Without walls: a discussion on the place of learning outdoors in primary schools in England.

Stephen Pickering

Introduction

Walls provide safety and security. Classroom walls enable learning to take place without interruptions and distractions from the outside world. The cold and rain is kept out and warmth is piped through radiators. The walls and ceiling ensure that electricity can function safely and bring the world to our fingertips through the wonders of internet technology. Google Earth, for example, can bring any place in the world zooming into view and with a touch of a button you can virtually transplant yourself onto any street you choose to visit. Children can learn effectively within classroom walls.

Walls are also barriers. Does the safety and security they provide inadvertently suggest to young minds that the world just beyond the walls is somehow less safe and less secure, or less inviting? And if so, is that something we want for our children? Or if the world is seen as an exciting place beyond the classroom walls that the children can visit on special occasions, is this how we want our children to view the world beyond the walls – as something a bit different from the normal classroom? Does safety from the weather around us deny children opportunities for learning in a real environment? Indeed research by Clements-Croome et al. (2008) demonstrated that 'pupil and teacher productivity were shown to be dramatically affected by ventilation of fresh air with the classroom' (MacNaughton, 2015, 20). Children learn better with fresh air, and children can surely learn about their environment by being out in it: both sunshine and rain and wind and calm provide experiential learning opportunities. Yes, Google Earth can bring a virtual world in front of our eyes, but to step out beyond the classroom walls brings the real world to all our senses. Geography is not just Africa, the Americas or Australasia; it is right here and taking place just outside the window. There are further complications when doors are added. Cognition experiments suggest a 'location-updating effect' whereby people leave information learned in the room within the room in which they learned it. When they step back out through the door some of the information is left behind! An interesting research point would be to examine if learning has a direct link to the type of environment within which the learning took place (Radvinsky, Krawietz & Tamplin, 2011), or if the action of moving through a door, or barrier has the effect of categorising that particular learning to that particular place.

This chapter does not intend to provide an argument to remove the walls and teach outside. But it does argue to remove the 'special nature' of outdoor learning – the 'Welly Wednesday' way of thinking (Pickering, 2017a) – and to pitch learning outside the classroom walls as being as normal, as routine and as fundamental to children's learning and development as teaching within the classroom walls. There is a great deal of research that has investigated the benefits of learning beyond the classroom walls. The Natural Connections Demonstration project, for example (Waite, S., Passy, R., Gilchrist, M., Hunt, A. & Blackwell, I. 2016), which involved 40,000 primary and secondary children from 125 urban and rural schools across a four year period is one of the largest surveys on outdoor learning to date. It provides some overwhelmingly positive statistics. Over 82% of schools surveyed stated that outdoor learning improved the social skills, health and well-being, and behaviour of their pupils, and over 69% of teachers surveyed claimed that outdoor learning had a positive impact on their

teaching, professional development and job satisfaction. Research by Reese and Myers (2012) was used to develop a model of EcoWellness, or the health and well-being effects of learning outdoors, from a broad range of international research.

Learning can, and should, take place both within the classroom and without. All too often learning outdoors is seen as something special: a trip, or a piece of fieldwork. Yes, there is indisputably something special and memorable about being in the outdoors and learning through all our senses. The impact of outdoor learning is obvious to learners and practitioners. Learning outdoors could be seen to be as normal, and as important and valuable, as the work completed indoors. But it is not. It seems to occupy a separate space, or a little corner – a secret little garden if you like – of our curriculum. There are some mental walls to be broken down.

Using the past to make sense of the future

Philosophers from the ancient civilisations of Greece, China and India, right up to the continuing debates raging today, have sought to determine what makes education effective and what environments children learn best in. Our own personal educational values – and the educational values of society – are shaped by our experiences, by previous philosophies and philosophers and by current trends (Gray & Macblain, 2015). Interestingly, the model of the classroom within which children are taught, generally sitting at a desk and mainly by one adult, seems to have been adopted very early in the history of formal education. It has been adopted in school settings globally and continues relatively unchallenged, yet throughout history and across the world philosophers have argued for a broader range of approaches to learning and teaching.

