

RETHINKING LEARNING SPACES

Jo Clanfield, founder of Teach Outdoors, discusses overcoming barriers to outdoor learning and why her organisation is championing a Whole School Approach



Author profile

Jo Clanfield, founder of Teach Outdoors, is an experienced primary teacher and leader, dedicated to fostering outdoor learning experiences. Since 2015, Jo has empowered teachers nationwide to integrate outdoor education as a tool for academic improvement and holistic development. With qualifications in Forest School and Beach School practices, as well as expertise in dyslexia support, Jo advocates for enriched, active learning outdoors. Jo and her team aim to globally disseminate the benefits of outdoor learning, ensuring all children thrive in their learning journey.

What does a learning environment look like and where do children learn best? When we envision a typical place of learning, what often comes to mind is a traditional classroom setting: desks arranged neatly, an interactive whiteboard at the front, and students seated, focused on the teacher. However, recent research challenges this idea of the passive classroom - according to Robert Coe (1), and the Great Teaching Toolkit: Evidence Review (2), learning truly happens when students are deeply engaged in thinking. Yet, despite this understanding, many classrooms remain static, with little variation in learning environments throughout a student's educational journey. At Teach Outdoors, we are on a mission to consider where and how children learn best and we believe the answer may lie beyond the confines of four walls, desks, and chalkboards - as I'm sure many Horizons readers do as well!

Teach Outdoors, founded by experienced primary teacher Jo Clanfield, is dedicated to promoting outdoor learning and maximising the potential of outdoor spaces for educational purposes. With over eight years of experience in supporting teachers and schools nationwide, we are passionate about bringing outdoor environments to life and creating memorable learning experiences for children. We offer training and support to educators, which aims to empower them to effectively use outdoor spaces and natural areas, ensuring that all children can benefit from the educational opportunities provided by the great outdoors.



From early years to adolescence

A significant body of research suggests that increased physical activity and reduced sedentary time have numerous benefits, including improved cognitive function (3). And, if we look closely at current practices in schools, we can certainly see this in action - younger children often benefit from hands-on outdoor learning experiences that are designed to encourage them to think freely and deeply, making connections as they go. Yet, as we progress from early years education to higher levels, there is often a shift towards a more sedentary style of teaching and learning. Why is this the case? Do children fundamentally change the way they learn as they grow older?

Addressing mental and physical health concerns

Aside from the potential academic and cognitive benefits that learning outdoors can provide, it is important for us to consider mental and physical health. Mental health issues among children and young people are alarmingly common, with one in five individuals aged 8-25 in England experiencing a probable mental health disorder (4). We also know that for children living in the most deprived areas, obesity is twice as high as for those living in more affluent locations (5). Despite these concerns, most children spend a significant portion of their learning day sedentary, both in school and at home.

The benefits of outdoor learning

Research regarding the benefits of outdoor learning in terms of academic learning, behaviour, and physical and mental health is not new. In fact, we have been hearing about the advantages of outdoor learning for years. Yet we also know that, despite this research, a significant portion of children go without experiencing nature first hand, with 12% of children in England not visiting natural sites for over a year (6). This begs the question: could outdoor learning hold the key to addressing some of the most pressing challenges in education and child development? And if so, why isn't everybody doing it?

Overcoming perceived barriers

Despite the compelling evidence supporting outdoor learning, many educators face perceived barriers when considering its implementation. Teacher concerns are wide-ranging and varied, including:

