

You need to get out more:

global goals, national priorities and local engagement

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ABSTRACT

Outdoor learning has been shown to have a number of benefits for individuals in terms of attainment, behaviour and well-being. There are, however, some barriers which inhibit the engagement of certain groups with this educational approach. This article considers these benefits and barriers alongside an appreciation of how this approach can help educators to address key challenges associated with the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

INTRODUCTION

September 2015 saw the launch of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with a strapline of 17 goals to transform our world (<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/>). Lily Caprani, the deputy executive director of Unicef UK, wrote that the SDGs 'present a historic opportunity to advance the rights and well-being of every child, especially the most disadvantaged, under the rubric 'Leave No-one Behind'... Protecting the planet as well as prosperity' (Caprani, 2016: 102).

These goals are increasingly being used to provide a framework for action at national and local level, with their associated indicators offering up a basis to develop context-specific metrics to 'measure' performance against the global goals. Clearly, the goal of quality education is one that teachers will focus on in the first place, but a moment's thought will also show that goals associated with good health and well-being, gender equality and reduced inequalities are central to the mission of formal education. Alongside these, educationalists could also be expected to make a real contribution to the skills and attitudinal development

KEYWORDS

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that will impact on those goals working towards decent work and economic growth, sustainable cities and communities, and action on climate and biodiversity. The purpose of this paper is to explore how the approach to education that can be categorised as outdoor learning might be used to help realise these goals and to address national priorities associated with them. It will address some of the ways in which local engagement can be mobilised to do so.

OUTDOOR LEARNING

The term outdoor learning can be used to refer to a wide range of activities,

both formal and informal, across the life course. In effect it is a field of theory and practice which, at its heart, can be thought about as a way of learning. Jim Burt, Natural England's principal adviser for outdoor learning, talks about how the discussion of outdoor education is 'a global conversation, rooted in evidence, about quality education, health and childhood' (Natural England Blog, 2016a). He goes on to catalogue how the New Zealand government has made a five-year investment of NZ\$11 million in Enviroschool; how Denmark is providing policy support to the learning-outside-the-classroom Udeskole programme; and how Singapore's Ministry of Education has recently approved and funded an outdoor education master plan. In the UK, a number of reports over the past few years have drawn upon the qualitative evidence of the benefits for the individual, relating to attainment, behaviour and health and well-being, of outdoor learning (Dillon & Dickie, 2012; Fiennes et al., 2015; Natural England, 2016). In one study, the National Connections Demonstration Project, over 125 schools were involved. This was a four-year project investigating ways to embed outdoor learning in schools. Schools reported the following positive impacts of the outdoor learning that they undertook:

- 95% stated that it made lessons more enjoyable
- 94% stated that it led to a greater understanding of nature
- 93% stated that it improved social skills
- 92% stated that it engaged pupils with learning
- 85% stated that it had a positive impact on behaviour (Waite et al., 2016)

There are several ways to consider how we can progress outdoor learning to secure these benefits for all and make contributions to meeting the SDGs: spending time in nature; having awareness and understanding of the environment; and taking action to protect and enhance

the environment. However, we do this with an existing outdoor learning offer that is fragmented across the country and often driven by key, motivated individuals. This all adds to the difficulty of assessing how these 'localised' effects might translate into scalable benefits for society as a whole, an area which is less well documented.

The realisation that we require a better understanding of these barriers and benefits was the emerging environment in which Natural England established a Learning in the Natural Environment (LINE) Strategic Research Group in 2012. This group of leading researchers, alongside many other organisations and networks including the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom, aims to advance policy and practice in LINE by facilitating a more strategic approach to research evaluation and use of evidence in this area. A current priority for the group is to further our understanding of, and grow the capacity to deliver, the benefits that are promised through the research, looking to do so in a way that addresses inequalities, supports quality education and health and well-being as well as giving consideration to how to develop the key skills of the environmental conservation industry going forward.

HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The Marmot Review (2010) was very clear in its linkage of health inequalities to environmental factors, with regular use of good-quality green and/or blue space found to improve health and well-being and offset some of the health impacts of poverty. However, it would seem that it is deprived communities who are the least likely to have access to quality green space and who are much less likely to make frequent visits to the natural environment (Mitchell & Popham, 2008; Burt et al., 2013). A key policy recommendation of the Marmot Review (2010) was to improve the availability of quality green space for all and in

particular to enable children's access. This stems from the strong relationships between the frequency with which adults and children within a household visit the natural environment, with the presence of children in the household being related to an increase in the frequency with which adults visit green space and take part in physical activity (Hunt et al., 2015).

James Cross, the chief executive of Natural England, has set out his view on the benefits for health and well-being of engaging with green space. He states that 'reconnecting people with nature is a key theme in [the Government's] 25 year plan and Natural England's Conservation Strategy' and acknowledges that there is a growing demand for nature-based health interventions such as care farming, social and therapeutic horticulture, environmental conservation and green exercise (Natural England Blog, 2016b). Whilst there are sites of green space across the country – national parks to local ones – there are issues of access which are evident from the Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment Survey (MENE). A total of 11.5 million adults from relatively low socio-economic groups visit the natural environment, 25% less than the average.

