

## Learning outside the classroom: How far should you go?

*Mike Tones, LOtC Champion, presents the findings of the recent Ofsted report, Learning outside the classroom: How far should you go?*

“When planned and implemented well, learning outside the classroom contributed significantly to raising standards and improving pupils’ personal, social and emotional development.” (Ofsted report)

On 2 October, Ofsted published a new report, *Learning outside the classroom: How far should you go?*, evaluating the impact of learning outside the classroom in schools and colleges across England. The report makes it very clear that learning outside the classroom in all its forms, significantly raises standards and achievement. It also enhances young people’s motivation and levels of interest, providing real, exciting and enjoyable contexts in which they can respond, behave and learn well. The findings show that well-planned activities not only enhance pupils’ learning, but can also re-engage those who are hard to motivate.

Christine Gilbert, Her Majesty’s Chief Inspector, commented that “the positive impact of learning outside the classroom is widely recognised, but unfortunately it is sometimes seen as an extra or a treat, rather than as an integral part of the curriculum.”

The survey found that first-hand experiences of learning outside the classroom helps to make subjects more vivid and interesting for pupils and enhances their understanding. In each of the schools visited, learning outside the classroom improved young people’s development in all five of the Every Child Matters outcomes.

The following example illustrates a significant contribution to pupils’ personal, social and emotional development:

During a science activity in the school garden, two fascinated Year 3 pupils used a magnifying glass to explore various habitats. ‘Why does it live there?’ asked one girl, when she discovered a woodlouse under a stone. She and her partner considered various possibilities: ‘The stone protects it.’ ‘It doesn’t want the sun.’ They recorded their ideas and later compared them with other pupils’ responses. Through direct observation and experimentation, these pupils were able to arrive at sound conclusions based on evidence, fulfilling an important requirement of the National Curriculum programme of study for science.

Learning outside the classroom can also help to combat under-achievement, as shown below:

Pupils, who were underachieving in English and mathematics, spent two hours a week after school at a ‘playing for success’ centre, where they took part in climbing, canoeing, dry-slope skiing and other outdoor activities. Staff used these experiences as stimuli for work in mathematics, writing and computing. Evidence from the schools and the centre showed that, within a few weeks, the standard of pupils’ work had improved noticeably. Their responses to questionnaires showed that their confidence and self-esteem had also risen. One pupil wrote: ‘I have learned so much here. It has built up my confidence and I have learned to try my best and have a go.’ A typical comment from a parent described the way her

daughter had returned from the centre 'looking so animated and stimulated – quite different from a normal school day'.

The report has little truck with schools which allow concerns over health and safety, cost or workload to be barriers to learning outside the classroom. It explains how many schools overcome these. The report points out some differences in the ways primary and secondary schools organise learning outside the classroom. Primaries generally use their local area and the school grounds well, but Secondary Schools often promote better learning on day and residential visits. The report asks all schools to ensure that well planned learning outside the classroom, which promotes the frequent and progressive development of skills over time, is integral to their curriculum. It challenges the DCSF and local authorities to give clearer messages to schools about the value of learning outside the classroom and to support schools better in promoting higher quality activities outside the classroom.

The report can be found at: <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/Ofsted-home/Publications-and-research/Documents-by-type/Thematic-reports/Learning-outside-the-classroom>