

Changing Times for Outdoor Learning in Wales: Outdoor Learning Cards, Adventurous Activities and Physical Education

by Andy Williams and Nadia Wainwright

Things are changing in schools in Wales with new opportunities for pupils to experience school-based Adventurous Activities and a new professional development resource (the Outdoor Learning Cards) to support outdoor teaching. This article reports on the initial findings of a small-scale study into the impact of the Outdoor Learning Cards upon the learning and teaching of Adventurous Activities as part of Physical Education for 8-15 year olds in Wales.

▲ Education in Wales

Since the formation of the Welsh Assembly Government in 1990 Wales has sought to demonstrate that it has a different cultural and political identity to its bigger cousin across Offas Dyke. At the heart of this process has been radical reform of the education sector that has sought to ensure pupils in Wales have the knowledge, skills and attributes necessary for lifelong learning and success when they leave compulsory education. These developments have radically changed the landscape for outdoor learning in state schools in Wales in a way that has not been seen for over twenty years, and collectively they offer a wonderful opportunity for pupils to experience the challenges and rewards of outdoor learning as a key component of their education and development.

Two developments are of particular importance for this research:

1. The introduction of Adventurous Activities¹ as a statutory area of the Physical Education curriculum for all pupils aged 8-15 (DCELLS, 2008a).
2. The introduction of an underpinning Skills Framework for 3 to 19 year olds that advocates the development of the key skills of Thinking, Communication, ICT and Number across all subjects and areas of learning (including Adventurous Activities) (DCELLS, 2008b).

This research highlights the positive impact the Outdoor Learning Cards are having upon learning and teaching around Adventurous Activities specifically and, more broadly, in contributing to pupils' key skills learning in line with the aim of the Skills Framework that underpins **all** learning and teaching in Wales.



*...the Outdoor Learning Cards...
support outdoor teaching*

▲ The Outdoor Learning Cards

Developed in 2008 by the OEAP* the Outdoor Learning Cards are a resource and training programme to assist teachers in the delivery of high quality outdoor learning activities and to support the development of a range of pupils' skills related to these activities. Four activity areas are identified as: journeying, bouldering, team building and orienteering.

(*OEAP Outdoor Education Advisors Panel – the body that brings together all the LEA outdoor ed advisors – Ed)

Key principles underpinning the development of the Cards are outlined below:

- for use in and around the normal school grounds,
- require no specialist outdoor qualifications on the part of the teacher,
- require no specialist equipment ,
- can be delivered after a one-day professional development course.

In addition the Cards are:

- bilingual,
- progressive in their demands on pupils,
- differentiated according to pupils' needs,
- cross-referenced to Physical Education and Skills Framework outcomes,
- visually engaging and easy to handle.

Healy (2010) has reported on the philosophical and pedagogical issues raised during his involvement in the delivery of the Outdoor Learning Cards training. In particular, he highlights the challenges encountered by himself and colleagues as they sought to reconcile their experiential approach (facilitating the teachers to learn for themselves) with the teachers contrasting requests to be told how to use the Cards (*just teach me to boulder, then I'll know*, p.21). Healy raises an important point, reflected throughout much of the outdoor sector, in questioning just how experiential outdoor education practice really is? Whilst we did not seek to explore this issue specifically, our study does shed a little light on this question through its consideration of teachers Adventurous Activities practice *after* they have attended an Outdoor Learning Cards training course (see below). More broadly our focus was to research the impact of the Outdoor Learning Cards upon students learning as well as teachers practice.

Data for the study was generated via a questionnaire and selected semi-structured interviews from the 90 teachers who took part in 5 separate one-day Outdoor Learning Cards training courses (Wainwright and Williams, 2011). Our research is still in progress but the initial findings suggest the provision of Adventurous Activities learning in schools is already changing for the better, with teachers responding enthusiastically to the opportunity to introduce pupils to a more adventurous, outdoor and experiential approach to learning in the Physical Education curriculum.

▲ Increase in teacher confidence to deliver adventurous activities in school.

Without exception all the teachers on the training course reported they were more confident, or much more confident, to deliver Adventurous Activities in school as a result of their training course attendance. Even those teachers (the majority) who had very little previous outdoor teaching experience commented positively on their new found confidence. This they attribute to attending the training day and having the opportunity to work with the Resource Cards.²

(The training) gave me numerous ideas to develop in school and gave me the confidence and security....I never taught it before and now it features regularly in the teaching of PE.... They were easy to explain to other staff, which is vital as I am the co-ordinator but do not teach KS2....I would encourage any teacher who has the opportunity, to make the most of this course, especially the non-specialist PE teachers.

