

Back to nature: how outdoor learning benefits both students and staff

Training teachers to perform lessons outside of the classroom can help young people reconnect with their natural environment

[Guardian Professional](#), Tuesday 8 April 2014 10.30

Children who spend more time outdoors are healthier, more alert and have better social skills.

The outdoors brings learning to life

Spring is in the air, and the great outdoors is all around us, but how often do teachers and their pupils venture outside? Children today are losing their connection with the natural world. Schools are often risk averse when it comes to teaching children further afield than the classroom, but [research by Kings College London](#) shows that there are significant benefits for children who are taught in natural environments.

Outdoor learning, whether it be in a school field, a local farm or a nearby woodland can help make core subjects rich, relevant and exciting for children, meaning lessons will stay with them. This is particularly true when it comes to natural sciences. Children who spend more time outdoors are also healthier, more alert and have better social skills. But the benefits don't stop with the children – the research pointed out that teachers also benefit from teaching outdoors, becoming more confident and more enthusiastic about teaching and bringing more innovative teaching strategies to their lessons.

Kirklees is leading the way with new courses for teachers

In Kirklees Metropolitan Council there is an increasing focus on outdoor learning. Beginning in April outdoor learning courses for primary teachers will be run to encourage practitioners to deliver, among other things, maths, literacy and science lessons in an outdoor setting.

The courses will be run at Cliffe House, an outdoor learning centre, owned by Kirklees, and are being put together by the education team who are based there. One of the teachers, Catherine Heppenstall, says that many younger teachers haven't experienced outdoor, "free-range" childhoods themselves, which makes them wary of taking children outside.

"My generation used to spend a lot of time playing outside, making contact with the seasons and understanding the impact that the weather systems have on our lives – that's something that's being lost today," she says. "A lot of schools run an outdoor week, but then the rest of the year the children are inside the classroom. We want to challenge that and say: "Why not get children and teachers outdoors all year round?"

Teachers need to be given the skills and the confidence to deliver lessons outside

The courses will give teachers tips on how to teach maths, literacy and science outdoors, in a way that is both practical and hands-on as well as firing-up the children's imaginations. The first course is entitled "I'm a kid, get me out of here!" Catherine explained: "The course was booked out within days and has a huge waiting list – clearly today's teachers really do want to get outside they just need the tools and the confidence to do so." She went on to say: "Children are the most natural explorers in the world and they're stimulated by our natural environment. Our aim is to make sure that teachers feel confident in delivering a lesson in an outdoor setting. "By running regular courses for schools we are sure that we will give head teachers, teachers, support staff and governors the belief that children will still make 'four points progress' – it's just they will enjoy making that progress far more than if they are in a classroom!"

She points out that the new primary curriculum lends itself to outdoor learning extremely well and cites the example of healthy eating. She says that teachers can, for example, help children grow their own fruit, vegetables and herbs and then eat outdoors with them, perhaps by cooking over a campfire. "Camp fires should not just be reserved for those who are part of the Scouting group – I can't think of anything that will make a deeper and longer lasting memory than that first taste of a toasted marshmallow – link that into a discussion on the properties of 3D shapes and the maths becomes imprinted at the same time."

Another example is the inclusion of Darwin in the science curriculum, which Catherine sees as a fantastic boom to outdoor learning. "He was a great thinker and the way he collected information, developed his theories and collated his evidence is a tremendous way for children to learn outdoors," she says. "The natural world inspires children to be investigative and explorative and this underpins all their learning. We want to show teachers how they can use natural resources to teach, motivate and enthuse their pupils."

Catherine went on to explain that the centre is working closely with a number of universities which provide teacher training. "Getting in at grass-roots level and showing young teachers the benefits of outdoor learning creates outstanding opportunities for everyone. The children get to work outside on a more regular basis and the NQT [newly-qualified teacher] acquires a unique set of skills as they move on from training and into full-time teaching – putting them one step ahead of the rest."

Teaching outside will make you versatile and resourceful

Paul Matthias, national specialist director at Hays Education, the leading recruitment expert, says that teachers who teach their pupils outdoors are also adding to their skill set, making them versatile and resourceful.

"Being able to teach outdoors in an exciting and stimulating way is a really great skill for a teacher to have. Teachers that lead learning outside the classroom are learning useful teaching techniques which will be relevant to them throughout their career. It shows imagination, versatility and a real commitment to really getting the best out of their pupils. It's especially good for increasing confidence in teachers, particularly younger and newly-qualified teachers."

As Catherine says: "We know that there is a wealth of inspirational and outstanding teaching going on throughout our schools, what we aim to do is to encourage, on the children's learning – we want everyone to get out there, feel alive, awake and ready to discover."

Useful resources:

creativestarlarning.co.uk

Juliet Robertson's Scotland-based site has lots of creative and practical advice for teachers and schools, as well as links to research, resources and training and courses.

Content on this page is provided by [Hays Education](#) – supporter of the [career advice hub](#).