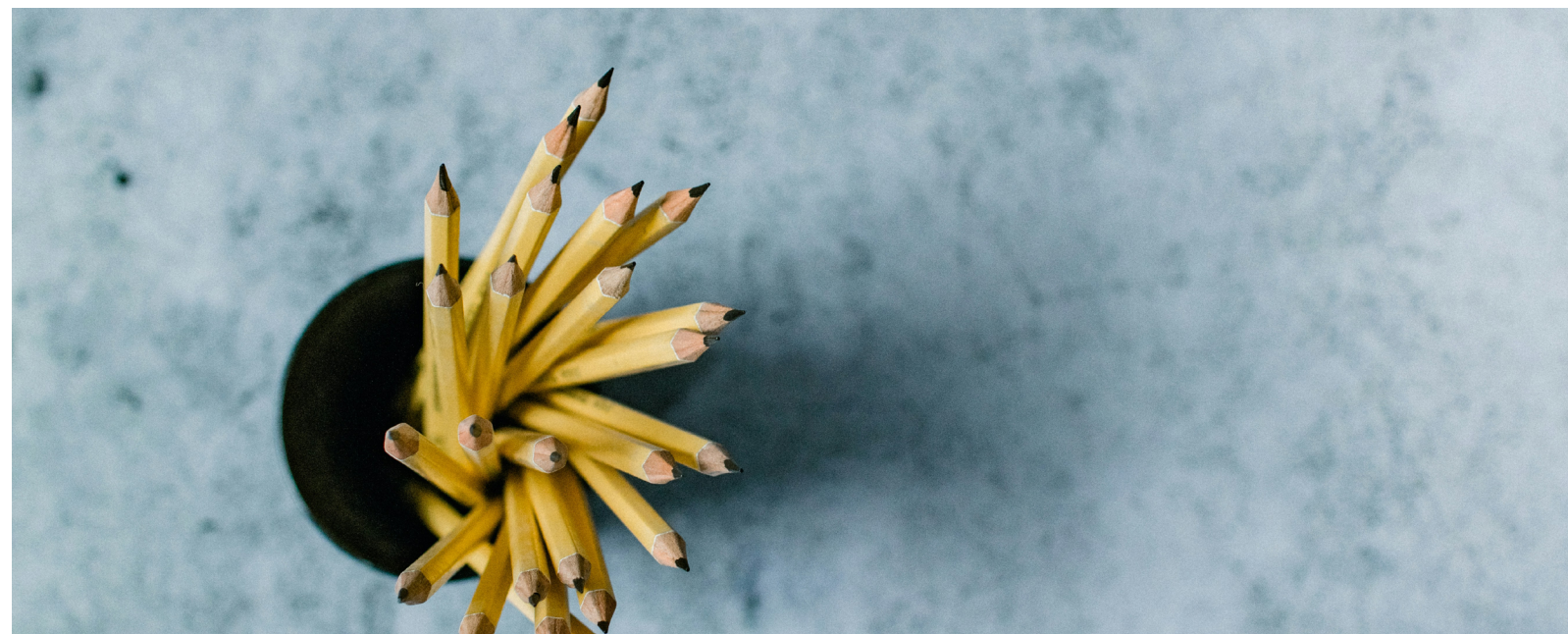
- A notion that outdoor learning is 'just bug hunting' or Forest School and if you aren't qualified you can't teach outdoors.
- The perception that extra time is needed to teach outside and it is quicker to cover the content inside.
- Concerns over managing behaviour outdoors and the idea that it is easier to keep children 'on task' when seated at tables.
- The notion that monitoring and evidencing learning can't be done outside.
- Getting 'buy in' from senior leaders - will they be onboard or will they see outdoor lessons as wasted learning time?
- Worries around Ofsted - how would outdoor learning affect accountability and data?

The Whole School Approach to outdoor learning

These barriers can be overcome with the right support and approach - and this has helped us to develop the Whole School Approach to outdoor learning. The Whole School Approach to outdoor learning is a comprehensive program offered by Teach Outdoors to support schools in implementing outdoor learning practices school-wide. This approach involves online training, in-person outdoor leader training, and the provision of resources and activities aimed at fostering a culture of outdoor learning within the school community. Through this program, schools receive support in overcoming barriers to outdoor learning implementation, allowing students to access outdoor learning opportunities more frequently. Additionally, staff benefit from training and professional development in outdoor education practices. Teach Outdoors also conducts research on individual case studies to contribute to the literature base on the benefits of outdoor learning, further supporting the efficacy of the Whole School Approach.

By involving all members of the school community and equipping them all with the knowledge, skills and confidence that they need to take the curriculum outdoors, schools can create a culture where outdoor learning is integrated seamlessly into the curriculum. This approach empowers teachers, fosters collaboration, and ensures sustainability - regardless of whether teachers come and go, outdoor learning remains within the very fabric and ethos of school life.

Empowering educators and engaging stakeholders at all levels is central to the success of a Whole School Approach. Developing a Whole School Approach is about empowering all members of staff and ensuring sustainable integration of outdoor learning. Creating a vision is the first step, as it's important to get everyone on-board to understand the purpose. What do we want outdoor learning to look like in our school and for our children? How will we know we are successful? This gives schools something to aim for and a shared vision that everyone can work towards. We have found that providing relevant, easy-to-digest research is crucial to this. It provides school staff, from teaching assistants to senior leaders, with answers to the question "why should we teach outdoors?" and even encourages them to ask, "why aren't we teaching outdoors?"



Once schools have established their ‘why’, the process continues with supporting schools to create a clear vision for outdoor learning linked to the school development plan. Included in this vision is a commitment to provide ongoing support and training for all staff members. So often we see outdoor leaders sent on courses and then having little time to implement the changes needed. When senior leaders truly value outdoor learning and provide dedicated time for the whole school to implement change, the impact is more significant. It’s essential to recognise that this is not a tick-box exercise and there is no quick fix. Schools understand this is a 3-5 year commitment, meaning they can cultivate a culture where outdoor learning is valued, sustained, and truly embedded into everyday practice.

