

Getting outside

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Chapter Objectives



- to examine the philosophies and approaches to using environments outside the classroom to enhance early opportunities for literacy
- to link learning outside the classroom to key principles and practices relating to the teaching and learning of early literacy
- to demonstrate how learning within meaningful contexts can provide opportunities for children to express themselves in a variety of ways and via a range of modes.

This chapter will cover:

- the debate regarding the effectiveness of different types of 'experiences' home and the classroom
- the decline in children's engagement with settings and experiences beyond the classroom
- what the literature and research tell us about the benefits of children engaging in opportunities to learn beyond the classroom
- how to explore non-fiction in experiences beyond the classroom.

Every young person should experience the world beyond the classroom as an essential part of learning and development. (DfES, 2006: ii)

Over the last decade, a plethora of research studies have been undertaken into learning outside the classroom and its resultant benefits on pupils (Rickinson, 2001; Gould, 2003; Dillon et al., 2005; Peacock, 2006; Malone, 2008). This chapter examines the philosophies and approaches to using environments outside formal education and care contexts for children from birth to the age of eight. Woven throughout are principles and practices related to the teaching and learning of speaking, listening, reading and writing and how these can be developed in contexts outside the usual 'classroom' or care environment.

The chapter will present an argument for embedding children's development as literate language users within meaningful contexts outside the classroom, thereby placing demands on children to express themselves in a variety of ways and using a variety of modes – spoken, written and visual. This will include an exploration of the particular benefits of out-of-classroom environments as learning contexts, as well as a consideration of the possibilities afforded by visits to local and cultural settings, such as museums, art galleries and historic buildings. There will be a particular focus on the genre of non-fiction and how children's interest and learning in this area might be promoted.

What do we mean by learning outside the classroom?

The term 'outside' is somewhat ambiguous as it can of course include *outdoor* experiences, but also *indoor* experiences *outside* the classroom. This chapter will be considering both examples, but, first, it is useful to understand what others believe this entails. Rickinson et al. provide a useful definition of *outdoor* learning as:

Learning that accrues or is derived from activities undertaken in outdoor locations beyond the school classroom. (2004: 9)

They consider this to include:

- projects in the school grounds or within the local area surrounding the school
- outdoor adventurous education
- fieldwork or visits to nature centres, farms, parks, and so on.

Malone provides a broader definition, describing it as any opportunity:

initiated by teachers and/or students to engage with alternative learning settings to complement and/or supplement the formal indoors classroom curricula. (2008: 7)

The range of possible settings that exist outside the classroom – both indoor and outdoor – are considerable and include playgrounds, the school grounds, museums, libraries, outdoor and adventure settings, zoos, art galleries and urban spaces, but, according to Rebar (2009), whatever the setting used, common characteristics are shared which are distinct from what he terms the 'formal classroom setting'. In general, out-of-classroom settings are associated with being more informal, learner-driven and learner-centred (Waite and Pratt, 2011). There is also the strong belief that the learning which occurs within these settings is more open-ended, interactive and flexible (Dillon et al., 2005). Such settings, whether around the pond in the school grounds or the coastal cliffs of Dover, are also unique in that the learning is characterised as being context-embedded and rooted in 'real-world' experiences (Rea, 2008) – something, as shall be discussed in due course, possibly lacking in many primary schools and, yet, key to the successful teaching and learning of early literacy.

The revised framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2012) puts a strong emphasis on the three prime areas considered essential for children's development and well-being – communication and language, physical and personal, social and emotional development – and, for practitioners working with these young children, 'getting outside' should enable them to embrace these areas of learning in real and exciting settings. Interestingly, the language used in the revised EYFS Framework is pertinent to both outside learning and literacy – and children's learning beyond the Early Years. Some of the phrases include, 'to experience a rich language environment', 'providing opportunities for young children to be active and interactive', 'to develop their co-ordination, control and movement and 'to have confidence in their own abilities' (DfE, 2012: 5). All of these goals might more readily be achieved outside the classroom and are very relevant to literacy for all ages, as children need to learn about language in environments where they can be actively involved and feel safe, while also being able to take risks. As will also be discussed, however, best practice in the teaching and learning of early literacy should focus on a seamless integration between outdoor and indoor learning.