It is encouraging that many teachers feel they have gained confidence in the teaching of Adventurous Activities. Certainly for non-specialist PE teachers operating at KS2, with little or no previous outdoor teaching experience, there was clear evidence of them reflecting on improvements in their own knowledge and understanding around Adventurous Activities.

In primary we're not specialists....I'm PE co-ordinator, but my subject was always literacy in college and I'm now PE co-ordinator, and I'm not a specialist in any way, so I'm completely reliant on these courses really, so it's had a huge impact on us because its shown us the sort of things that we need to be doing to develop these children in these outdoor and adventurous activities.

However, it is important not to get too carried away with these initial responses. Indeed it is quite possible that what teachers are reporting is not that their teaching is any more effective than it was prior to the training but they simply feel more confident doing it with a ready made set of resource cards to guide them. This would not be an unusual outcome of a one day training course and it mirrors Healy's (2010) findings which highlighted how teachers are often more concerned with the practicalities of introducing new ideas to their pupils than they are with the theory and philosophy underpinning those ideas.

Irrespective of whether teachers are better (or just think they are better) at Adventurous Activities, what really matters at this point is that pupils are having more in-school opportunities to explore and learn more about a range of these activities than they have had for many years. What may be more problematic for traditional, NGB qualified, outdoor educators is the thought that non-NGB qualified, school teachers will now be teaching Adventurous Activities!

▲ Adventurous Activities in the Curriculum

Since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1990 adventurous learning outdoors has had a difficult and often marginalised presence on the curriculum, often existing as a somewhat detached week-long, end of year 6, residential experience. Whilst we fully recognise and support the value of such experiences and the learning opportunities they continue to provide, many would agree that the real potential of this approach to learning has never been fully realised. In the unseemly squabble for space and recognition that was the first draft of the National Curriculum (1990) outdoor and adventurous activities (as it is still known in England) was identified as one of two optional areas of learning (the other being athletic activities) in the subject area of Physical Education, alongside games, dance, gymnastics and swimming which were compulsory. In reality this optional status meant that the stronger athletics based traditions and interests of many schools, and the simpler practicalities of marking out an athletics area (as opposed to taking pupils off-site with all the red tape and risk assessment implications that would entail), militated against many pupils ever actually doing any Adventurous Activities other than orienteering around the school grounds or the occasional problem solving exercise, all neatly packaged into a double lesson on a wet Friday afternoon. So for many years the outdoor residential experience has fought a gallant though undervalued fight to provide pupils with the 'broad and balanced' (physical) educational experience that is the key principle upon which the National Curriculum was built.

It was a particular interest of ours to explore the impact of the Outdoor Learning Cards training upon the provision of Adventurous Activities curriculum opportunities within the school setting. Somewhat unexpectedly the findings were very positive for whilst a small number of schools did indeed identify a move away from the traditional outdoor residential in favour of school based and in-house delivery most did not. In contrast, the majority of schools felt the Outdoor Learning Cards had actually expanded their schools provision of Adventurous Activities. Many teachers commented on the extended provision that was now evident across the full four year range of Key Stage 2, with particular emphasis on Adventurous Activities being timetabled into the curriculum on a regular basis for years 3, 4 and 5 as well as year 6 – something that did not happen very often in the past. Most encouragingly, these new opportunities for regular, on-site,

teacher facilitated Adventurous Activities appear to have been introduced to compliment, rather than replace, the outdoor residential. If this trend continues it is reasonable to think that in the future the outdoor residential experience will become more integrated and valued as the natural culmination of KS2 Adventurous Activities learning. At the same time it will inevitably challenge outdoor residential centre staff to make sure that the experiences they offer pupils connect with, and further extend, what those pupils have already done with their teachers in school.

▲ Positive impact on children's learning

We asked ourselves the question why have the Outdoor Learning Cards proved so popular with teachers and pupils that they are now keen and motivated to use them to deliver Adventurous Activities with all year groups? A number of possible explanations are possible.

Some teachers highlighted the particular value of the new Adventurous Activities opportunities to expand provision for pupils who have often felt excluded from any previous Physical Education success because of the dominance of team games and sports. This greater inclusivity of all children has been a major strength of outdoor pedagogy for many years and resonates strongly with the more traditional term 'outdoor education' and its holistic approach to learning.

OAA (Outdoor and Adventurous Activities) is a great way of keeping everyone active at a non-competitive level. It has proved a great success with children that are not keen on sport.

Alternatively, it may well be that the greater diversity of learning offered by the statutory inclusion of Adventurous Activities within Physical Education is evident in the high levels of enjoyment and increased pupil motivation being reported by teachers.

The children are very motivated; they cannot wait for the summer term when they know the adventure cards are coming out....I did one last week, I did the blindfold one and set up a course. They were being blindfolded and working their way through the course and 2 children came up to me at the end and they said 'Miss, that's the best PE lesson we've ever had and we couldn't see for most of it'. They loved it because they are so fun.

