



Outdoor Journeys: Relevance within practice for children and young people

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Abstract

This research briefing explores the underlying evidence to underpin the implementation of the Outdoor Journeys programme with children and young people. Although there is limited literature supporting this relatively new approach, there is sufficient scope for outdoor learning within Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence all whilst supporting national policy and legislation. Recent studies have suggested children are disconnected with nature and their local environments due to an upsurge in technological advancements. Although Outdoor Journeys is not considered a traditional Occupational Therapy intervention strategy, the approach and concepts can be connected to practice. Thus, Outdoor Journeys could be employed to act as an effective and upcoming strategy within schools to facilitate learning and also support other related fields such as Occupational Therapy.

Keywords

Outdoor Journeys, Occupational Therapy, School, Children and Young People, Outdoor Learning, Nature

Key Points

- Outdoor Journeys is a relatively new approach which allows students to learn about the people and place in which they live.
- Outdoor Journeys maintains the support of Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence Initiative and Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC).
- Outdoor Journeys supports place-based education and can potentially help mitigate the effects of Nature Deficit Disorder.
- Natural outdoor environments have been shown to reduce stress, enhance emotional resilience, facilitate functional and imaginative play along with supporting cognitive functioning in neurotypical children.

Background

Outdoor Journeys is an approach developed by Simon Beames, it "*involves learning about the socio-cultural and geo-physical story of students' local landscapes*" in an active, holistic and contextualized manner (Beames & Ross 2010, pp. 95). Through this process students can plan and undertake

journeys within their school grounds and local neighborhoods to learn about the people and place in which they live. *Outdoor Journeys* is intended to be student-led, giving an active role of responsibility and choice in the learning process over to the learner, rather than pre-determined, expert-led sessions and

is rooted in a sense of place. Journeys are usually divided into three phases which often happen in a perpetual spiral; Firstly, the *Questioning* phase involves student's generating questions about their local area, before *Researching* through the relevant resources in order to find answers and finally, *Sharing* their findings and experiences with classmates and other members of the community using creative methods. Outdoor Journeys can enable the delivery of regular, low-cost, meaningful, cross-curricular outdoor learning (Beames and Ross 2010).

“Occupational Therapy enables people to achieve health, wellbeing and life satisfaction through participation in occupation (WFOT 2013, pp. 48).”

Occupation refers to any meaningful or purposeful activity in an individual's life to achieve a sense of identity and live independently (Duncan 2011). The essential day-to-day tasks for children and young people may range between self-care (getting ready to go out or eating a meal), work (going to school or volunteering) and leisure (playing with friends or enjoying hobbies). Occupational Therapists work with individuals of all ages and abilities within various settings who have challenges carrying out the activities and occupations they want to do, need to do or are expected to do (Creek 2014). Although Outdoor Journeys is not considered a traditional Occupational Therapy intervention strategy, the approaches used can be connected to practice.

Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) encourages greater choice and opportunity for young people, cross-curricular learning along with promoting active, challenging and enjoyable

learning (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2004). It states that education should be inclusive, a stimulus for personal achievement and broaden pupils' experiences of the world through a wide set of experiences (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2004). Additionally, the *CfE through Outdoor Learning* recommends that all children and young people participate in a range of progressive and creative outdoor learning experiences incorporated within the school curriculum to connect people with the natural world, built heritage, culture and society. It suggests an adventurous approach to learning containing challenge, enjoyment, relevance, depth and development of the whole person. The natural outdoor environment can provide various opportunities for advancing knowledge in literacy, numeracy along with health and wellbeing (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2010). Scotland's *Learning for Sustainability* report is intended to be an integral part of the CfE by 2030; already embedded within teaching practice to deepen young people's understanding of global citizenship and sustainable development education built on outdoor learning experiences, nurturing a generation who know and value the natural world (Scottish Government 2016). According to Beames et al. *“outdoor learning is the right of every child, can maximize children's learning across the curriculum, has the capacity to elicit personal and social development within each child, needs to be strongly linked to education for environmental sustainability, rests on universal principles of equality and social justice and can provide important opportunities for every child's health and wellbeing (2012, pp. 13).”* It appears that the concept

of Outdoor Journeys may have the capacity to support Scotland's current *Curriculum for Excellence*.

Furthermore, Getting It Right For Every Child (GIRFEC) is concerned with promoting, supporting and safeguarding the wellbeing of children and young people (2016). It is based on the United Nations convention on the rights of the child, incorporating national policy and legislation. GIRFEC ensures children and their families are at the centre of all decision-making, while considering the persons overall wellbeing in terms of how safe, healthy, achieving, nurtured, active, respected, responsible and included they are; Outdoor Journeys can support these elements of GIRFEC through self-directed learning in changing environments.