The debate regarding types of experiences

With educationalists and researchers alike making the distinctions expressed above, it opens up the argument regarding whether some learning experiences are more beneficial than others. Hirsch (1996), for example, is one such critic, who argues that some of the learning experiences mentioned above should not be accepted uncritically. He contends that 'bookish hard work' (Hirsch, 1996: 76) is equally, if not more, important and it is through drill and practice that results are yielded, rather than an holistic approach to learning, which, he contends, is an 'insecure way of learning' (Hirsch, 1996: 86). Indeed, he goes on to argue that 'specialized drill and practice' is 'essential'

in teaching and the emphasis should not constantly be on creating 'lifelike, meaningful contexts' (Hirsch, 1996: 86).

In stark contrast, there is a growing body of thought that schools actually achieve nothing more than to distance children from the real world (Austin, 2007). The National Advisory Committee on Creative and Cultural Education (NACCCE, 1999), for example, rightly asserted that 'schools alone cannot provide all the educational experiences that children need', implying 'bookish hard work' (Hirsch, 1996: 76) is not enough on its own. In fact, others would argue that our current school system removes children from the real world and 'offers them a constrained environment in which to learn which regularly fails to make connections with their experiences' (Austin, 2007: xi). Moreover, Vare (1998) earlier raised the important question of what learning children actually miss out on by going to school. School-based learning can, according to Resnick (1987), often be solitary, divorced from real-world experiences and have little or no connection with real life. Indeed, Bentley (1998: 47) – writing some 11 years after Resnick, argues that:

One of the most telling criticisms of school education is that it can insulate pupils from the outside world and one of the most important failures is that knowledge gained in school is not transferred or applied successfully in contexts beyond the classroom.

This, though, is not a new argument; Illich (1971: 73), writing in the early 1970s, made the case that learners need to engage with the real world 'instead of continuing to funnel all educational programmes through the teacher. Illich's vision of children engaging more with the world beyond the classroom is one that we need to hold on to, particularly in this current educational climate of accountability and the need to have measurable outcomes driven by targets. This chimes with Hayes (2007), too, who, when problematising the 'over-formalised' curriculum driven by learning objectives, suggested that learning outside the classroom would be the alternative to this. How, then, does this relate specifically to early literacy?

Cognitive development in relation to out-of-classroom education can be linked to decision-making skills, problem-solving ability, affective knowledge, environmental awareness and understanding, acquisition of knowledge and skills and attitudes to learning (Malone, 2008), all of which are relevant and useful with regard to early literacy. Whitehead (2010: 163) believes that children's early experiences of oral and written communication are directly influenced by the stimulation they find in their personal and cultural situations' and, arguably, this stimulus needs to come partly from experiencing a range of environments, including outside the classroom. Bearne (2002: 30) writes that the setting for writing should be an 'environment of possibility' with 'an atmosphere where risks can be taken with writing' and, once again, different environments need to be part of these possibilities and risks. Working outside will provide natural opportunities for children to engage in exploratory talk and solve problems via discussion, interaction and negotiation. They will engage with

reading – not just signs, labels, instructions or other manmade reading materials but also other people's expressions and body language. All of these literacy experiences could be said to occur within the classroom environment, but my argument would be that, by providing alternative learning environments, we are extending the children's experiences and offering them the increased freedom that 'getting outside' suggests.

So, if the benefits of literacy learning outside are so considerable, what, then, is the current situation with regard to learning outside the classroom in the United Kingdom?

The current climate for learning outside the classroom

Over the last decade, there have been considerable developments in promoting out-of-classroom education. Examples include the establishment of a House of Commons Select Committee enquiry into education outside the classroom in September 2004, the launch of the *Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto* in November 2006 by the DfES, the creation of a quality badge for providers of learning outside the classroom in October 2008 and the £5 million investment by the DfES in the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom between 2006 and 2010.