In 1927 Heidegger's theories focused on the teacher challenging the children to learn, rather than actually teaching them in the traditional sense (Heidegger, Sein & Zeit, quoted in Mulhall, 1996), a philosophy that chimes today with the principles of Forest School and learner centred holistic development (Forest School Association, no date). 'Openness and mutual trust' (Bonnet, in Palmer, 2001) between the learner and the teacher is a central strand of Heidegger's philosophies where learning is 'an open space' (Bonnet, quoted in Palmer, 2001). Heidegger warned against the prescribed curriculum route followed by many countries today since such education seems to regard the world around us as a resource for economic gain rather than a space for the development of learning. His view of education was to enrich the mind (Bonnet, in Palmer, 2001). Fast forward to our current educational climate, and we find ourselves wrestling with a knowledge-focused curriculum based on children gaining a pot of knowledge with which to register academic achievement (and, one can assume, economic success), against the more liberal, learning processes agenda where children are equipped with the learning skills through problem solving, experiential learning and 'real-life' examples with which to engage in the wonder and joy of learning for learning's sake. So where does where does taking the children outside to learn find balance between these philosophies?

Clearly we are bound by the requirements laid down by government, but we are also bound by the responsibility we have towards the children we teach. 'Our aim therefore is not merely to make the child understand, and still less to force him to memorize, but so to touch his imagination as to enthuse him to his inmost core' (Montessori, 1989, p.11). Vygotsky described how learning develops from social interaction within a cultural construct (Wertsch, 1985). Practitioners today may notice that the cultural constructs – both between teacher and

pupil and to a certain extent pupil to pupil – vary in different learning environments. There can be a tendency for freer learning and engaging practices in outdoor environments by virtue of the openness of place and space when compared to a classroom. Vygotsky describes how learners collaborate and learn as they participate, developing as they make sense of the 'goals, practices, and tools common to the activities of which they are a part.' (Seaman & Gingo, quoted in Smith & Knapp, 2011, 160). Seaman and Gingo describe how various studies (The Rogoff Study in 1995, the Seaman Study in 2007 and the Emo study in 2006) provide examples to show how learning experientially outdoors helps to cement deeper learning. 'Beyond the classroom walls pupils tend to be free of the behaviourist – reward and sanction – classroom management practises that Vygotsky railed against in early twentieth century Russia and that are still apparent in many classrooms today. Deep learning can develop through enjoyable, motivational activities in accord with constructivist processes of development' (Pickering, 2017b forthcoming).

Dewey's influential theories on the development of education were based partly on the historical experiences of the pioneers of Mid-West America. Put quite simply, if families and children did not learn from their environment then they did not survive in it. '[School] has a chance to apply itself to life, to become the child's habitat, where he learns through directed living instead of only a place to learn a lesson having an abstract and remote referent to possible living to be done in the future…' (Dewey, 1915, p.31-32). The image of a learning environment as 'the child's habitat' is a powerful one. If we want our children to flourish in the world, with a desire to explore and discover and contribute in a positive way to the world, then surely we have a responsibility to empower and motivate our children to do just that. The world is the learning environment for us all. Interestingly, Dewey believed that the significance of the learning experiences was more important than the actual truth of it (Russell, 2004). Dewey's theory demands a complex understanding of, 'truth,' but if we take the significance of the learning environment at face value it is a very interesting point to consider when undertaking learning outside.

Learning outside tends to be less didactic than much which is taught within the classroom by the very nature of the more open environment, and therefore the learning is more open to interpretation by the learner. I would argue that the very term 'teaching,' has a redressed value when balanced against the word 'learning,' when activities take place outdoors. In other words, the outdoor environment is an important force in an individual's construction of learning. Indeed the resources available outside, rather than being more limited in scope, can actually be said to be more conducive to imaginative and creative learning. Take an Early Years setting for example. An Early Years Classroom is often filled with colour and toys and resources. There will be cars and plastic dinosaurs, a play till for shopping with plastic fruit and money. By comparison, a woodland has twigs and leaves, earth and space. In a classroom a plastic dinosaur can be a dinosaur. In a woodland a twig can be a dinosaur, or a car, or a magic wand, or a sword … or, or, or. 'The unconstructed and messy nature of natural resources provides greater freedom to develop imagination and imaginative play' (Pickering, 2017b forthcoming). Additionally, the twig in a child's hand may represent different things to different children and so there will need to be a natural development of communication between the children. They will need to communicate effectively and collaborate to progress with their play.

