

Outdoor Learning: pupils' experiences and teachers' interaction in outdoor learning

Barbara Humberstone & Ina Stan Bucks New University

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This article is based on research undertaken for the 'The Well-being and Outdoor Pedagogies' project, which involved an in-depth examination of teaching and learning focused largely around the 'outdoor classroom'. This paper explores the processes of teaching and learning at one outdoor residential education centre with children and staff from 'Oliver' Primary school. Data were collected through ethnographic research and include participant observation, interviews with teachers and centre staff and group interviews with pupils.

Previous research has demonstrated the values of engaging pupils in outdoor learning, and this has been shown to be extremely beneficial, particularly in Scandinavian countries, where outdoor experience is well integrated in the educational system. On the contrary, in the English curriculum there are limited outdoor experiences offered to pupils, partly due to the risk aversion in British society. Nevertheless, even though there are known benefits associated with outdoor learning, this research argues that it is significant to undertake an in-depth examination of the different teaching approaches that are adopted when engaging with pupils in the outdoors. The findings revealed that some of the children found the experience very helpful as they felt more grown up and independent, others said that it encouraged them to try new things, such as new food, new activities. For some pupils the residential visit was an opportunity to exercise more, increase their circle of friends or deepen existing friendships, and also learn about team work. Whilst the interviewed children reflected positively on the experience, there were some pupils whose experience appeared to be very different. This became obvious when one of the researchers observed how some of the teachers used a controlling approach while conducting the outdoor activities, which may have impacted negatively on the children's learning experience, and ultimately on their wellbeing. Consequently, this study highlights the importance of providing a democratic, shared positive learning when the teachers interact with their pupils. Moreover, this study raises the issue of professional development for school teachers working with primary school children in outdoor, residential situations.