

Report identifies ways to boost children's quality of life through outdoor learning

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Outdoor learning can have a significant and positive impact on children's quality of life but needs to be introduced more formally into global school curricula in order for its potential benefits to be fully realised, a new report suggests.

Student Outcomes and Natural Schooling has been produced by Plymouth University and Western Sydney University, following a conference organised in collaboration with the University of East London and Natural England, and with funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC).

It highlights the many and varied benefits to children of learning in the natural environment, not just from an educational perspective but also in terms of their behaviour, social skills, health and wellbeing, resilience, confidence and sense of place.

But it also says that in an age dominated by a full curriculum, busier family lifestyles and increased fear within society, children are losing the freedom to play, explore and be active in their environment and being denied opportunities that could enhance their long term prospects.

The report, published today, identifies a framework showing how governments could build on existing and current research and introduce outdoor learning as an integral element of national education policies.

Sue Waite, Reader in Outdoor Learning at Plymouth University and one

of the authors of the report, said: "At the moment, if outdoor learning is part of a school's curriculum in England, it is largely because the teachers recognise the values of it. With so much focus on academic attainment, there can be pressure on teachers to stay in the classroom which means children are missing out on so many experiences that will benefit them throughout their lives. This report shows that although there is significant research which supports outdoor learning for academic as well as social and personal outcomes, it is only by having that recognised by [policy makers](#) that we are likely to achieve universal positive cultural change."

Over the past 10 years, there have been five significant reviews focussed on children learning in [natural environments](#) in the UK and abroad. This is at a time when there is evidence that childhoods are dramatically changing, and children are experiencing limited opportunities to be outdoors in formal or informal learning settings, with consequent negative effects.

This report was produced following the Lessons from Near and Far conference led by Plymouth University in July 2015, which featured 21 international presentations intended to encourage researchers, practitioners and policy makers to share areas of best practice which could potentially be embedded into national policies. The report also includes a review of recent research and policy impacts in the UK, Australia, Singapore and Denmark (which host partners in the ESRC funded international partnership network), to demonstrate ways in which evidence and policy can support each other effectively.

The framework it proposes includes pathways to research informed practice designed to generate five key outcomes for children: a healthy and happy body and mind; a sociable confident person; a self-directed creative learner; an effective contributor; an active global citizen.

Professor Karen Malone, from Western Sydney University's Centre for Educational Research, said as the amount of evidence on the benefit of learning in natural environments on health and wellbeing continues to mount, the question is, is it enough to persuade policy makers to come on board?

She said: "This report maps the evidence to encourage researchers and policy makers to meet at the interface of research and policy in order to shape a positive future for our children. While the report was funded and supported by agencies in the UK, the lessons learnt resonate for most high income nations around the world, particularly in Australia, where the political landscape and its impact on funding for programs in schools for outdoor learning are comparable. The [report](#) should be taken up and read widely by researchers, educators and policy makers connected to the field of outdoor education, health and physical education and sustainability and environmental education."

Provided by University of Plymouth

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