Another crucial factor in the Teach Outdoors Whole School Approach is the network of support that we establish both within a school and within the wider community. We fully recognise that being an outdoor leader in a school can be a lonely role - yet, outdoor learning needs to be a whole school responsibility.

Being an outdoor leader and striving for whole school change is not a one-person job. In schools where this happens it is often unsustainable, and, in our experience, if the member of staff leaves the whole provision goes with them. Building a whole school community is about looking at who is going to support the development towards achieving the vision and how. For example, the English lead may already be looking at raising levels in boys’ writing, so how can outdoor learning support this? Making as many links with the whole school development is key to successful implementation, e.g., attendance, well-being, teacher retention - how will outdoor learning and access to outdoor spaces impact all of these aspects?

As many of our outdoor leaders know, there are always those members of staff who are more reluctant and may need more persuasion and support to take learning outdoors. To address this, we devised a package of monthly interactive online training sessions for staff, to aid their own professional development, but also to equip them with the skills to feel confident taking those with additional needs into outdoor environments. We also offer staff regular bitesize research updates. Teach Outdoors is keen to work with schools to contribute to the broader body of knowledge surrounding the benefits of outdoor learning. Led by our research partner Gemma Goldenberg, we are currently investigating the correlation between outdoor curriculum time and key indicators such as attendance, well-being (both for teachers and students) and nature connectedness. One of our flagship Teach Outdoors schools is actively participating in this research, providing valuable data that will inform our understanding of the relationship between outdoor education and student outcomes.

Impact of the Whole School Approach

A case study from Stanwick Primary Academy showcases the transformative impact of implementing the Whole School Approach to outdoor learning. With nearly 200 students and a dedicated staff team of thirty, the school community prioritises student engagement and active learning experiences. Recognising the value of outdoor spaces as valuable learning tools, Stanwick Primary aims to ensure that children are actively engaged in their education and avoid becoming passive learners. The school emphasises that outdoor learning can occur in any space, regardless of size or resources. Through innovative approaches and creative use of materials, such as chalk and natural elements, teachers at Stanwick foster creativity and imagination while delivering curriculum content. The support provided by the outdoor learning leader, Kirsty, has been instrumental in empowering teachers to embrace outdoor education and collaborate with like-minded educators. The Whole School Approach has helped foster a sense of community among staff members, enabling them to share ideas and best practices for implementing outdoor learning initiatives.



Teachers at Stanwick Primary have eagerly embraced outdoor learning as a way to enhance student engagement and address diverse learning needs. From incorporating outdoor activities into subject leadership training for staff and facilitating walking meetings, educators are exploring new ways to integrate outdoor learning into daily instruction. Through initiatives like a coastal erosion project and outdoor science experiments, students are actively involved in their learning and able to apply theoretical knowledge in practical contexts. Outdoor learning has proven particularly beneficial for children with ADHD, autism, and other special educational needs, providing a sensory-rich environment that promotes focus and reduces sensory overload. The impact of outdoor learning is evident in students’ increased motivation, deeper understanding of concepts, and improved well-being. Research conducted at Stanwick revealed noteworthy insights into the benefits of outdoor learning. Utilising the Leuven Scale for well-being and involvement, the school observed increased well-being and involvement among children outdoors compared to indoors. Moreover, the process of teachers stepping back and observing children outdoors prompted reflections on teaching practices and interactions, leading to valuable insights for the teaching staff.

Challenges

Despite these successes, Stanwick Primary faces ongoing challenges. Clothing and footwear issues are particularly evident during wet and muddy weather. Efforts like termly welly boot swaps have been implemented to address this concern. Moreover, sustaining staff momentum during colder weather remains a challenge, compounded by pressures of the curriculum, especially in core subjects like english and maths. Teach Outdoors has recognised this and included elements of the Whole School Approach training targeted specifically at core subject leads, considering how to take the existing curriculum outdoors. Funding, unsurprisingly in the given climate, also remains an issue, with Stanwick Primary seeking additional sponsorship for the programme. The school has made use of the Teach Outdoor fundraising pack in order to approach local businesses to secure funding for the remainder of the programme. As Stanwick continues to prioritise engagement, well-being, and academic progress, outdoor learning remains a cornerstone of their holistic approach to education.

Conclusion

For Teach Outdoors, the goal is clear: to challenge traditional mindsets about learning environments and make outdoor learning a norm in education. It’s about recognising that teaching outdoors doesn’t require extreme outdoor skills, but rather a shift in perspective and educational culture towards active, engaging learning experiences.

Want to find out more? Head to our website or find us at an upcoming event: teachoutdoors.co.uk ▲

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