

Report to Victoria Park Primary School on the Natural Connections case-study visit on 21st May 2015



1. Introduction

We would like to extend our grateful thanks to staff and pupils at Victoria Park Primary School for making us so welcome and giving us an informative, interesting and enjoyable day. This document is a summary of the day's findings.

2. Interviewees

During the day, we spoke to:

- the headteacher
- three teachers
- support staff and volunteers
- 12 pupils from years 3, 4 and 5

We also enjoyed a tour of the school grounds and visited the Northern Slopes for a Forest School session with year 5.

The purpose of our visit was to understand the extent and the range of learning outside the classroom in the natural environment (LINE) activities and their impact on staff and students. Our findings are set out below.

3. School approach to LINE

Interviewees reported the following key points:

- Victoria Park use LINE to provide opportunities for children they may not otherwise have, such as engaging with nature and being outdoors.
- Forest school opportunities and work on the school allotment support the school values that include co-operation, respect and determination.
 - The school have taken a gradual approach to engaging staff with LINE. Staff are generally positive about LINE but there is a need to bring on board and support those who are less enthusiastic and confident.
 - The school have tied LINE into the experiences they provide for children as part of their curriculum. Embedding LINE further into school policies to help ensure its sustainability and consistency is seen as the next step.
 - The school make a concerted effort to overcome the limitations of their grounds and staff work hard to make purposeful use of outdoor space.
 - The school feel they are at the early stages of developing LINE and joined the Natural Connections project to share ideas, network with other schools and link to external opportunities, such as Edible Bristol.

[Children] should have that entitlement and opportunity [to engage with nature and be outdoors] ...for their spiritual growth, their personal growth ... appreciation of the world.
(Member of staff)

I think it [LINE] gives the children who maybe aren't succeeding in the classroom ... a real opportunity to succeed outside. You see a totally different side to the children.
(Member of staff)

4. Overview of LINE activity

The school has limited space in the grounds, but has developed this where possible to include areas of fake grass to create textures, quiet covered areas and new play equipment. Troughs on the site are currently being planted with Edible Bristol and will be accessible to the local community during the holidays, and the school have plans to redevelop the outdoor classroom as a resource for all areas of the curriculum. The school business manager works hard to find funding and resources to support LINE.

The school makes use of nearby greenspaces including: an allotment for Year 4, a different allotment in partnership with the charity Youth Moves for other year groups; Northern Slopes woodland for Forest School, Victoria Park and the river. All children have one term a year of Forest School / allotment activities that are alternated each week. There are a number of trained Forest School staff in the school and Forest School is provided both in-house and by Youth Moves

LINE activity is greatest in Early Years but with peaks of activity in other years. Outdoor experiences are used as stimuli for different parts of the curriculum and include:

- Year 5 climbing a mountain and using this as a stimulus for poetry, art and geography
- Year 3 visiting Aust Cliff to look at fossils as a stimulus for writing
- 'Brilliant Bristol' (a project aimed at increasing happiness among school children) and 'Vic Fest' (an activity week with local community, charity and LINE experiences).

The school is planning an experience passport, tied to their curriculum, of things children should do before they leave school. This will include activities such as shelter building, planting, walking to the city centre and across Clifton suspension bridge.

LINE activity across the school is supported by the school learning mentor, the school business manager and volunteers (parents and students from UWE).

5. Staff views on LINE implementation

Staff reported the following points:

- Staff are positive and supportive of LINE but other priorities mean that activity is not consistent between year groups.
- Staff perception of LINE initially was that training was needed. However simple 'permission' to work outdoors from senior leaders has helped to instigate more LINE activity.

From an educational perspective it [LINE] can be really valuable... because often the nature of outdoor learning is very practical, it's very kinaesthetic and so for a lot of children that is really useful and that can... secure learning and understanding that something more paper based, more oral or visual... might not work for them (Headteacher)

- Outdoor and Forest School experiences are seen as important in providing opportunities for Reception children at an early stage of their development.
- Teachers valued outdoor experiences with children as they could use experiences outdoors to help pupils overcome challenges back in the classroom. Staff were confident about the benefits children gained from Forest Schools.
- Volunteers enjoyed working with children but found the role of co-ordinating activity and keeping children purposefully engaged challenging.