Such developments reflect the previous government's and others' strong beliefs in the broad range of benefits associated with learning outside the classroom, but also the growing concerns about the marked decline in the opportunities being afforded to children to learn away from more formal settings (Dillon et al., 2003; Rickinson et al., 2004). While it is difficult to quantify the amount of learning that *does* occur beyond the classroom every year, it is clear that there has been a decline in the opportunities given to primary-age children. The reasons for the decline are well documented in the literature (Clare, 2004; Rickinson et al., 2004; Peacock, 2006; Malone, 2008; Bilton, 2010; Sangster and Green, 2010; Waite, 2011) and have been attributed to a number of key issues, including:

- the perceived concerns regarding health and safety (not helped by adverse media headlines)
- lack of teacher confidence in relation to skills and knowledge
- pressures of the curriculum and the school timetable
- cost
- union guidance – in particular, the NASUWT's statement in 2004 advising its members to not take children on school trips
- bureaucratic demands on teachers.

Given such daunting obstacles to education beyond classroom walls, the question that has to be asked is why such provision is receiving so much positive attention and support from all quarters, including at government level? Indeed, what does learning

outside the classroom offer teachers and their pupils that classroom contexts may lack? What does educational research tell us about the contribution that this type of learning experience can have on pupils and teachers and how strong is the evidence that this type of provision is beneficial?

The following section will explore the benefits of learning outside the classroom, with specific reference to children learning about non-fiction in literacy. A case study will be introduced to illustrate the power of learning outside the classroom and how it impacts children's literacy learning.

Learning outside the classroom and non-fiction

Some children have very few opportunities to experience life outside of their home and school, other than through images on the television (Waite, 2007). This 'divorcing' of children from real-life experiences was illustrated by Owens (2004), who found that, even though children could name a range of television characters, they struggled to name wildlife, such as birds or flowers.

According to Medved and Medved (1998), this lack of children's engagement with the outdoors can partly be attributed to popular culture, television watching and technological advancements, such as spending time in the online world rather than the outside world. Arguably, aspects of the outside world can be powerfully experienced through television programmes and Internet sites, so adults working with young learners need to ascertain what experiences the children have had, in both the real and virtual worlds. Many children do enter the classroom with a rich understanding and experience of the world around them (Barnes, 2007) and such experiences should be sought out and shared so that all the children might benefit. The world outside the classroom can provide the perfect stimulus for eliciting such experiences from the children. This is of particular importance when considering how to engage and motivate children to be confident readers and writers of non-fiction.

Children's personal interests need to be recognised and exploited to provide an authentic and meaningful context for their writing of non-fiction. The outside environment provides this context for emerging and developing writers:

Outdoor play is an equally strong context for encouraging all kinds of print. Boys in the nursery years seem particularly motivated to write when their role play is out of doors and centres on familiar locations like garages, plant nurseries and builders' yards. (Mallett, 2003: 8)

The following case study describes the literacy learning planned for by a class teacher linked with a learning experience outside the classroom at a stately home and gardens.

argued that cross-curricular approaches within the primary classroom provide greater motivation for children (Barnes, 2007) and, as Palmer (2001) points out, if children have become 'experts' on a particular topic, it makes sense to link their writing to cross-curricular learning. Further, the combination of the cross-curricular approach with the real-life experience of the trip provides a very powerful learning experience for any child.

I would at this point, however, like to look more carefully at this case study and regard to literacy and young learners through the lens of Wray and Lewis' (1997) EXIT model. The EXIT model (extending interactions with texts) examines ten stages that children can usefully go through in order to support their literacy learning. The stages are:

1. activation of previous knowledge
2. establishing purposes
3. locating information
4. adopting an appropriate strategy
5. interacting with text
6. monitoring and understanding
7. making a record
8. evaluating information
9. assisting memory
10. communicating information.

Prior to the trip, the children were given opportunities to learn about the historical site they were going to see and were able, therefore, to access this knowledge when they arrived at the setting (1). They had already begun to explore the genre of chronological reports and were aware that they would ultimately be producing a report about life in Tudor times (2). During their visit, the children were able to interact with and find out relevant information from a range of sources and use a variety of methods to record their findings (3, 4 and 5). The children's understanding of information they had learned and their ability to put this into an appropriate writing format enabled the teacher to monitor their understanding (6 and 7). Because the class also had electronic and pictorial evidence from their trip, they were able, once back in the classroom, to evaluate their findings, remember the details and share these with others (8, 9 and 10).

