



In the curriculum

Embedding Outdoor Learning into a school curriculum: a case study

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Christine has a degree in Environmental Science and was a primary school teacher for 20 years before moving into Outdoor Learning. She started her own company, Learning With Nature, four years ago and partners with Forestry England to deliver school visits at Westonbirt Arboretum. She also works with schools to develop Outdoor Learning and with trainee teachers.



Like many of you, I work outdoors because I realise the value of being connected to nature and the benefits to both my mental and physical state. I am passionate about connecting children and adults with the natural environment in order to pass on these benefits and to encourage stewardship of our environment by the next generation. Although one-off visits can inspire children and adults alike, to bring about a real change in people's attitudes to the natural environment, work is needed with schools to teach children about nature as part of their school curriculum.

In June 2018, I was contacted by Wendy D'Arcy, Headteacher at St. Joseph's Catholic Primary School in Nympsfield, enquiring whether I could provide Outdoor Learning sessions at her school. This enquiry led to the opportunity to try and embed Outdoor Learning into a school curriculum.

I soon realised that we shared a vision for transforming her school curriculum.

Wendy had decided to have each Friday as an enrichment day with outside



providers and staff delivering a range of activities aimed at enriching and extending the whole school curriculum.

She explained that she was going to use the Primary PE and Sport Funding Premium to fund the Outdoor Learning sessions and that as there was a coaching requirement to the funding, she would be sending her staff out with the children so that I could coach them. This made me realise that I would have the opportunity to bring about long-term, sustainable change if I embedded Outdoor Learning into the school curriculum.

This was the start of an exciting journey that proved to be both rewarding, challenging and transformative.

ASSESSMENT

In order to make the most of this opportunity, I decided to try and assess

PE AND SPORT PREMIUM

The PE and Sport Premium provides primary schools with £320m of government funding to make additional and sustainable improvements to the quality of the PE, physical activity and sport offered through their core budgets. It is allocated directly to schools so they have the flexibility to use it in the way that works best for their pupils.

the impact of the sessions on both the staff and pupils by using IOL's *7 Steps to CPD* model, tweaked to suit the skills needed by teachers. I asked staff to map out their current competency level in September 2018 and in July 2019.

Assessment of the benefits of Outdoor Learning to pupils has always been difficult to quantify. As I would be working with all the children in the school, I would not be able to compare academic achievement between groups. I contacted IOL's South-West Research Hub for advice and met with Dr Alun Morgan, a Lecturer in Education at Plymouth University and member of the hub, at the beginning of September 2018. He advised me to use a form of assessment that had already been validated by use in the Natural Connections Project (1). This was a qualitative assessment of the benefits of Outdoor Learning based on a questionnaire which the children completed in September 2018 and July 2019.

To evidence the impact of the Outdoor Learning sessions on the school as a whole I wanted to include external accreditation, and so decided to go for the Eco Schools awards. This entailed creating an Eco Committee at the school, of which I was Chair, and then working with pupils, staff, governors and parents to achieve the various awards, through

activities covered during the Outdoor Learning sessions.

CURRICULUM LINKS

From the start, I was keen to differentiate between Forest School and Outdoor Learning sessions. These were going to be Outdoor Learning sessions, linked to the curriculum and working with whole classes at a time. (Forest School sessions are usually focused on developing interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, rather than learning objectives, and are delivered to a small group of the same children over a period of weeks.) At our meeting in June, I had asked Wendy for the curriculum planning for each year group for the year. I then started planning weekly sessions for each year group, linked to the curriculum so that the teachers could cover their curriculum learning objectives in our Outdoor Learning sessions. As we progressed through the year, the staff identified possible curriculum links themselves, then started to plan for individual Outdoor Learning sessions, and then a set of six sessions, and finally planned and led sessions. At the end of the year, we got together as a whole staff to create a whole-school Outdoor Learning curriculum linked to the National Curriculum for their school. All this was done during staff meeting time or evening training sessions.

STAFF COACHING

An important part of the year was to ensure staff developed the skills and confidence to deliver Outdoor Learning sessions to their classes, as this would ensure the curriculum was sustainable.

By coming out with their classes and shadowing my sessions, the staff learnt how to plan for, and manage, 30 children outdoors. An important part of the sessions, for both pupils and staff, was identifying and mitigating risks. This process led to an increase in the resilience of both staff and pupils.