Using the local area to make sense of the world

Scandinavia has a strong tradition of living with the outdoors as much as with the indoors. Friluftsliv is the Norwegian tradition of 'being free with nature' (Pickering, S. 2017a forthcoming). What this means in practice is of great interest to the debate on learning outdoors in the more formal sense of education in the U.K. Friluftsliv is supported by Government with a right to roam and camp (with a few restrictions based on respect for homes, cultivation and property). In practice this means that families, school groups, friends and many other groups see walking across the land and enjoying being in natural settings as being as natural as perhaps heading into town to go shopping. There is an historical culture, not just of valuing land, landscape and the environment, but also of seeing involvement and engagement with it as being a normal, regular part of life (Sandell, 2007). In Japan there is a slightly different approach to the local environment, but still predicated on the same main theme: respect. The local landscape is viewed in cultural, historical and spiritual contexts. Ishida (2005) describes how the local environment is viewed as an interlinking of the man-made landscape, the cultural landscape, with huudo – or the relationship between a community and the environment it is part of (Kameoki, 2009) – and the spiritual landscape. In other words there is a blending, rather than a distinction, of the human and natural environment. The relationship between human and natural is very much a balance which was first described by Minakata as ecology of biology, ecology of society and ecology of mind (Minakata, in Kameoki, 2009).

Ecology of the mind is an interesting concept to consider in relation to our own local areas and teaching in primary schools. Ecology of the mind should consider the stories that surround the local environment, the histories of the area and the meanings we attach to places, but also the stories that make up every child's life: a journey to school, games played, and imaginations created. These stories provide a growing sense of place to a child. This can provide a route for children to engage in understanding their own place in society and in nature. We can each weave our own stories around the places we value. Affective learning can develop from the notion of an emotion or feeling attached to an object or place learning (Roberts 1992; Pearlman-Hougie, 2010). Children grow very fond of their Forest School site, for example, and many have favourite places in the school fields and playgrounds. These feelings and emotions can in turn influence their attitudes and values towards the world outside the window in a positive way. Taking children out on a regular basis to local environments can help children to develop this socio-environmental relationship. As the children learn about their local area and environment both affectively and cognitively they also learn about themselves and perhaps help to foster this balance between nature and society.

In the U.K at the moment there seem to be two different approaches developing. There is a strong and well-supported programme of learning outdoors through approaches like Forest Schools, which tends to support learning for children in Reception and Key Stage 1. There is also a more adventurous route for Key Stage 2 children with sports coaching from outside agencies and residential trips to engage with sports and activities. Many of the Forest School approaches have a foundation based on respect for the land and the fauna and flora that the land supports. Forest School lessons are guided by six key principles (see Figure 1). These principles set out the ways in which Forest School sessions can be used to aid the holistic development of the children through regular and sustained trips to a local wooded area. Forest School is not a subject based pedagogy, but clearly there are many clear links to National Curriculum subjects and knowledge to be learned. Forest School sessions enable children to operate within and learn to manage an aspect of their local environment. And such communities of practice do not belong solely to the schools which benefit from the woodland

nearby. There is, for example, a separate beach schools movement (Macintosh, M. in Pickering, S. (Ed) 2017) and indeed the style of independent, resourced, discovery based learning, can and does take place with some schools in urban environments as well as rural.

The Principles underpinning Forest School

1) Forest School is a long-term process of frequent and regular sessions in a woodland or natural environment, rather than a one-off visit. Planning, adaptation, observations and reviewing are integral elements of Forest School
2) Forest School takes place in a woodland or natural wooded environment to support the development of a relationship between the learner and the natural world.
3) Forest School aims to promote the holistic development of all those involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners
4) Forest School offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.
5) Forest School is run by qualified Forest School practitioners who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice.
6) Forest School uses a range of learner-centred processes to create a community for development and learning

Figure 1: The Six Principles of Forest School
(Source: www.forestschoolassociation.org/full-principles-and-criteria-for-good-practice.)

There is, however, a subtle distinction between the type of learning that children engage with up and down England on a regular basis and the philosophies described earlier from Norway and Japan. In England the emphasis is set firmly upon the development of the learner with the local environment being a resource from which to learn. In Norway and Japan the foundation shifts slightly towards respect and understanding about the local environment first, from which learning develops. This is not to say that Forest School philosophies and practices are not excellent. Forest School and other related forms of outdoor learning emphasise the importance of helping children to develop independence, resilience, problem solving, discovery and collaboration skills, all of which help to develop children as effective learners (BAECE/DfE, 2012), and this is partly why it has been heralded as a success in Early Years and Key Stage 1 settings. Forest School was, in fact, introduced from Scandinavia relatively recently, in the 1995 (Knight, S. 2011), and so it does appear that outdoor education in the UK is playing 'catch-up' with cultures that have embraced environmental care and learning for many years. Perhaps we as a nation need to see how education and educational philosophies develop as the children currently learning through Forest School become the teachers and politicians of the future.