Thus, this experience outside the classroom gave the children plenty of opportunities to extend their interactions with a range of texts and embed their learning within useful and relevant processes. The ten stages explained by Wray and Lewis (2001) do not necessarily have to be followed in the above order) provide a very valuable framework to use when planning and teaching a non-fiction unit of work with children of all ages, particularly when children are visiting alternative learning sites, with the wealth of opportunities to interact with texts needs to be exploited.

CASE STUDY 1

The children (aged eight) were learning about the Tudors and, as part of the unit of work, the children were due to visit Penshurst Place in Kent. The teacher identified several writing opportunities that could arise from the children's visit to the stately home and gardens, one of which included a non-chronological report about life in the Tudor times. As part of the teacher's planning, he had visited Penshurst Place and spoken in advance with the education officer to carefully plan the day and consider how the trip could be integrated into the unit of work.

In the days leading up to the trip, the children learnt about the history of the house and its historical significance so that they had some existing knowledge and understanding prior to their trip. In their literacy lessons, the children had been looking at a range of non-chronological texts and identifying the language and organisational features, as well as exploring effective notetaking techniques. The primary purpose of the trip was to provide the stimulus for the children to apply their learning and produce a non-chronological report about life in Tudor times.

Keen for the trip to have maximum impact on the children's learning, it was purposely planned to coincide with Penshurst Place's annual 'living history' week, providing a hands-on, practical, experiential learning opportunity for the children with skilled musicians, actors and actresses recreating characters and the daily life of the period.

Keen not to overload the children with worksheets to complete, the teacher adopted a more open-ended approach, providing groups with 'tuffcams', audio recording equipment, digital cameras and mini sketchbooks to capture their experiences.

Prior to arriving, the teacher had explained to the children that, during the day, they would be required to apply their prior learning about notetaking to record their learning experiences while also making effective use of ICT as a tool to further support this recording.

Throughout the day, the children were immersed in a range of activities that actively involved them in experiencing for themselves what life during the Tudor period was like. They were aware that they would be expected to use their notes and other evidence when they returned to the classroom to work on their non-chronological reports.

In the case study above, the teacher used literacy lessons as the vehicle for expanding on other areas of the curriculum, creating meaningful contexts in which the children could apply their reading, writing, speaking and listening skills. It has been

Learning outside the classroom: some things to think about when planning a trip

If you are going to use a trip as a stimulus for literacy learning, you may want to heed the following considerations.

- Remember to look at what is available on your doorstep! Trips do not have to involve lengthy journeys. Look at your local area and your school grounds and consider how these can be incorporated into your literacy and language curriculum and what texts are available with which children can interact.
- Do your homework – ensure that you visit the venue. Often if a venue is aware in advance that you are undertaking a preliminary visit for a planned school trip the cost of entry will be waived. Visiting will ensure that you can maximise all the literacy learning opportunities available.
- Think carefully about how you are going to incorporate your trip/visit within your unit of work. A mistake made by many is that they plan a trip towards the end of a unit as a 'treat'. This can make it difficult to follow up any of the learning that occurs as a result of the experience and so often reduces its impact. Likewise, having it too early can also cause an issue if the children are not adequately prepared in advance. In the example in the case study above, the teacher was keen to prepare the children before the trip and also use the outing as a stimulus for some follow-up activities and therefore planned the trip midway through the unit. Mallett (2003: 8) suggests that, initially, children might look at texts, diagrams and pictures relating to a topic before then going outside and making links between what they have discovered in print-based and electronic texts and the things they find in the new environment.

Think carefully about what you want the children to do while on the trip. Another common mistake is to provide the children with countless worksheets to complete. Completing worksheets can detract from many of the rich learning experiences that can occur. That is not to say mere exposure to the environment beyond the classroom will be enough to support effective learning, however. Consider how you can draw on ICT as a way of capturing the children's learning and experiences so that you can refer back to it when in the classroom. A productive activity with younger children is to let them take photographs of the trip so that when they return to the classroom, they can use these to support recounting, both orally and in writing, the events of the day.

