

Report to Curledge Street Academy on the Natural Connections case-study visit on 28th April 2015



1. Introduction

We would like to extend our grateful thanks to the headteacher, staff and pupils at Curledge Street Academy 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
- the LINE lead
- three teachers
- eight pupils from Years 1, 2, 4 and 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:

- The school philosophy is about 'developing the whole child' and LINE contributes a range of important sensory and linguistic experiences towards this aim.
- School governors understand the benefits of LINE and are supportive of the school's efforts.
- The LINE lead's training as a Forest School (FS) practitioner, together with their move to Year 1, have enabled the school to use LINE to support children in their transition from Early Years. A colleague is now undertaking FS training, with the aim of increasing the LINE offer.
- Curledge is collaborating with other local primary FS leaders to support and develop their practice.
- The school is currently reviewing the curriculum, and the vision is for LINE to be integrated more clearly into children's learning, with a weekly session for each class.
- Parents now see outdoor provision as a 'given', and that going outdoors is part of the school culture. FS attracts more parent volunteers than other school activities.
- Joining the Natural Connections project has facilitated links with other schools interested in LINE; the LINE lead has participated in CPD that will support the ongoing development of LINE within the school.

We try to look at learning [as] something that they enjoy... and they absolutely love it and enjoy it [LINE]. And when you get enjoyment, you get enthusiasm and you get raised results. So it's a win-win.
(Headteacher)

4. Overview of LINE activity

Curlidge is an urban school with limited green space; the small school garden has planting beds, bug hotel, a seating area, and a boundary of trees next to the road. The rest of the grounds are hard surfaces, but are imaginatively sculpted to include a sandpit, a willow dome and a water play area in the Foundation Stage area; planting pots and beds by a row of mature trees in the Phase 1 area; and planting beds and a wisteria in the memorial garden in the Phase 2 area.

Partly because of the relative lack of green space in the grounds, the school makes use of the nearby woods, where the LINE lead undertakes regular Forest School activities with Year 1 but less frequently for all other pupils in the school. Other teachers use the woods and local park for subjects such as science and geography, and some arrange trips to Dartmoor and/or the beach. In a new development for this academic year, Forest Fridays have been provided one day a term for Years 3-6 during PPA time. These days are not curriculum-driven but focus on the school's four learning values: Respect, Creativity, Independence and Collaboration.

Getting that outdoor environment is so important because we are trying to almost compensate for many of those experiences that children won't have come to school with. And if they don't have those range of sensory type experiences, then they are not going to develop the language that is necessary to developing their academic achievement.
(Headteacher)

5. Staff views on LINE implementation

Staff reported the following points:

- The head is fully supportive of LINE, which means that the school 'embraces' learning outdoors; there is an explicit expectation that if something can be taught outside, it should be. Teachers interviewed agreed that some topics can only be taught effectively outside; habitats, for example, are best demonstrated in their natural environment.

Every subject topic should have an outdoor element, and I think that is probably where most people [staff] are going to be heading. (Staff member)

- There are pockets of enthusiasm and interest for LINE among staff, and those who are less keen need to be convinced of the benefits before they are willing to engage.
- The LINE lead sees her role as 'looking at ways in which I can encourage people to be outside'. This includes providing resources such as risk assessments, finding curricular links and demonstrating the impact of LINE.
- Putting WiFi connections outside so children can use their iPads to record developments has been helpful in keeping up to date with technologies that fit into children's learning; it also encourages those who are less keen to be outside to engage with the activities.

6. Challenges to LINE

Challenges were seen as:

You can see them [pupils] come alive outside ... it gives them a chance to shine.
(Staff member)

- Time. Staff need to have the time to think about making curricular links to LINE so that it is high-quality and an intrinsic part of school learning, rather than a bolt-on piece of work. Time is also needed to source and develop resources.
- Curriculum and time-tabling constraints. Staff are looking at ways to alter the timetable in ways that will support LINE from September 2015.
- Logistics for off-site visits. Risks assessments and encouraging enough parent volunteers were seen as barriers to trips.
- Adult / pupil ratios for LINE in school. Higher numbers of adults would enable smaller groups for more tightly-focused, high-quality activities outside.
- Risk of injury on the school's hard surfaces.
- The difficulty of assessing work outside. Teachers are working on overcoming this challenge through photos, videos and interactive diaries. However these can lead to the additional challenge of recording while teaching.
- Difficulties with the site that include easy access (resulting in equipment set up for lessons being disturbed), the lack of outside storage / classroom / shelter and the expense of purchasing resources suitable for hard surfaces.

7. Impact of LINE

This section briefly describes the reported impact of LINE on pupils.

Engagement with learning

Staff felt that FS has been particularly powerful in engaging children in the school's nurture group, and that this engagement is carried back into the classroom. For some of these children FS has been '*a real, real turning point*'. All children participating in FS were reported as showing a stronger focus and engagement with their tasks. The key with learning outside was seen to be enjoyment, which enthuses pupils and encourages them to achieve.

Attainment

Children show improved knowledge and understanding: '*Now we have children talking quite confidently about plants and able to name plants*'.

Behaviour

Staff reported a number of different ways in which LINE helps pupils' behaviour:

- Children are calmer outside, with the result that behaviour improves. Staff commented that pupils are more '*settled*' indoors after regular use of the school garden.

Outdoors ... gives me more inspiration and gets me motivated for my writing.
(Pupil)

- The garden can be used as a place for staff to engage one-to-one with pupils who are experiencing different issues; working together encourages talking.
- Children see different aspects of each other on FS days, with the result that friendship groups can change. Working together in different groups often leads to improved communication between these children.

Confidence

Working outside was seen as a leveller, with children who shine in the classroom sometimes finding themselves out of their comfort zone, and those who have difficulties inside finding that they can excel when, for example, building dens.

The physical development that comes with children pushing themselves on the timber trails or the bikes builds confidence and helps with fine motor skills such as handwriting.

8. Pupil views

All the pupils interviewed were positive about LINE, and told us about a range of activities undertaken outside. Interviewees' particular memories included:

- The mud slide; going fast and getting dirty!
- Making dens and fires during Forest Friday; roasting marshmallows and cooking popcorn.
- 'If you go outside and write poetry you can look around and use your senses'.
- Using maps and compasses to find their way around.
- Playing games.
- Learning about volume with litre bottles.
- Planting seeds, apple trees and making benches in the school garden.
- A trip to Dartmoor to get inspiration for a scary story.
- Assemblies outside.
- Playing woolly worms and remembering that 'green' was the hardest to find – although they thought that brown might be harder.
- Rain misting up their spectacles.

It was my first time going on Dartmoor and it was incredible ... I actually went back with my family; we sat on a giant rock had lunch. It was such a good school trip! (Pupil)

*I will put in my box the sinister clouds kissing the sun goodbye
A majestic hurricane bellowing at the sharpness of the sky
The sun glistening down on the glowing ground.
(Extract from pupil's poem inspired by the outdoors)*

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