

Outdoor Learning Research Hub Project

UPDATE by Carrie Hedges, Research Coordinator

Network of Academics and Practitioners discussing and evaluating research in Outdoor Learning

Interest in Outdoor Learning is growing. The health and wellbeing benefits are increasingly well understood and supported by a growing evidence base from researchers. Several large studies such as Nature Connections¹ and Learning Away² have also demonstrated a strong case for educational benefits as well; benefits that practitioners have known and often evidenced anecdotally for themselves. Now, to strengthen the argument for more time out of doors for all, and to understand how best to provide high quality experiences, practitioners and researchers are coming together to tackle the questions to which we still need answers.

The Institute for Outdoor Learning, the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom and Natural England, together with a national network of researchers - the Learning in the Natural Environment Strategic Research Group (LiNE SRG for short!) - proposed the idea of regional Research Hubs to bring researchers and practitioners together. As encapsulated by Andy Robinson, Chief Executive of IOL:

"If Outdoor Learning is to be valued more highly by UK society it needs to be better understood and more consistently delivered to high standards. I think the work of the Research Hubs will support these aims by providing better dialogue between different research institutes and between researchers and practitioners."

Therefore, launched last year, the Research Hub project set out to meet this need for better joined-up research development in outdoor learning. The focus of the project is to facilitate research-practitioner engagement to drive the nationwide development of an evidence base to support the delivery of high quality, frequent and progressive outdoor learning experiences for children and young people, and to raise the standards of professional delivery in outdoor learning research and practice. Dr Chris Loynes, a member of the LiNE SRG, explains:

"this project gives the outdoor field a chance to find out at grass roots level how to develop the capacity to provide quality outdoor learning for all young people, how to reach those young people who currently spend little or no time out of doors, and to join up provision so that outdoor experiences meet the needs of young people who learn how to flourish through the outdoors and, at the same time, come to value nature as an important and precious part of their lives".

The Regional Research Hubs

To facilitate the project a network of regional research-practitioner hub groups ('research hubs') are being established that will enable academics and practitioners from across the outdoor learning sector to meet and discuss needs and priorities in moving the Research Hub project aims forward. These research hubs are tasked with identifying local priorities, supporting evidence gathering, and progressing local research evaluation. There are currently five regional research hubs already established and active, four in England (the north-west, north-east, south-

west and south-east regional research hubs) and one in Scotland, with several more currently in development as interest continues to grow.

Each regional research hub is developed autonomously and is asked to:

1. Build links between local research-practice communities with an interest in outdoor learning – universities, providers, professionals, researchers, postgraduate students, etc.
2. Capture the scope of research and delivery projects in their area and feed any publications in the public domain to the research coordinator
3. Once identified, create plans for supporting amplification of delivery in areas of national priority. (Such as school-based Outdoor Learning)
4. Once identified create plans to support evidence gathering in areas of national priority. (for example, nature and connection, with nature in delivering wellbeing and pro-environmental outcomes)
5. Disseminate information about evidence and good practice within their hub area, among the network of pilot hubs and to the LiNE SRG through frameworks put in place by the National OL Research Coordinator.

The groups are meeting several times during the year and their discussions and developments so far have been both encouraging and insightful. Already, hubs have identified previously unknown research, debated the most important questions to ask – and how best to ask them, begun to develop action research workshops to support new projects and build new practitioner researcher partnerships for new projects.

The National OL Research Coordinator

A National Research Coordinator, funded by IOL, has been appointed to support the project by collating and analysing existing evidence for the impact and provision of outdoor learning in the UK. This includes bringing together local evidence (via the hub network) and to summarise those findings to inform and stimulate local hub-driven research, research and evaluation priorities, and national policy and practice. This role supports the regional research hubs by facilitating the hubs ability to feed into national policy development, whilst also providing insight of UK-wide research needs and priorities.

How can you take part?

Anyone is welcome to take part in the local research hub groups, you do not, for example, need to be a member of IOL. For more information, local Research Hub contacts, and to keep up to date with Research Hub activities, visit the IOL Research Hub webpage: www.outdoor-learning-research.org/Research/Research-Hub. Should you wish to develop a local research hub group then please contact Louise Keir at the IOL office: louise@outdoor-learning.org for more information. ■

References:

1. Waite, S., Passy, R., Gilchrist, M., Hunt, A. & Blackwell, I. (2016). Natural connections demonstration project, 2012- 2016: Final report.
2. Kendall, S., & Rodger, J. (2015). Paul Hamlyn Foundation Evaluation of Learning Away: Final Report.

www.outdoor-learning-research.org