Opportunities to learn outside the classroom by taking trips are an excellent way to get children away from the normal school and classroom environment, but, of course, these cannot form part of the day-to-day experiences of the child and are likely to take place just once or twice a year. It is important, therefore, to ensure that other opportunities to 'get outside' are provided as part of everyday practice. The next section explores how this might be promoted using role-play.

Role-play outside the classroom

Having direct engagement with and experience of a variety of settings beyond the four walls of a classroom can provide opportunities for children to interact effectively with language – a crucial aspect of early literacy, as children are beginning to access a range of forms of communication and find their oral and written voice in the world. As Cotton (2011: 69) highlights, if children have little opportunity to experience the outside world, they will find it hard to model the spoken and written language appropriate to different settings. Mindful of this warning, it is essential that authentic learning experiences are provided to support children's language development within a range of learning contexts, including the outside environment, so children are exposed to speaking and listening, reading and writing in meaningful contexts and can begin implicitly to realise how language and literacy can empower them (Neaum, 2012).

The role-play area can provide the ideal opportunity to not only build on young children's existing experiences of the world around them but also help them reflect on and make sense of their world and these experiences. The EYF5 Framework recommends play as a language-learning opportunity. When identifying how the role-play area can support young children's understanding of non-fiction, you might consider organising the area around real-life situations and bring the outside into the classroom. Potential examples include visits to the doctor, dentist, vets, travel agents, bank, post office, supermarket, or restaurant. All of these situations provide the creative teacher with an opportunity to provide real, purposeful opportunities to promote speaking and listening, writing and playing with language. Where possible, however, although it is beneficial to have an indoor role-play area, also take role-play outside of the classroom.

The following case study describes the experiences of a class of five- and six-year-olds as they gave new and exciting meaning to the idea of a role-play area by creating their own garden centre within the school grounds. In this way, role-play and reality became interlinked so as to create as authentic an experience as possible.

CASE STUDY 2

The children were learning about plants and how they grow as part of their science topic at school. Within literacy, the children were focusing on instructional texts and lists, labels and captions. Recognising that the role-play area does not have to be confined to the classroom, the teacher, keen to create an authentic learning experience, decided to develop a cross-curricular 'real-world' garden project with her class, combining the science and literacy units of work.

(Continued)

developing their early literacy being active learners and having the opportunity for first-hand experiences as a stimulus for instructional writing. Importantly, though, the garden centre experience not only enabled the children to learn about language by also language in this context provided a valuable medium for learning, as the children expanded their understanding about settings beyond the classroom. The opportunity afforded from such an experience for new language to be acquired, practised and new ideas and understandings developed were endless. Hopefully, as you read the above case study it raised your awareness of how alternative settings can be used as an extension to the classroom.

An important principle that the teacher in the above case study wanted to reinforce was the equal weighting that should be given to both learning inside and beyond the classroom. Bilton (2010: 85) reinforces this, pointing out that, within the EYFSP provision, both environments need to be combined to avoid the outside environment being perceived as an 'add-on' that has a lower status than the classroom, 'where the important school stuff happens'.

Learning outside the classroom: key considerations regarding effectiveness

In order to further maximise the effectiveness of children learning outside the classroom, Dillon et al. (2003) identified the need to make links between learning inside and outside the classroom and the necessity of follow-up activities to maximise the learning experiences. This, too, was highlighted by Ofsted (2008) as one of the key contributing factors influencing the effectiveness of out-of-classroom provision. Dillon et al.'s (2003) research also identified the need to take into account the wide range of perceptions and experiences that learners from different backgrounds will bring to the setting.

