997, p.70)

Another opportunity referred to in the literature is recent **Curriculum developments and initiatives**. Copper (2000) sees the 1999 revisions to the National Curriculum as a welcome change for advocates of outdoor education.

The review findings give a clear endorsement for certain kinds of outdoor learning provision. In particular, research indicates the value of programmes which:

- Provide longer, more sustained outdoor experiences than is often provided
- Incorporate well designed preparatory and follow up work
- Use a range of carefully structured learning activities and assessments linked to the school curriculum
- Recognise and emphasise the role of facilitation in the learning process
- Develop close links between programme aims and programme practices

Those with a statutory and non statutory responsibility for policy relating to outdoor learning should be in no doubt that there is a considerable body of empirical research evidence to support and inform their work. This speaks to a wide range of individuals and institutions including teachers, school governors, non governmental organisations, local authorities, LEAs, teacher unions, subject associations and politicians at all levels, all of whom may be involved directly or indirectly in developing and evaluating policy relating to outdoor learning.

We believe that policy makers at all levels need to be aware of the benefits that are associated with different types of outdoor learning. In particular they need to appreciate that:

- Fieldwork and field studies, properly planned, delivered and followed up, provide powerful opportunities for cognitive and affective learning
- Outdoor adventure education can provide unique opportunities for personal and social development with long lasting impacts
- School grounds / community projects can enrich curricular and cross curricular learning, and build stronger links between schools and communities

In short, learners of all ages can benefit from effective outdoor learning.

However, policy makers need to recognise that despite positive research evidence and the long tradition of outdoor learning in this country, there is growing evidence that opportunities for outdoor learning are in decline and under threat. There is therefore a need for policy makers at all levels and in many sectors to consider their role in increasing access to outdoor education that is challenging, effective and that meets the needs of society while being sensitive to the needs, feelings and culture of the individual. It is crucial that policy makers consider ways to::

- Tackle barriers that stand in the way of the provision of effective outdoor education for all students
- Encourage good programmes and practices and capitalise on policy developments, for example, by linking initiatives in different sectors
- Support research, development and training so that good practice can be understood, disseminated and supported.

In the **education sector**, policy makers need to address these questions:

- To what extent are there policies in place that promote high quality outdoor education as an entitlement for all students at both primary and secondary schools?
- To what extent do policies ensure that fieldwork at undergraduate level is actively encouraged and supported?
- To what extent do institutional policies support outdoor education through training?
- To what extent do such policies in schools, universities and LEAs result in adequate funding, for safe and effective residentials in a range of relevant subjects?
- To what extent do curriculum and assessment policies fully support outdoor education?
- To what extent are there policies in place to ensure that the networks of new subject learning centres organise outdoor learning training courses for teachers?
- In what ways can the expertise and confidence of new and experienced teachers be improved through pre-service, in-service and leadership training?