For us however the most significant impact of the Outdoor Learning Cards upon children's learning and teachers teaching has been in relation to the focus on the development of key skills (thinking, communication, ICT and number) that are felt to underpin lifelong learning (DCELLS, 2008b). Teachers commented enthusiastically on the positive contribution of Adventurous Activities to this crucially important initiative. In so doing they have identified not only how valuable Adventurous Activities are as an alternative (non-competitive, outdoor, experiential)

The children are very motivated; they cannot wait for the summer term when they know the adventure cards are coming out



approach to Physical Education but also, and most crucially, to the contribution that Adventurous Activities have been making to pupils' non subject-specific development of life skills.

The Outdoor Learning Cards have a large impact on children's thinking skills and problem solving.... (children) solve problems more efficiently and communicate better with each other....For us its all about the skills, its teaching all those different Key Skills and they really come through in this because you've got your communication skills, you've got your creative thinking, you've got every skill, you've got the problem solving element of it....

Outdoor educators throughout the land may well throw their hands in the air, asking how this is any different to what we have been saying and doing for the last 30 years. The answer we would suggest is that learning outdoors is no longer on the margins of pupils' educational experience. On the contrary, in Wales at least and in the guise of Adventurous Activities, it is now valued equally alongside other aspects of the subject area of Physical Education, as well as alongside all other curriculum areas in its ability to contribute to the development of pupils key skills. This dramatic change in the Adventurous Activities-Physical Education relationship has been brought about by the changes in the National Curriculum in Wales. The introduction of the Outdoor Learning Cards, as a user-friendly way of bringing outdoor learning into the school timetable, has been a significant vehicle in supporting teachers' ability to respond to these changes.

▲ Conclusion

Bringing Adventurous Activities into the school curriculum and grounds, placing it in the hands of the teachers who best know and understand the particular needs of their pupils, and giving them the Outdoor Learning Cards training and resource to support their teaching have all had a positive impact upon children's learning. At a time when teachers in Wales have to identify how their teaching delivers the Skills Framework it appears that they welcome both the Outdoor Learning Cards resource and the Adventurous Activities medium that so readily enables children to develop these Key Skills. Importantly for outdoor educators these changes have also provided the long-sought after opportunity for their holistic, outdoor and experientially focused approach to learning to become a statutory and regular part of young people's education.

▲ Future thoughts

A number of questions are raised by this study which we are continuing to explore in ongoing research. In particular, teachers have highlighted concerns relating to moments of transition from the Foundation Phase (3-7 years) to Key Stage 2 and how the cross curricular potential of the newly accessible school grounds can be harnessed across all Key Stage 2 subjects. Likewise, at Key Stage 3 we are concerned to know more about how Physical Education in secondary schools will respond to and build upon pupils Adventurous Activities experiences of primary school. Finally, at a time of increased emphasis on health we are keen to explore the contribution of Adventurous Activities to levels of physical activity and health across all age ranges. ■



Notes

1. Adventurous Activities is the term used in Wales to describe activities of a challenging and outdoor nature in the Physical Education Programme of Study (DCELLS, 2008a). Other terms such as outdoor and adventurous activities and outdoor education, which reflect earlier curriculum models and teachers' personal preferences, are for the purposes of this research, synonymous with Adventurous Activities.
2. Many teachers reported schools investing in new equipment such as a climbing wall or for den building, as a normal part of their spending to meet educational priorities rather than as an extra cost. Other teachers in schools that had not prioritised this area of learning stated that cost was a barrier.

References

DCELLS (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills) Making the most of learning. Implementing the revised curriculum. Cardiff: DCELLS, 2008a.
DCELLS (Department for Children, Education, Lifelong Learning and Skills) Skills Framework for 3 -19 year olds in Wales. Cardiff: DCELLS, 2008b.
HEALY, M. 'This isn't PE, it's not physical enough'. Horizons 52, pp. 21, Winter, 2010.
WAINWRIGHT, N. and WILLIAMS, A. Camping on concrete: professional development for adventurous activities in Wales, AIESEP Conference, Limerick, 2011.

Author's Notes:

Andy Williams is the Director of the Centre for Outdoor Education Research at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and programme coordinator for the BA and MA Outdoor Education degrees. He enjoys the exploring the traditions and history of outdoor environments and has particular research interests in outdoor pedagogy and emergent learning.



Nalda Wainwright: is Senior Lecturer in Education at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and programme coordinator for the MA Physical Education and MA Physical Education with Secondary QTS degrees. She is a keen surfer and walker and a consultant for the PESS project in Wales. Her current PhD research is on the implementation of the new Foundation Phase in Wales.

Photographs: All from Nalda Wainwright