While the overwhelming majority of research concurs that opportunities to learn outside the classroom provide a range of experiences which classroom contexts cannot offer, it is important to acknowledge, as Rickinson (1999) has done, that there is a possibility such experiences may be unproductive for some children. Individual children favour different pedagogical strategies and, as Semper (1997) reminds us, learning is a highly individualised thing. In addition, the plethora of norms and practices are simply taken outside with the class. It seems, therefore, that the novelty of the setting is not enough; it also requires teachers to adopt a different pedagogical approach. These concerns were raised in an earlier study by Ballantyne and Packer who concluded that:

the use of worksheets, note-taking and reports were all unpopular with the students and did not appear to contribute greatly to their learning. (2002: 228)

Many of the children had never visited a garden centre before and the nearest visit from an employee from the garden centre. He wore his uniform and brought into school packets of seeds, pots, planters, watering cans, plant labels and an assortment of pictures of the garden centre.

The class, inspired by the visit and what they had learned, decided to create their own garden centre within the school grounds, which would culminate in a plant sale to raise money for new playground equipment. The children set about asking for further donations of other plant and vegetable seeds from parents and people from the local community. Several enthusiastic parents were keen to support the class and worked with the children to prepare some raised beds and plant a whole host of different fruit, vegetables and flowers. The children were thoroughly engaged with the growing and tending of the plants and the employee from the garden centre visited regularly to check on progress.

Inside the classroom, the children busily produced labels for their plants and wrote instructions for how to grow and care for the various plants. Science lessons became focused on the class 'garden centre', with the children observing the plants as they grew, drawing and labelling their findings, measuring their height and watering and tending to the plants.

The culmination of this term-long project was the official opening of the garden centre and the plant sale where the children could put into practice the speech patterns they were familiar with from their own visits to shops – 'That'll be £1 please' and 'Would you like a bag for that?'. Every lunchtime, the school opened its gates to allow parents to visit the garden centre and the children took it in turns to staff the shop and sell their produce to parents.

The creative teacher will not limit role-play to the 'corner' of a classroom, but seek to use other settings to support children's literacy and language development. In the above case study, the children were immersed in a rich, meaningful and, perhaps most importantly, authentic context, making use of the outside space to bring role-play alive. This cross-curricular unit of work actively promoted the use of the four language skills. The children were required to adapt and modify their spoken language to real-life situations and contexts and the patterns of speech that were utilised indicated to the practitioner that the children were able to respond to settings and situations. Writing was given a real purpose – the labelling of plants and the writing of instructions provided a purpose and 'real' audience for the children. Such authentic learning experiences are essential. Mallett (2010) highlights the importance of children who are

Ricketts and Willis (2001) and Rea (2008) likewise argue that if there is an insistence on practitioners seeking to extract learning from each outside experience, it runs the risk of disengaging children. There is evidence (Rea, 2006) indicating that children are capable of engaging in reflective thought independently and construct meaning from these experiences without the need for teachers to facilitate this reflection process in a formalised way.

Summary

In an education climate driven by accountability and measurable outcomes, it can be tempting to revert to 'drill and skill' approaches to teaching and learning. It is hoped that this chapter has provided an alternative pedagogical approach. Making use of the 'outside' as an extension of the four walls of a classroom can promote learning within an authentic, active, hands-on, meaningful context, whereby the children are fully involved. Nixon et al. (1996) argue that learning actually depends on motivation – without the motivation to invest the time and effort, no learning will occur. They go on to suggest that traditional teaching and learning methods, as seen in many of our primary schools, bring about apathy towards learning, decrease motivation and the 'standards agenda' can create anxiety instead of joy. This is of particular relevance and importance for our young learners, who need to acquire the ability to communicate in a range of settings with an array of people, using a variety of media to reflect the world they live in, in the twenty-first century. Our commitment to offering innovative and motivational experiences is crucial if we are to ensure that young children see learning as fun and relevant to their lives.



Further reading

Bilton, H. (2010) *Outdoor Learning in the Early Years: Management and Innovation*. Abingdon: Routledge.

This comprehensive text provides a thorough exploration of working outdoors in the Early Years and explains the centrality of outdoor play for children's development. A whole range of topics are explored, providing practical advice on setting up the outdoor area.

Waite, S. (ed.) (2011) *Children Learning Outside the Classroom: From birth to eleven*. London: Sage.

An excellent text aimed at bridging the gap between theory and practice concerning learning outside the classroom. The authors explore how environments beyond the classroom can provide the context for learning for children from the EYFS to the end of Key Stage 2.

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Part 2

Provision for all