At Key Stage 2 – although this is on the understanding that this is a generalisation and there is actually a great variety of practice across key stages – the emphasis shifts further away from the *landscape* and towards the *experience*. Children are encouraged to challenge themselves physically and mentally with high ropes courses, orienteering exercises and canoeing expeditions which are memorable for the splashing and the dunking in the water. Adventurous activities hold great value and for many children they motivate further engagement with sports and pursuits in the outdoors specifically and also a love and engagement with the outdoors generally. They are a means by which children can overcome

personal barriers, gain self-esteem, and find great satisfaction and enrichment from being outside. Loynes (2007), however, argues strongly against the development of local environments as 'marketable commodities' through adventure pursuits in favour of developing values through learning and engagement that relate to the landscape itself and its 'preservation in a time of environmental injustice' (Loynes, 2007, 257).
England is currently facing many environmental pressures, not least the required drive towards a major house building programme to keep up with the changing demographics of the country. There is not just the result of an expanding population, but the changing family structure demands an increasing number of smaller houses. It could be argued that the island of Britain as an environment has developed over time through a culture of exploitation: from the agricultural revolution through the industrial revolution, and continuing on to current times – indeed throughout the nation's resource-hungry expansive history. Britain has long been subject to environmental injustice. In Norway land seems to be treasured for its intrinsic value by merit of its existing nature. Perhaps the climate and demographics have allowed this luxury, but it is certainly valued within the cultural make-up of the people who live there. In Japan, where there has been incredible pressure with a large population operating within the limitations imposed by a mountainous relief, there is a strong drive towards balancing the natural and the human environment as a cultural whole. In the U.K., by contrast, there seems to be a more bi-polar attitude with environmentalists waging a King Canute style campaign against the culture of resource exploitation. Orr (2001) describes this as 'disorder grounded in the paradigm of human domination… that must be replaced by one that places us in the web of life as citizens of the biotic community' (Orr, quoted in Sterling, 2001, 8).

Conclusion

Outdoor learning needs to develop with a balance between learning and the personal experience on one side and an 'eco-relationship' (Henderson, quoted in Henderson and Vikander, 2007) on the other. The primary National Curriculum for geography states that its purpose is to 'inspire in pupils a curiosity and fascination about the world and its people that will remain with them for the rest of their lives' (DfE, 2013, 214). This is a superb start for teachers to work with, whichever subject is being taught. In order to create curiosity children will need the opportunity to discover the environments and communities they are a part of. For fascination children will need the opportunity to explore and ask questions – to wonder and inspect. Inspiration is a very personal emotion that emerges from a desire to learn, but also perhaps from a desire to contribute. Inspiration is a more active form of learning. It brings the mind and spirit to life together. Children can engage in the local environment, developing knowledge, skills, and vitally a sense of value of themselves within the world and of the world itself, and then make use of this set of skills, knowledge and values to discover the world through both class-based work and work outdoors. This cannot happen however whilst the world beyond the classroom walls is seen as something special to visit. Learning outdoors needs to become ordinary for its true value to be realised.

References

BAECE/DfE [British Association for Early Childhood Education/ Department of Education] (2012). *Development Matters in the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS).* Available at: http://www.foundationyears.org.uk/files/2012/03/Development-Matters-FINAL-PRINT-AMENDED.pdf.

Clements-Croome, D.J., Awabie, H.B., Bako-Biroa, Z., Kochara, N. & Williams, N. (2008). Ventilation rates in schools. *Journal of Building and Environment, 43,* 362-367.

Cremin, T. & Arthur, J. (Eds.). *Learning to Teach in the Primary School*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Cutler, M. (2016) *The Call of the Wild*. Cambridge Primary Review Trust Blog September 30th 2016. http://cprtrust.org.uk/cprt-blog/the-call-of-the-wild/ (Retrieved 30.09.2016)

DfE/CLOT (2006) *Learning outside the classroom manifesto*. Nottingham, DFES Publications.

Dewey, J. (1915). *The School and Society*. (2nd Edition). Available at: https://ia801408.us.archive.org/33/items/schoolsociety00dewerich/schoolsociety00dewerich.pdf.

Forest School Association (no date) *The six Principles of Forest School.* Retrieved from http://www.forestschoolassociation.org/full-principles-and-criteria-for-good-practice/ Retrieved Oct. 2016

Gray, C. & MacBlain, S (2015). *Learning Theories in Childhood*. (2nd Edition). London: Sage.

