

Environmental Education



Children Learning Outdoors!

Kenrick Days Success Page 9



Reflections on Early Years



The Planet and Stuff Review



Field Studies Council's 70th Anniversary

We've only just begun....

Dr Beth Christie *Research and Teaching Fellow*, Dr Simon Beames *Lecturer* and Dr Robbie Nicol *Senior Lecturer*



Background

Secondary schools are unique; they are governed by timetables, divided by disciplines and a typical school day is segmented into short periods of time. At first glance, these characteristics do not appear to lend themselves to educational journeys outside of the classroom. However, outdoor

learning does not have to involve full day trips to remote places, it need not be costly and it does not require specialist staff or equipment. *Outdoor Journeys* is one example of an effective pedagogical approach to outdoor learning that is meaningful, low-cost and which can be delivered in school grounds or in the wider community.

In 2011 we received a 24-month grant from the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation to investigate the quality and availability of outdoor learning in schools in Scotland and consider ways to help and support teachers to develop their practice. We approached this in two ways: first an audit year to assess the frequency and nature of outdoor learning provision; and second a developmental phase to consider the practical issues involved in developing outdoor learning -- specifically the *Outdoor Journeys* programme -- in the secondary sector. This enquiry was timely as no such data had been gathered since Higgins, Nicol and Ross's study in 2006¹, and little was known about how the policy document *Curriculum for Excellence through Outdoor Learning* and associated Education Scotland support had influenced outdoor learning provision.

¹ Higgins, P., Nicol, R. and Ross, H. (2006) *Teachers' approaches and attitudes to engaging with the natural heritage through the curriculum*. Perth: Scottish Natural Heritage.

Furthermore, there is limited research and development work on outdoor learning within secondary schools.

Frequency and nature of outdoor learning provision

In the first year we examined the frequency and nature of outdoor learning provision in Scottish schools, with specific attention paid to teachers' approaches to learning outdoors, and consideration given to further support and practical training teachers needed to develop their practice. Questionnaires were administered to primary and secondary schools across four local authority areas: Angus, Edinburgh, Highland (sub-region: Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) and West Dunbartonshire.

The results² indicated that secondary schools were keen to develop outdoor learning provision, but they needed support to do so. Also, there was an increased use of school grounds as a context for learning within the primary school sector. In general, there appeared to be a development in terms of secondary teachers' understanding and acceptance of outdoor learning as a legitimate pedagogy. Notwithstanding these issues of acceptance and legitimacy, there remain issues around the practical implementation of teaching and learning outdoors in Scotland.

To address this we took an existing outdoor learning programme – *Outdoor Journeys* – which was developed for use in primary schools and trialled it within secondary schools...

What it is *Outdoor Journeys* is a school-based teaching approach that enables pupils to learn about the people and place in which they live. It encourages pupils to generate and answer questions about the socio-cultural and ecological 'story' of their local landscape. By allowing pupils to plan and undertake local journeys in their community they are able to learn across the curriculum in a manner that is active, holistic and contextualised. This integrated approach encourages regular, low-cost, meaningful, cross-curricular outdoor learning within the constraints of conventional secondary schooling. No expert staff, specialist equipment or transport is required which addresses some of the concerns and barriers raised during the research conducted in year one of this project.

What we did Our inquiry involved working with various high school classes within S1-S3 (12-15 year olds) in three secondary schools in one Local Authority area in Scotland – Perth and Kinross. Specifically, we worked with the geography department in Breadlabane Community High School and the maths departments in Perth Academy and the Community School of Auchterarder. Data collection included participant observation, short questionnaires, and interviews with approximately 150 students and 10 teachers. In most cases, pupils reported enjoying the opportunity to guide their own learning and to develop dispositions for good thinking.

² Christie, B., Beames, S., Higgins, P., Nicol, R. & Ross, H. (in review) *Outdoor Learning Provision in Scottish Schools Scottish Educational Review*.

What we found out The data fell into two categories. First, practical issues arose which were related to the development and implementation of the *Outdoor Journeys* programme. For instance, teachers requested further support to develop outdoor learning and concrete examples of successful approaches within a range of subject areas. This was addressed in the short-term by three outputs, which included a guidance booklet, continuing professional development (CPD) sessions for teachers, and the development of the *Outdoor Journeys* website to include a variety of subject-specific case studies. Second, theoretical and conceptual issues arose which related to understanding what was happening for the individual pupils involved in the programme. Three key themes emerged – culture, context and relationships – and represented the various aspects of school, family and community life, the relationships that exist between and within these contexts, and which exert an influence upon pupils' experiences. These related themes provide interesting areas for future research, as they demand a much closer examination of this complex interplay between the three themes.

Development of critical thinking In terms of key findings in relation to the immediate effect of the *Outdoor Journeys* programme, the teachers noted two things: first, they identified that it offered opportunities for students to develop critical thinking skills at both a subject specific and more generic level; and second, they acknowledged that such skills are often overlooked



within the first three years of secondary school, and then rather suddenly expected at higher levels. Both the pupils and the teachers identified that the *Outdoor Journeys* provided an opportunity to deeply engage with a topic. For example, the pupils enjoyed being able to create a question to investigate and the opportunity that process affords for self-directed learning and increased engagement. The teachers, on the other hand, were impressed that pupils appeared to develop their questioning and thinking skills as they investigated, critiqued and presented the knowledge gained to their peers. The teachers felt that these critical thinking skills were not exercised regularly during the first few years of secondary school and they identified *Outdoor Journeys*, and outdoor learning more generally, as a way of

developing these important life skills.

Contact beth.christie@ed.ac.uk / More Information www.outdoorjourneys.org.uk