



# LEARNING BEYOND THE STOCKADE

How schools can  
create learning areas  
in their communities

There is a wonderful piece of African wisdom – ‘it takes a village to raise a child’. Sadly this concept of community responsibility for child rearing seems to have been lost long ago in most parts of the UK and replaced with the concept of state responsibility. So, beyond the parents, we look to teachers, social workers, police, the local council etc to take responsibility rather than looking to ourselves - the local community.

by David Crossland

**T**he factors leading to this are too complex to unravel here but two tragic events are relevant. The Dunblane massacre of 1996 and the Soham murders of 2002 were dreadful events, which still scar the families and communities involved; but these were strange, rare and peculiar events not common occurrences. The reality was then, and is now, that children are much more likely to be at risk from the bad relative, the bad friend, the bad person in a position of trust, than they are from the bad stranger. Dreadful as these events were, some of the things put in place afterwards, from the best of motives, led to unintended consequences that, in the long run, are unhelpful and create divisions between generations and within communities. Following Dunblane, schools started to become fortresses with security fences and locked gates/doors.

These fences were designed to keep strangers out - not to confine teaching and learning within the stockade, nor to cause teachers or parents to fear going outside the fence. Soham led to vetting and barring checks, which were designed to reduce the risk of the bad person getting into a position of trust, but which threatened to sow so much suspicion that we became frightened to let a child speak to someone who was unchecked. The reality is that a child is safer being watched over by the multiple eyes of a caring community than by leaving all responsibility to parents and professionals, within a community that stays silent and does not get involved.

Schools cannot hope to resolve this societal problem (too often have schools been seen as the cure for ills well beyond their ability to solve).

But schools can do something to start to reclaim the concept of community involvement in child rearing. They may not be able create a world in which the community plays a part in raising the child but they can start to educate children - in the community. Schools can refuse to allow the education of their pupils to be constrained by fences and fear and can, metaphorically at least, dismantle the barricades. They can change from buildings bound by fences to learning entities sitting within environments and communities, which they use to educate their children.

Schools are required to deliver a broad and balanced curriculum and governors are responsible for ensuring that children are educated in the most appropriate place. There is plenty of evidence that the most appropriate place to educate children is very rarely



*There is nothing to stop teachers from choosing to 'do' mathematics in the local shops or English in the park or woods or theatre.*

---

the classroom but is more likely to be the outdoors, the grounds, the park, the shops, the museum, the theatre, the local and wider community, the real world.

Because schools are empowered to deliver the curriculum in the way they choose they do not require consent from parents to take children off the school premises during the school day. There is nothing to stop teachers from choosing to 'do' mathematics in the local shops or English in the park or woods or theatre. Those of us who grew up years ago may well have enjoyed 'nature walks' on fine days at school and there is nothing to prevent these from happening today. Maybe if more primary children enjoyed regular nature walks we could reverse the current situation where children can talk about global warming and the Amazon rainforest but are unable to name the trees, flowers, bugs and birds which fill their local environment. There is nothing to stop these things apart from fear or bureaucracy and if this is what holds your school back there is a simple starting point – create a 'learning area'.

A 'learning area' is that area where your school has standard operating procedures to allow you to use it whenever you choose with no (or very little) preparation. It is that area where, 'at the drop of a hat', you can choose to respond to a question or comment from a child by saying 'lets go and look', 'lets go and find out' and moving your lesson off-site to harness the power of the real world and children's curiosity. Learning areas may be any shape or size and might include the use of public transport routes for those blessed with useful, and even free, ones. They can include all sorts of environments: countryside, parks and open spaces, leisure and cultural facilities, historic buildings and sites, sacred spaces, shops, businesses, care facilities.

Learning areas are not 'instead of' educational visits, they are simply one particular form of visit. The Outdoor Education Advisers Panel (OEAP) National Guidance [www.oeapng.info](http://www.oeapng.info) uses a 'Radar' model to help judge the complexity of planning required for various types of outdoor learning and off-site visits. At the lowest end of the complexity scale are visits not too far away that involve an 'everyday' level of risk and which should be covered by standard procedures or policy – in other words the vast majority of what you would do, on a day to day basis, in your learning area. The aim of the 'learning area' concept is to help those schools,

that do not already do this, to overcome any barriers. The idea came from a comment made by a mature head teacher who said "I miss the days when you could simply choose to go to the local park for the lesson because it was a nice day". My response was that those days have never gone away – we just forgot them and then imagined they were too hard to bring back – which they are not.

Steps to creating your own Learning Area:

1. Take some time to explore the community and environment around your school to discover its learning possibilities. Many teachers commute to work and so do not know the area local to the school. Spending a training day identifying the learning possibilities and considering how they will need to be managed is the first step.
2. Go through a risk-benefit assessment process to identify what the problems are going to be and how you will manage them. This involves considering what the OEAP National Guidance describes as the SAGED variables (Staff, Activity, Group, Environment, Distance) in order to arrive at a way of managing the safety and learning of your children in your chosen locations with your staff team. Remember you are not trying to make things as safe as possible but as safe as they need to be. If children are working in an area of nettles and brambles they may get scratched and stung, this is not necessarily a problem just experiential learning and part of growing up. You will compile a 'to do' list that might include things like: staff training, training for the children, discussions with local people and stakeholders, access arrangements, equipment, communications, first aid and emergency procedures.
3. Go through your 'to do' list and formulate and document your standard operating procedures for using your learning area. Share this with staff, parents and children. Schools do not need parental consent but it is good practice to ensure parents are informed about where their child may be educated. Also you may need parents to help by providing things like Wellington boots and waterproof coats to be kept at school (remember there is no such thing as poor weather, just poor clothing!)
4. Ensure all staff using the learning area are competent and fully aware of the standard procedures and what to do in an emergency.
5. Start using your learning area and enrich the learning and lives of the children at your school while at the same time getting much more fun and excitement from your work.



