

Impact case study (REF3b)

<p>Institution: Plymouth University</p>
<p>Unit of Assessment: 25 Education</p>
<p>Title of case study: Outdoor and experiential learning: benefits for children and schools</p>
<p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)</p>
<p>This case study concerns a body of research conducted at Plymouth University on outdoor and experiential learning. The research has impacted upon children and schools through developing outdoor learning approaches and schools making changes to the school physical environment to support learning. It has also impacted upon practitioners and their practices and influenced the review of outdoor learning curriculum in Victoria (Australia). It has led to a successful Lottery bid, led by the Silvanus Trust, which is having a direct impact on practitioners and their approach to understanding outdoor learning and well-being.</p>
<p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)</p>
<p>This case study describes a body of research, undertaken at Plymouth University as part of the Outdoor Experiential Learning Research Network. The research network supports research activity through bids, partnership working with practitioners, conference papers and sharing literature. There has been a popular groundswell of support in recent years for increasing children’s connection to the natural environment for improved health, well-being and educational outcomes, but a lack of research that questions its purposes and potential benefits or how they accrue in different contexts. The research programme explores how issues of ‘place’ and the outdoors enter into the construction of learning.</p>
<p>Much of the research has been led by Sue Waite (Associate Lecturer, 2003-12, Associate Professor, Reader, 2013-present). The initial study concerned Forest Schools, an innovative educational approach to outdoor play and learning in a woodland environment. The project ‘Forest Schools: an evaluation of the opportunities and challenges in Early Years’ (Waite 2005) focused on supporting and advising on a local authority’s potential investment into the Forest School’s workforce programme. The research found that the benefits of Forest School would be improved by more integrated experiences with mainstream practice. It also found that there needed to be clarification of the school’s key expectations of children’s behaviour and learning and on Forest School pedagogical principles.</p>
<p>This was followed in 2009 by a study, funded by the ESRC, to understand how changes in learning objectives between the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 may influence teaching and learning practices. The study also reviewed how ‘place’, in particular outdoor contexts, may interact with staff and children to construct ways of teaching and learning. The research provided insights into pedagogies in different places and social and affective support for learning, differentiating between place and cultural affordances and gender issues in the outdoors;</p>
<p>Following this, Waite undertook an evaluation of the Exmoor Curriculum (2010). The Exmoor Curriculum is a four year Programme developed with the assistance of the Exmoor National Park Authority and the Exmoor Society. Children work on the four year course and eventually become Junior Exmoor Rangers. The research found that the approach had led to practical skill development in pupils and was a source of inspiration for staff and students. In 2010 Waite provided an analysis of the use of outdoor spaces in two primary schools in urban and semi-urban environments in a period of transition from play-based to national curriculum teaching (Waite, 2010).</p>
<p>A further research project ‘Good From Woods: How do activities in woodland contribute to people and communities feeling good?’ (2012-2014) is studying people’s participation in woodland activities and identifies what type of well-being occurs as a result. Using a practitioner-researcher approach, it has expanded knowledge relating to social cohesion and well-being deriving from woodland activities, while developing research capacity in the voluntary and community sector.</p>

This Lottery funded project is jointly led by The Silvanus Trust and Plymouth University with the Neroche Scheme, The Woodland Trust, and Forest Research. The Silvanus Trust is a charity working through partnerships to regenerate the woodlands in the South West for economic, social and environmental benefits.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

Waite, S. (2011) 'Teaching and learning outside the classroom: personal values, alternative pedagogies and standards', *Education 3-13*, **39** (1), 65-82. International, peer-reviewed Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education. This article has had 5741 article views and is the journal's 'Most read' article (as at summer 2013).

Waite, S. (2010) 'Losing our way?: declining outdoor opportunities for learning for children aged between 2 and 11'. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*. **10** (2), 111- 126. International, peer-reviewed journal. This article has had 3795 views and is the journal's 'Most Read' article (as at summer 2013).

Waite, S. (2007) 'Memories are made of this': some reflections on outdoor learning and recall. *Education 3-13*, **35** (4), pp. 333 - 347. International, peer-reviewed Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education. This article has had 1999 article views (as at summer 2013).

Davis, B. Rea, T. & Waite, S. (2006) 'The Special Nature of the Outdoors: its contribution to the education of children aged 3-11', *Australian Journal of Outdoor Education*, **10**, (2), 3-12. Refereed journal of the Outdoor Council of Australia.

Waite, S. (Ed.) (2011) *Children learning outside the classroom: from birth to eleven*, SAGE: London. An edited book starting with Waite and followed by chapters from leaders in the field.