Place-based education

Outdoor Journeys is a place-based education approach intended to be delivered within a contextualized manner. Place-based education considers societies current alienation from nature and encourages high quality experiences in local settings. It is "*designed to help students learn about the immediate surroundings by capitalizing on their lived experiences* (Knapp 2005, pp. 278)". This approach aims to ground learning in a sense of place and proposes local educational adventures rather than distant field trips, to provide people with meaningful, purposeful connections to their local landscapes (Knapp 2005; Smith 2002). Today learning is often directed towards distant, unknown places, developed by strangers and gained through textbooks, internet and lectures rather than through lived experiences (Smith 2002), while

outdoor education usually takes place far away from school in highly controlled residential environments (Knapp 2005).

Similar to Outdoor Journeys, Forest schools are an increasingly popular venture consisting of regular sessions in woodland or natural environments among children to support a relationship between the learner and the natural world. These sessions can often be linked back to the school curriculum objectives such as understanding science, physical development and, health and wellbeing. The sessions are run by qualified Forest School practitioners, encourages a holistic development of the learner and provides an opportunity for taking appropriate risks (Forest School Association 2019). Forest School supports place-based education, encourages engagement with the local area and helps develop a sense of community and relationship with the natural world. The changing nature of play today from outdoor activities to video games can be attributed to societal changes, risk adverse culture and lower levels of freedom. Forest Schools have shown to reveal positive changes to children's knowledge of the natural world, natural play experiences along with knowledge and understanding of the world around them with children recalling safety routines and respect for the natural environment. This approach can also make children increasingly aware of local environmental issues and provide transferable skills to other environments (Ridger et al. 2012). Forest School's ethos is comparable to the Outdoor Journey's approach further supporting its potential benefits.

There are some negative assumptions surrounding the cost, risk and curricular

relevance of outdoor learning within schools (Beames and Ross 2010). Although there is scope for students engaging in non-local learning experiences on occasion; Learning within the confines of the school playground and local neighborhood offers rich cultural and ecological stories with relevance to the lives of the students (Beames et al. 2012). Outdoor Journeys are intended to be kept close to home or school, requiring no specialist equipment or training; Ultimately, reducing the associated costs and risks (Beames and Ross 2010). The CfE aims to place the learner at the centre of curricular purpose, reduce the amount of de-contextualized learning content and provide real life experiences (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2004); Outdoor Journeys can provide a platform on which the curriculum can be delivered locally in an active, creative and enjoyable way catering towards all learning styles (Beames & Ross 2010).

Occupational Therapists take a unique holistic perspective of individuals, considering not only the physical but psychological, social and environmental factors affecting one's occupational performance (Duncan 2011). Personal meaning and purpose are often attached to one's occupation and through adopting a person-centred approach to practice, Occupational Therapists can ensure individuals are increasingly motivated to engage and be involved in their therapy outcomes (Creek 2014). Likewise, outdoor learning can provide personal meaning to individuals, often rooted within familiar socio-cultural contexts (Beames et al. 2009). Scotland's CfE also considers individuals personal values, beliefs and choice where possible and encourages

individuals to have an active role in their learning and development (Learning and Teaching Scotland 2004). Furthermore, Education Scotland recognizes "*the place in which people learn also helps them to make connections between their experiences and the world around them in a meaningful context* (2013, pp. 6)", allowing opportunities to develop skills for learning, life and work.

Findings

Nature and outdoor benefits

Similarly, Nature Deficit Disorder, a concept coined by Richard Louv (2009) describes the psychological, physical and cognitive costs of human alienation from nature. Although this is not a medical diagnosis, it is essentially a result of modern society. He suggests that children should be connected to nature from an early age in order to reap the psychosocial benefits. He explores the increasing levels of children being diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) due to persistent patterns of inattention and hyperactivity in relation to a number of factors, including children's limitless accessibility to television and modern technological advancements. The recent environmental and cultural change has altered how children spend their childhood and grow up in society today (Louv 2009). Both children and adults are spending increasing amounts of time indoors engaging in sedentary activities, which often makes individuals more susceptible to negative moods and reduced attention spans (Louv 2009).

According to Taylor et al. (2001) green outdoor settings can proportionally reduce attention deficit symptoms;

extending Kaplan's Attention Restoration Theory (1995) to children which suggests that natural environments can assist attentional functioning and mitigate stress levels. Being close to nature can help boost children's attention span, improve motor co-ordination and their ability to concentrate along with increased likelihood of fostering success in life; thus it has been suggested as a useful therapy experience for minimizing ADHD symptoms (Louv 2009).

Occupational Therapists often adopt a Person-Environment-Occupation (PEO) model to further understand people within their changing environments and alternating occupations. The environment is seen to have a direct effect on how we behave and perform our chosen occupations within that chosen context (Law et al. 1996). Similarly, Education Scotland (2013) considers the learning process through the relationship between the people involved, the activities undertaken and the place in which learning happens to maximise opportunities. Through increased time in natural environments along with reduced access to television and game consoles, attention-deficits in children can potentially be reduced, along with promoting healthy childhood development (Louv 2009). Everyday play environments have been shown to make a difference in overall symptom severity in children with ADHD, specifically green play settings compare to built indoor or outdoor facilities (Taylor and Kuo 2011); ADHD children have also been noted to have a greater urge to play outside rather than inside when given the choice regarding play settings (Taylor and Kuo 2011). Following the completion of the Outdoor Journeys programme, children are more likely to undertake their own

journeys outside school time (Beames & Ross 2010); a favorable outcome in a society now filled with modern gadgets and technology.