Henderson, B. & Vikander, N. (Eds.) (2007). *Nature First. Outdoor Life the Friluftsliv Way*. Toronto: Natural Heritage Books.

Kameoka, Y, (2009), *Cultural dimensions of outdoor education in Mt Koya, Japan: Co-existing patterns of universalist and local outdoor education approaches*. La Trobe University: Bendigo.

Knight, S. (2011) *Forest School for all*. London: Sage

Loynes, C. (2007). *Why outdoor learning should get real*. In B. Henderson & N. Vikander. *Nature First. Outdoor Life the Friluftsliv Way*. Toronto: Natural Heritage Books.

Macintosh, M. (2017, forthcoming) *Beach Schools* in Pickering, S (Ed) *Teaching Outdoors Creatively*. London: Sage

MacNaughton, A. (2015). 'Tut, Tut, It Looks Like Rain'. *Primary Geography*, 88, 19-21.

Montessori, M. (1989). *To educate the human potential*. The Clio Montessori series: 6. Oxford: Clio Press.

Mulhall, S. (1996). *Heidigger and Being and Time*. London: Routledge.

Orr, D.W (1994) *Earth in Mind. On education, environment and the human prospect.* Washington, Island Press.

Palmer, J.A. (Ed.) (2001). *Fifty Modern Thinkers on Education*. London: Routledge.

Pearlman Hougie, D. (2010). Learning outside the comfort zone. *Primary Geography*, 73, 26-27.

Pickering, S. (ED.) (2017a, forthcoming). *Everyday Places and Spaces*. In S. Pickering (Ed.). *Teaching Outdoors Creatively*. Abingdon: Routledge

Pickering, S. (2017b, forthcoming). Valuing, Organising and Managing Learning Outside the Classroom. In T. Cremin, T & J. Arthur (Eds.). *Learning to Teach in the Primary School*. (4th Edition). Abingdon: Routledge

Pound, L. (2005). *How Children Learn*. London: Step Forward Publishing.

Radvinsky, G., Krawietz, S. & Tamplin, A. (2011). Walking through doorways causes forgetting: further explorations. *The Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology, 64*(8),pp1632-1645

Reese, R. & Myers, J. (2010). EcoWellness: The missing factor in holistic wellness models. *Journal of Counseling & Development*, 90, pp 400-406

Roberts, I. (1992). Affective Learning, Affective Experience: What does it have to do with Museum Education? In A. Benehold, S. Bitgood & H. Shettel (Eds.). *Visitor Studies: Theory, research and practice Volume 4*. (p.163). Jacksonville, AL: Center for Social Design.

Sandell, K. (2007) *The right of public access: The landscape perspective of Friluftsliv*. In Henderson B and Vikander N (Eds) (2007) *Nature First. Outdoor Life the Friluftsliv Way*. (pp. 90-99). Toronto: Natural Heritage Books.

Seaman, J. & Gingo, M. (2011). Lev Vygotsky: Experiential Education - A View from the Future. In T.E. Smith & C.E. Knapp (Eds.). *The source book of experiential education. Key thinkers and their contributions*. (pp. 157-165). Abingdon: Routledge.

Sterling, S. (2001). *Sustainable Education. Re-visioning learning and change*. Schumacher Briefings 6. Totnes: Green Books.

Russell, B. (2004). *History of Western Philosophy*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Smith, T.E. & Knapp, C.E. (2011). *The source book of experiential education. Key thinkers and their contributions*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Waite, S., Passy, R., Gilchrist, M., Hunt, A. & Blackwell, I. (2016) *Natural Connections Demonstration Project, 2012-2016: Final Report. Natural England Commissioned Reports, Number215*. Available at: http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/publication/6636651036540928.

Wertsch, J. (1985). *Culture, communication and cognition: Vygotskian perspectives*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Websites

The Forest School Association: www.forestschoolassociation.org.

Stephen Pickering is Course Leader for Primary and Outdoor Education at the University of Worcester and Senior Lecturer in Primary Education. He is a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts and a consultant for the Geographical Association (GA) where he sits on the GA's *Primary Geography* editorial board. He has written articles for *Primary Geography*, *Teaching Geography*, *Primary Times*; chapters for *Teaching Geography Creatively*, *Teaching Outdoors Creatively* and *Learning to Teach in the Primary School*, and is the editor of *Teaching Outdoors Creatively*. Stephen has been an active member of the Charney Manor Geography Teacher Educators conferences and support groups since 2005.