Goodenough, A. & Waite, S. (2012) *Well-being from woodlands: The challenge of identifying what's good from woods*, *ECOS journal of British Association for Nature Conservation*, [Online] Available: <http://www.banc.org.uk/ecos/> [25 March 2013]

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The research outlined has had specific impact on the curriculum of schools as well as policy and practices within the UK and in Victoria, Australia. The research on alternative pedagogies as children move from Foundation to Stage 1, and in particular, the finding that outdoor learning opportunities can positively impact on learning outcomes, was used to frame an entire school development plan.

The first school involved in the research, Leigham Primary, put resources into ensuring that this was at the heart of their educational offer. Identifying CPD needs, staff went on an allotment training day to overcome, for example some reluctance to engage with outdoor activity. They have moved their Foundation stage classrooms to have access to the outdoors, allow children to independently choose whether to play outside or not, and use the local woods more.

"The study provided practitioners with the opportunity to reflect on their practice and consider the importance of the learning that takes place outside the classroom. I feel that since the study I have seen more evidence of 'outdoor learning' taking place across Foundation Stage 2 and Key Stage 1." Literacy Co-ordinator, Leigham Primary School, Plymouth.

The other school involved in the research approached school development through the lens of

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creativity and extended their school grounds with more structured learning prompts such as an earth mound dragon to stimulate storytelling, class-designed seating areas, chickens, and a poly tunnel for growing crops and for outdoor science. They also invested in literacy belts, a children's toolbelt with pencils and a notebook, to wear in outdoor spaces. As stated by the Head of Little Stoke School "As a school we recognise it makes a huge difference. The children are so much more engaged and excited about what they are doing."

Based on her research findings, Waite was asked to be the external commentator on the outdoor education middle school curriculum in Victoria, Australia and had a direct impact on curriculum policy and practice. She was also invited to present key messages from the research to teachers in Singapore engaged in delivering a new curriculum offer, 'The Programme for Active Learning'. As stated by the Outdoor Education Curriculum Developer in Victoria "Sue Waite's research has been influential in shaping both policy and practice. Her input to this process helped shape the review of the curriculum in terms of both policy and content".

Waite established the Outdoor and Experiential Learning Research Network as a result of the research. This provides a forum for discussing and sharing research and is used widely by practitioners. This network led to the partnership between Plymouth University and The Silvanus Trust and the development of a successful Lottery bid for almost half a million pounds for the *Good from Woods* project. The project, which started in 2010, is based upon the previous research undertaken by Waite and runs until 2014.

This research is impacting upon practitioner skills and approaches. Forest School practitioners use the research to understand the pedagogical principles underpinning their work. Practitioners were trained to research their own practice and then cascade the skills and learning to other practitioners, resulting in early impact on organisations. Waite mentors the practitioner-researchers. The Silvanus Trust reported an increased understanding of ethics and research approaches. The organisation also feels more confident and has been able to develop by bidding for funding that they wouldn't have previously gone for without the 'Good for Woods' research. Recent successes for the Silvanus Trust includes being awarded a national evaluation from Defra for the Big Tree Plant and a Heritage Lottery grant for research into woodland cultures. Both of these successes have been attributed to the impact of the Good from Woods research as stated below:

"The experience gained from working with Plymouth University has increased our confidence and added to our track record, helping us to successfully bid for work we might not otherwise have bid for...Our partnership with Plymouth University on the Good from Woods Lottery funded research project has definitely brought us up to speed on research ethics.... We are actively incorporating this best practice into the Trusts other activities."

The Steering Group for Good from Woods includes representation from the Woodland Trust, which has resulted in national influence on policy on how to support well-being in and for woodland. As described by the Woodland Trust... *'I've enjoyed reading the GFW report; there are some absolutely fascinating findings which I think will greatly benefit us at the Trust and will make a real difference to how we manage our events and materials for schools in the future.'*

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- 1) Statement from the Silvanus Trust detailing the impact of the Good from Woods research project on the Silvanus Trust
- 2) Statement from the Education Manager, Exmoor National Park Authority
- 3) Factual statement from Woodland Trust Officer on how the research benefits the Trust in the way they manage events
- 4) Outdoor and experiential learning research network that demonstrates the range of work practitioners can access <http://www.edu.plymouth.ac.uk/oelresnet/index.html>
- 5) Statement from the Lead on Learning in the Natural Environment, Natural England

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- 6) Statement from the Outdoor Education Officer, Ministry of Education, Singapore
- 7) Statement from the Outdoor Education Curriculum Developer, La Trobe University, Australia on how the research shaped the Victoria school curriculum
- 8) ESRC Impact Report: Opportunities afforded by the outdoors for alternative pedagogies as children move from Foundation Stage to Year 1. <http://www.esrc.ac.uk/my-esrc/grants/RES-000-22-3065/outputs/read/8cd461a9-4b8a-4ec5-8165-b20b9541aa06>
- 9) <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-22122108> BBC news interview with Sue Waite, Headteacher and schoolchildren in Bristol. Head highlights the difference the research has made to the children's learning.