Outdoor Journeys has been shown to provide opportunities to develop critical thinking skills and broaden social ecology, within culture and context (Christie et al. 2016). During implementation within a secondary school setting, pupils were able to develop interpersonal and important life skills, with the outdoor environment acting as an alternative stimulus for learning (Christie et al. 2016). Time-management, coordinating and delegating tasks between peers and presentation skills were also among the benefits, along with the opportunity to deeply engage with a topic of interest (Christie et al. 2016). Outdoor learning can support a "*strong effective relationship with the natural world*" (Beames et al. 2012, pp. 8)."

Natural outdoor environments have been shown to reduce stress, enhance emotional resilience, facilitate functional and imaginative play along with supporting cognitive functioning in neurotypical children (Chawla et al. 2014). Although there come many inevitable challenges associated with outdoor environments, nature has been shown to provide benefits for children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) including increased sensory engagement in natural environments, improved opportunities for developing fine and gross motor skills, coping strategies, self-stimulation, emotional and social benefits, while behavioural and cognitive benefits are still unclear (Li et al. 2019). This recent evidence concurs with Louv's (2009) proposal of nature providing rich, sensory stimuli and thus helps

develop sensory skills through outdoor learning. Although concerns regarding behavior, social factors and safety issues continue to be identified as barriers to engaging in nature-related activities, parents did report seeing outdoor green spaces as richer, safer settings for experiencing the world compare to built indoor environments (Li et al. 2019). Subsequently, the Outdoor Journeys approach can be used to facilitate outdoor learning while also enhancing sensory engagement and growing emotional and social benefits (Beames & Ross 2010).

Group considerations

As Outdoor Journeys is intended to be delivered in a group setting, there are a number of factors to be considered such as leadership styles and group facilitation.

The person organizing the Outdoor Journeys programme is often referred to as the leader and makes critical decisions regarding the development of the group. Leadership styles will vary according to goals, in order to let the young people self-direct their learning and follow risk assessment procedures. In the case where completing the task takes precedence, an effective leader may adopt an autocratic leadership style where the leader makes all the decisions and exercises power through coercion to change behaviours and thus achieve results (Priest and Gass 2018). However, this is type of leadership is not appropriate continuously; within a democratic leadership style, the leader uses participation and team-work to let the group influence decisions about goal setting and completing the task;

This is often a very applicable approach for delivering Outdoor Journeys. As concern increases for relationship, a laissez-faire leadership style may be employed where individuals can be left alone to make decisions, with the leader providing little direction or facilitation at all (Lewin, Lippitt and White 1939); This is sometimes incorporated into sessions. These leadership styles may also work in parallel with Tuckman's five stages of group development termed *Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing and Adjourning* (1965), however discussion of these concepts is beyond the scope of this briefing. Other factors that should also be considered include conflict, individual needs and unique member characteristics (Priest and Gass 2018).

Facilitation techniques can also be employed to enhance the learning experience and create changes, based on varying needs. Education-based programs such as Outdoor Journeys should include basic facilitation skills of *fundamental discussion* which consists of setting up and delivering a discussion circle, asking unstructured questions for an exploratory discussion; along with *funneled questions* which incorporates structured discussion including sequence confirmatory questions to filter out irrelevant information and focus on learning and change (Priest and Gass 2018). During a longer programme intermediate and advanced facilitation skills could potentially be incorporated.

Conclusion

Although there is limited literature available on the Outdoor Journeys programme specifically, there is sufficient related knowledge to support its

concepts and aims. Outdoor Journeys can support Scotland's *Curriculum for Excellence* and national approaches such as GIRFEC to allow a more creative, challenging and enjoyable learning experience to children and young people. It is clear that nature and outdoor environments can reduce stress and facilitate functioning (Chawla et al. 2014) while also acting as a rich sensory stimulus (Louv 2009) and provide social and emotional benefits (Li et al. 2019). Outdoor Journeys should be considered as an approach to improve children's outdoor experiences and facilitate learning opportunities.

Future recommendations

As Outdoor Journeys is a relatively new learning approach, literature supporting its use within learning environments is limited. However, evidence suggests that there are benefits associated with it. Furthermore, evidence shows many benefits with general education in natural environments. A further in-depth study of its utilization should be carried out to understand its positive use in practice. Further developments of the Outdoor Journeys programme could potentially benefit children and young people within the Positive Transitions Service with the transition from primary to secondary school, along with incorporating other People Know How projects such as Shaping your Future.

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