Sessions usually began with sitting in a circle chatting about what the children had been doing, experiences they have had and learning about the knowledge that the children already possessed. Teachers, who had a tightly timetabled day with set learning objectives to cover, found the change in pace unsettling to start with. They also found that the children were noisier and more excitable outdoors and they asked me to ensure that I maintained the school rules during my sessions. However, as time passed the teachers started to value the time we spent listening to the children, learning more about their interests and home life. The children settled down more during

sessions as they became used to learning outdoors and the sessions became relaxed yet very focused learning times.

As the year progressed, the views of the staff changed. Instigating change in any working environment is difficult and schools are no different. With a mixture of personalities, with different skills and experiences, the attitudes of the staff were very important to the success or failure of the year. Most of the staff lacked confidence when teaching 'Outdoor Learning' and some of them, no doubt, felt their skills as a teacher were being questioned by the need for someone else to come in to teach the learning objectives they were covering already but in a different way. At the beginning, some staff were very excited and enthusiastic about the opportunities they would be given, whilst others were hesitant about yet another thing to add to their workload.

However, the Head and Deputy Head were clear about their expectations and that in future years the staff would be expected to deliver Outdoor Learning sessions themselves. This whole-school approach, driven by senior management, was one of the main reasons for the success of the year.

As well as interacting with both myself and the Outdoor Learning sessions more as the year progressed, staff started contacting me for resources, ideas for sessions and advice. I started to notice other classes learning outdoors during the day and staff were often heard telling each other what they had been doing outdoors that week.

Wendy had an excellent idea for her staff to keep 'black books' of their enrichment day activities to evidence the impact of the change in the school curriculum. Putting in photos, resources and records of what the children had done at each session meant these A3 scrapbooks proved very useful for staff, especially when looking back and remembering what we did and how we did it.

The whole staff are now much more enthusiastic about Outdoor Learning and by the end of the year, when I was watching the staff deliver Outdoor Learning sessions, they had grown in

confidence, not only when working outdoors but also as teachers.

ASSESSMENT OUTCOMES

Pupils

The classes rotated through the year. I was able to assess four key stage 2 classes (year's 6, 5, 4 and 3) at the start of the year (in September). At the end of the year (July) the only classes available for re-assessment (due to timetabling) were year 3 and year 6. From September 2018 to July 2019 I obtained the following results:

The number of year 3 children who:

- enjoyed lessons outside increased by 15% (from 85% to 100%).
- thought that they learnt more in lessons outside increased by 28%.
- felt they achieved more in lessons outside also increased by 28%.
- felt healthy and happy in lessons outside increased by 8% (from 88% to 96%).
- felt they get on better with people at school during lessons outside increased by 16%.

For year 6 children:

- there was a 10% increase in those who felt they learn more in lessons outside.
- there was an increase of 11% who felt they achieve more in lessons outside.
- 100% of the Y6 children enjoyed lessons outside.
- 96% felt happy and healthy in lessons outside.

These results all reflect what the children thought about themselves.

Staff

Staff confidence and skills at delivering Outdoor Learning has grown (in some cases exponentially) and they have helped to create a whole-school Outdoor Learning curriculum for their school. For some there was a marked improvement in the range of skills identified by the IOL 7 Steps to CPD model, whilst others had been able to identify a particular area that they needed to develop and had managed to focus on this aspect of their outdoor teaching. Review statements at

USEFUL RESOURCES

Download and use the IOL 7 steps to CPD: <http://bit.ly/IOL7-steps-CPD>

Read more about Eco Schools and awards here: <https://www.eco-schools.org.uk>

year end showed how all staff felt their health and wellbeing had also benefitted from going outdoors on a regular basis.

Whole school

Through the Eco Committee, which involved the whole school community (pupils, staff, parents, governors), we attained the Bronze and Silver EcoSchools Awards.

REVIEW

Looking back over the past year, we have achieved many things. From the pupil assessment, and their feedback to Wendy about enrichment days, the children have loved learning outdoors and have many memorable moments which have aided their learning across the curriculum; they feel more confident and able when learning outdoors.

Staff, pupils, parents and governors have all supported the development of Outdoor Learning and, when interviewed, the Head, Wendy D'Arcy, said that she would strongly recommend other schools to use their available funding to develop Outdoor Learning in their schools. Wendy did emphasise that there needs to be a whole-school approach over a whole school year, with staff getting the level of support I was able to give them. What amazed me during this whole process was the transformation, not only of the children, but also the teachers, parents and school culture. I hope that other schools will feel encouraged to have a go at transforming their schools ■

REFERENCES

1. Natural Connections Demonstration Project, 2012-2016: Final report and analysis of the key evaluation questions (NECR215).

IMAGES

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