We were meant to be digging up [the soil] so we can plant it, but most of us started digging holes instead ... we just enjoyed it. There was clay under the dirt.
(Pupil)

Challenges to LINE

Challenges were seen as:

- Pressure of accountability. LINE can be viewed as a risk because it is not traditional, standard teaching.
- Time to deliver LINE:
 - The primary curriculum is very crowded. Staff need support to embed LINE into the curriculum rather than delivering it as an extra.
 - Time is required to change build confidence and alter teaching approaches; LINE becomes easier with practice.
 - Time is needed for planning to create ways to align competing priorities including LINE. Without this opportunities are sometimes missed.
- Logistics. The school undertake a lot of off-site activities, which require more preparation than working in the school grounds.

6. Impact of LINE

In my mind it is something about purpose. In literacy the purpose is almost about giving them [pupils] the content ... in maths the purpose is about using it to help enhance the experience and make it more practical
(Staff member)

This section briefly describes staff views on the impact of LINE on pupils.

Engagement with learning

The main impact of LINE was felt to be on the engagement and motivation of pupils: *'they enjoy it, they love it'*. This was seen as the foundation to other benefits shown below.

Attainment

LINE was seen to have a positive impact on attainment:

- Understanding of maths was felt to be better outside due to the 'hands-on', practical nature of learning outside that enhances pupils' experience. Children understood estimating better outside as they understood the context of the subject and saw a reason for doing it.
- Teachers reported that LINE supports attainment in literacy by providing children with experiences that inspired them and to which they could relate.

Behaviour

Behaviour in Forest School was felt to be calmer and more productive; working with the chickens has a similar effect on pupils with behavioural problems.

Social skills

Interviewees reported that being outdoors provides collaborative opportunities that are hard to set up in the classroom, with children's **co-operation** naturally increasing outside; children will work together, join in, share ideas and are happier to talk and negotiate outside than inside. LINE activity has also meant pupils are given more responsibility, which staff felt has a positive effect on children's **problem solving, independence and resilience**. Forest School, in particular, was seen to be '*a bit of an equaliser*' which helps to build **confidence**, which is then brought back to the classroom

My favourite thing would probably be ... the learning outdoors because I really like it. And sometimes maybe PE outdoors, I really like that as well ... It's really fun. Because it gives you energy
(Pupil)

7. Pupil views

All the children we spoke to recalled a range of activities and lessons outside. The common thread was their enjoyment of Forest School and allotment activities: *basically it is like a classroom outside to make you learn and having fun*'. Other enjoyable activities included building shelters and campfires at Forest School, and digging, planting, building and caring for the chickens at the allotment.

Curricular activities recalled included: gathering inspiration for art, measuring, drawing out shadows, paper aeroplane races on Science day, rehearsing a play outside, learning

Indoors you can feel slightly cooped up and it is like harder to work ... It is noisy and there's some distractions, where outside it feels just a bit more open
(Pupil)

about mini-beasts, constructing a protective casing for an egg and then parachuting the egg with an action man to see how effective it was. Witnessing the Eclipse in March 2015 was '*like we were in space*' because '*we wore glasses and when we saw the sun, it was orange*'.

Going outdoors was seen as fun, and benefits included exercise, fresh air, space to breathe, freedom and letting off steam: '*you get to go crazy!*' However going outside was also seen as a calmer environment for working and providing

inspiration: '*It sort of helps ... if things are linked to what you are learning. You can look around; it helps with ideas*'. Similarly the collaboration stimulated by being outside was helpful: '*because you can get your friend to say something ... and it usually gives you an idea of some sort*'. The negatives of working outside were seen as rain and cold. Some pupils thought rain was uncomfortable, while others commented that it ruined paperwork.

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