EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES FROM OUTDOOR LEARNING AS CHILDREN BEGIN THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM

BRIEFING REPORT

SUE WAITE, JULIE EVANS AND SUE ROGERS

During the Foundation Stage, children have many opportunities to learn outside as the Early Years Foundation Stage guidance promotes a play-based pedagogy both indoors and outdoors. As children move into statutory schooling at age 5 or 6, their educational experiences are guided by the requirements of the national curriculum. Opportunities to learn experientially outside become restricted as increasingly teacher-directed lessons focus on prescribed learning outcomes. Within this curricular context, our research asked, how and in what ways does being outside extend play-based learning into the primary years? Can outdoor play and learning opportunities support learning in the period of transition from the Foundation Stage to Key Stage 1?

We worked with four classes in two primary schools to find out how being outdoors changed teaching and learning in Year 1. Finding out what happens in outside spaces is not straightforward as children rush about, make noise and seek out hidden places. Following children with a clipboard would prevent us capturing what they naturally do there. So we asked children to wear digital recorders to pick up their vocal interactions ‘on the hoof’. We collected data over two years in the form of:

- Audio recordings of children
- Semi-structured interviews with teaching staff
- Observations
- Photographs, videos.

We found teaching and learning practices varied between FS, Y1, inside and outside the classroom as expected but differences between FS and Y1 were less marked in outdoor contexts which were dominated by child/child interactions. Children and places co-constructed pedagogy with adults, but sometimes a focus on specific outcomes limited the extent to which contingent learning opportunities were capitalised upon.

Transition

One head teacher described the transition to KS1 from FS as movement ‘between a rock and a meadow’. Although teachers supported outdoor learning for maintaining play-based learning opportunities for children beyond FS in theory, perceived pressure to prepare children for the next stage of educational assessment acted as a major constraint on this. Even in FS, sometimes resources were separated into specific learning goals, possibly reducing children’s agency in creating learning that is meaningful to them. Structural support from head-teachers in school development plans, for example, and teachers’ own personal convictions made a difference to how much use was made of the outdoors. Teacher effect was particularly marked in the sorts of activity planned for classes. As teachers were often absent from outdoor spaces, the extent to which outdoor learning was linked successfully with classroom learning was limited. It suggests that indoor teaching and learning had a higher status than outdoor teaching. Thus opportunities to extend and capitalise on experiential learning were not always maximised.

Pedagogy

Most adult/child interactions in both FS and KS1 focused on monitoring and managing children’s behaviour and avoiding risk in children’s play. There were fewer adult/child interactions for the purpose of extending children’s thinking. Quite often, adults directed children’s activity in order to achieve a desired outcome rather than following children’s emergent ideas. However, on occasions, adults responded contingently to children’s

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2 Sue Waite is a Research Fellow in the School of Education, Plymouth University
3 Julie Evans is a Senior Lecturer at The University College Plymouth of St Mark and St John
4 Sue Rogers is the Head of Early Years and Primary Education at the Institute of Education, London
interests, supporting extension of their thinking through making resources available and open questioning. We suggest that outdoor contexts can engender a different pedagogic relationship between child and adult and thus interrupt established patterns of teaching and learning more prevalent inside the classroom. However, this interruption appears linked to teacher and child expectations and the different nature (or culture) of various outside spaces. In this way the environment appears to exert a shaping influence on the character of the pedagogic interaction between children and adults. Significantly, child/child interactions outside were diverse, extended, rich in language, and hugely enjoyed. They developed sustained shared narratives and supported each other’s learning. A range of readiness for teacher-led learning was evident in follow-up interviews at the end of Year 2, suggesting a need for continuing diversity of places and pedagogical approaches.

Social and affective support for learning

Finding ways to be together was a dominant theme in outdoor contexts. The majority of talk outdoors was between children and involved negotiation, the formation of bonds and truces and the maintenance of play themes. In instances where an adult was present outside, conversations and play were often disrupted by adult agendas relating to school timetabling or concerns over health and safety. Inside the classroom, children’s interactions were frequently fractured by teacher talk and children’s talk sometimes indicated that their focus was on a product rather than the process of learning.

Differentiating place and cultural affordances

Place and culture are important for matching learning opportunities to purposes. Culture is understood here as ‘values and beliefs, rules and codes of conduct and behaviour, forms of language, patterns of speech and choice of words, understandings about ways of doing things and not doing things’. Cultural expectations affected places outdoors differently so that spaces close or within the school grounds often imported schooling cultural norms. Some spaces had richer associations for children and provided continuity with learning in the community. A consideration of the cultural aspects and cultural density of sites would help align purposes, pedagogy and place more effectively.

Gender

Schools are sites of both gender construction and reconstruction between children and adults and between children and children. Opportunities for outdoor learning enabled children to move beyond stereotypical notions of ‘being a boy or a girl’, for example, that ‘all boys’ need to be physically active and boys are more suited to outdoor learning. The data show that just as ‘some boys’ may benefit from outdoor learning environments, so too do some girls. In line with recent debates regarding gender differences in learning, the data offer an evidenced-based account of how gender operates within early years and primary school environments.

Noises ‘off stage’

Soundtracks of play and work were distinctly situated and varied between classrooms. Outside there were often non-verbal vocalisations: animal sounds, mechanical sounds, singing and humming accompanying children’s play; while in class, the most common backing to children’s conversation was adult voices. The child-centred method of audio recording was valuable in that it showed the levels of noise which children regularly cope with in their learning environments. The levels of background noise were high in both contexts (although perhaps surprisingly, less so outdoors), which impacted on our analysis of language in the audio material. We are exploring ways to represent this, as we regard this as an important data source and not simply ‘interference’.

Risk restrictions

Health and safety protection appeared to be increasingly co-constructed between adults and children, for example, children answering teachers about why somebody is crying. Children in Y1 sometimes suggested remedies, but in FS, they rarely suggested solutions to problems. Health and safety issues often disrupted play, however, through children being warned not to play in a particular kind of way.

We suggest that providing quality outdoor opportunities throughout primary schooling would help some children to continue to learn through alternative forms of engagement and pedagogy.

Please contact Sue Waite for further details of this ESRC funded study sjwaite@plymouth.ac.uk or look on the ESRC website for details of other related outputs.

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