THE ROLE OF SCHOOLS

It would seem that Burt is right to comment that, as a point of engagement with green spaces, 'schools are the obvious gateway, with regular, high quality outdoor learning as the tool' (Natural England Blog, 2016c). However, we know from the MENE survey that only 10% of school-aged children (aged 6–15) in England visited the natural environment with their schools in an average month during the previous year. There are clearly some inhibitors in action here, including the way in which the school sees its place in terms of its communities (Herrington, 2013) and issues relating to the confidence and training of teachers. Dillon & Dickie (2012) highlighted that the barriers teachers face in engaging in LINE were related to very local factors including

teacher confidence, self-efficacy and their access to training in using outdoor spaces. Interestingly, these factors underpinned and hence were more fundamental than other barriers often cited, such as risk, cost or curriculum. This latter group of 'constraints' are explored by Burt (Natural England Blog, 2016c) who used his blog entry to explore some of the myths that might constrain the utilisation of outdoor learning.

An insight study with a national sample of teachers and school leaders (Rickinson et al., 2012) confirmed the barriers for schools and that the scope of outdoor learning in schools appeared to be limited by factors which included individual teacher confidence, and their educational experiences and values. This study found that schools' activity did not appear to be related to catchment, whether in an urban or rural setting, to the amount of outdoor space available on site or, locally, to their Ofsted grading nor to membership or participation in related national schemes. Neither did it relate to the socio-demographic nature of their catchment. This is an important point as it means that schools do have the potential to operate as gatekeepers to engagement within these areas, if teacher-based barriers are worked upon. Addressing local barriers by developing teacher confidence and competence in LINE is now widely accepted as the critical step in enabling more children to benefit from LINE. A number of research papers (eg Fiennes et al., 2015; Glackin, 2016) and large-scale project evaluations, such as the Natural Connections Demonstration Project (Waite et al., 2016), which returned recommendations on supporting practising teachers through a broad LINE continuing professional development offer, have further informed our understanding of overcoming these barriers. Evidence suggests that, in general, trainee teachers graduate with little or no knowledge, skills or confidence in LINE and where it is offered it is often as one-off sessions. There also appears to be a lack of a commonly accepted

articulation of what characterises effective LINE pedagogy and practice. At the time of writing, a proposal for a project that addresses these issues is being developed.

AN APPROACH TO LEARNING

As was suggested above, personal experiences and values can also operate as a barrier to engagement with outdoor learning. In some ways this might be the most intractable barrier to overcome. It is likely that due to a number of years when outdoor learning was not a priority, there is a generation of teachers who are disconnected from the natural environment and there will be some teachers who do not see outdoor learning as appropriate in their subject. This subject hegemony can be addressed through a consideration of outdoor learning as an approach, with frequent use of outdoor spaces in everyday learning utilising the approaches implicit within place-based learning. Waite (2013) views a place-based education approach as one which enables place to be a partner in education. In this conceptualisation the place is the educational resource for a curriculum that 'is experiential and cross-disciplinary in its pedagogical approach involving repeated visits to local sites [which] is intended to increase the pupils' sensitivity to their own locale and environmental awareness' (Waite, 2013: 415) 'through ecology, cultural history, geology, geography, place-names, story, interactions with local community' (Harrison, 2010: 7).

Whilst this approach will have a direct impact on pupils, implicit in this is the possibility of impacting on the home learning environment (Herrington, 2015) which has been shown (Sylva et al., 2008) to account for around a quarter of the difference in cognitive gap between children of different socio-economic groups.

CONCLUSION

The Sustainable Development Goals will come to maturity in 2030; even the youngest of current pupils will also do so at about the same time. There is much to do to secure these goals and their promise. Part of this will be done by reconnecting with nature through a variety of means, including formal outdoor learning and the pathways that this could open up. These include pathways to healthier childhoods, pipelines to careers in green industries, and to lifelong engagement in activity in the natural environment. Whilst education is about impact on students, there is also a recognition of the influence that these schoolchildren may have on their household's engagement with the natural environment, something that is indicative of the 'interactions between children and parents [which] are reciprocal and symbiotic in that they are influenced by each other's behaviour and practices' (Hartas, 2012: 874). This may well act as a magnifier for positive effects from any interventions designed to promote outdoor learning in schools: a case can be made for the positive effect that such an approach would have on the activity level of adults and on, among other things, the engagement of individuals with their immediate communities. There is still much to do if we are to address the issues that are preventing schools from operating at full capacity in mediating this engagement with the natural environment, but we are at a time when there seems to be an overarching commitment to outdoor learning as a means of local action on global issues. ■

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