# An example of a Policy/Procedure for a School Learning Area

## General

Visits/activities within the 'School Learning Area' that are part of the normal curriculum and take place during the normal school day follow the Operating Procedure below.

These visits/activities:

- do not require parental consent (*state if there are any situations where you would like parents to be informed in advance, e.g. via a slip sent home*).
- do not normally need additional risk assessments / notes (other than following the Operating Procedure below).

## Boundaries

The boundaries of the School Learning Area are shown on the attached map (optional). This area includes, but is not limited to, the following frequently used venues: e.g.

- Mirkwood Park
- Mirkwood Library
- Little Whinging Pool and Leisure Centre
- The Durmstrang Shopping Centre
- Fanghorn Forest, up to the boundary with Lonely Mountain Road
- Etc.



## Operating Procedure for School Learning Area

*(The below is simply a generic risk assessment for routine activities).*

The following are potentially significant issues/hazards within our School Learning Area:

- Road traffic.
- Other people / members of the public / animals.
- Losing a pupil.
- Uneven surfaces and slips, trips, and falls.
- Weather conditions.
- Activity specific issues when doing environmental fieldwork (nettles, brambles, rubbish, etc).
- Etc. - add anything else specifically relating to your School Learning Area.

These are managed by a combination of the following:

- The Head, Deputy or EVC (*delete as necessary according to your circumstances*) must give verbal approval before a group leaves. *Not strictly necessary if you have clearly identified competent staff, and are confident in your operating procedure, and the fact that staff will follow it.*
- Only staff judged competent to supervise groups in this environment are approved. A current list of approved staff is maintained by the EVC and office.
- The concept and Operating Procedure of the 'School Learning Area' is explained to all new parents when their child joins the school.
- There will normally be a minimum of two adults. *This statement is probably appropriate for all primary schools, although in benign locations it may be appropriate to relax it for year 6s. Decisions should be based on the area and the age / maturity of the pupils - the key determinant will always be 'what would the pupils do if the only adult collapsed?'*
- Staff are familiar with the area, including any 'no go areas', and have practiced appropriate group management techniques.
- Pupils have been trained and have practiced standard techniques for road crossings in a group. *For primary schools this is easy to do with some simple road markings in the playground – with a little practice this can become drilled and slick, as everyone knows what is going to happen.*
- Where appropriate, pupils are fully briefed on what to do if they become separated from the group. *This needs a decision and will depend on the area you are in – return to school, wait where they are, go to x and ask for help, etc).*
- All remotely supervised work in the School Learning Area is done in 'buddy' pairs as a minimum. *There may well be times when this is not appropriate and it is perfectly acceptable for pupils to work individually – you need to decide when and where and at what age/level of maturity lone working may be right for your school.*
- Pupils' clothing and footwear is checked for appropriateness prior to leaving school. *If children, and parents, expect to have wellies and a decent coat at school everyday this becomes really easy. In terms of the staff carrying spare stuff, when appropriate, you can just make up a couple of small rucksacks with bits in – cost is negligible and they can live in the staffroom ready to go.*
- Staff are aware of any relevant pupil medical information and ensure that any required medication is available.
- Staff will deposit in the office a list of all pupils and staff, a proposed route, and an estimated time of return. *Consider a 'signing out' board or sheet in the office. Also consider the office using SIMS to create a bespoke visit report format.*
- A school mobile is taken with each group and the office has a note of the number.
- Appropriate personal protective equipment is taken when needed (e.g. gloves, goggles) *If you have a local issue, e.g. with drug needles, etc, in any area, then you can mark that bit as no-go, or add here how you will educate the pupils to deal with it – it is their home after all, so they need to be able to cope with it!*
- PLUS
  - Add any specifics relating to your local area – e.g. 'When crossing Bimble Street everyone must use the toucan crossing by Baguette the Bakers'.
  - Etc.



Clearly the size, scope and ease of use of a learning area will vary between primary and secondary schools but the concept can be applied and work in both sectors. The main stumbling block is will or commitment. As in so many things Health and Safety can be a convenient excuse for inaction but it is not a valid excuse. There are no insurmountable health and safety or child protection barriers to educating children, on a daily basis, in and around their own local community.

Hopefully very many readers will be thinking ‘what is this guy on about – we already do much more than this’. I know this will be the case in some schools and some areas but I fear there are still many schools where the ‘normal’ day will see children confined within the stockade, if not within the building itself, and thus confined within a limited and impoverished learning area.

This article is based on work done as a Local Authority Outdoor Education Adviser. Any merit it may have has been greatly enhanced by input from colleagues in schools and among fellow advisers. I am very grateful for having been able to share and benefit from their belief in, and passion for, outdoor learning. Any faults, of course, remain entirely mine. ■

*As in so many things Health and Safety can be a convenient excuse for inaction but it is not a valid excuse.*



#### Authors Notes

David Crossland  
David has worked in outdoor adventure learning as a teacher, lecturer, head of centre, AALS inspector and LA adviser. He is now retired from full time work but maintains an interest

and involvement through small amounts of inspection, guidance and consultancy work. He can be contacted at [davidariege@gmail.com](mailto:davidariege@gmail.com).

#### Photos:

Title photo with Creative Commons License. Others by the Low Bank GroundTeam.

