

Inside Outdoor Learning

Learning Outside the Classroom within
a secure provision

by Paul Senior

“Exposure to well managed risks helps children learn important life skills, including how to manage risks for themselves... children, in particular need to learn how to manage risks, and adventure activities are an ideal way of doing this.”

The Health and Safety Executive, RSA Risk Commission Conference, 31 October 2009

There are 15 individually managed Secure Children's Homes throughout England and Wales encompassing a range of services within a secure environment that support the individual needs of the children in its care. They provide placements for boys and girls aged between 10 and 17 and include full residential care, educational facilities and healthcare provision. A very high level of intensive help is offered to each young person.

Young people spend time within a secure environment due to the following:

- That he/she has a history of absconding and is likely to abscond from anything other than secure accommodation; and
- If he/she absconds he/she is likely to suffer significant harm, or
- If he/she is kept in anything other than secure accommodation he/she is likely to injure him/herself or other persons

How do we facilitate this LOTC in a secure environment, an environment where individuals liberties are restricted for the own welfare and safety?

Within a secure provision, opportunities for learning outside the classroom can be limited! Opportunities and practicalities for delivering robust, interactive and appropriate LOTC experiences require an imaginative approach, significant relationship building within the individuals

and staff participating, a high degree of trust facilitation, the support of the establishment and specialist staff, very explicit parameters within which to work and a significant amount of bravery from participants, the staff team and management. A restricted learning environment that may include an indoor gymnasium, an outdoor garden, a secure outdoor play area can be some of the most stimulating and enriching environments in which individuals in a secure establishment can thrive at this stressful time in their lives.

Young people within a secure environment deserve opportunities that enrich their relationships, build resilience and challenge their 'comfort zone' and develop the need for staff to respond creatively and through carefully risk assessed boundary pushing through carefully managed activities.

There are many rewards as a result of LOTC experiences that have a positive impact on young people's self esteem and abilities to interact with others and society. The Council for Learning Outside the Classroom identifies the benefits for young people's learning and personal development, summarised as follows:

LOTC tackles social mobility, giving children new and exciting experiences that inspire them to reach their true potential. These real world experiences raise aspirations, equipping young people with the

skills they need to become active and responsible citizens and shape a fit and motivated workforce.

LOTC addresses educational inequality, re-motivating children who do not thrive in the traditional classroom environment, such as those from disadvantaged backgrounds or with Special Educational Needs. Young people who experience learning outside the classroom as a regular part of their school life benefit from increased self esteem, and become more engaged in their education both inside and outside the classroom walls.

LOTC supports improved standards back **inside** the classroom, raising attainment, reducing truancy and improving discipline. Learning outside the classroom is known to contribute significantly to raising standards & improving pupils' personal, social and emotional development outside the classroom.

These can be huge, significant, and have an impact on individuals that transcends the curriculum offer within the establishments. Resources are of course limited and restricted for LOTC within a secure setting therefore creative thinking plus huge amounts of 'thinking outside the box' is required. Activities that are delivered outside the classroom in a wood or other Outdoor and Adventurous Activities



(OAA) environments can be delivered but with this creative licence required. Individuals work towards 'mobility' in these establishments where they have supervised experiences out of the secure environment, supported by appropriate adults in preparation for reintegrating back into society in a variety of contexts such as visits to places of interests, walking in the local area, indoor climbing on a local wall.

This mobility allows LOTC experiences to be undertaken away from the secure environment and provides continuity and development of activities that individuals have participated in within the secure setting and hopefully instils an interest in the wider outdoor world.

A rope, plastic hoola hoops, some gym mats, lots of imagination and adaptation can facilitate a couple of hours of engaging activities where individuals can push themselves out of their comfort zone, and can engage them in interactive activities that at times smash into the constraints, expectations and boundaries imposed within a secure environment.

Digging and potting plants outside in a garden on site, private and quiet can be hugely fulfilling and a hugely positive experience on young people that have often experienced chaos and a lack of calm or peace in their life.

There is risk... individuals in a secure setting are often prohibited from physical interactions for their own and others safety. Teaching young people to manage risks for themselves and take sensible decisions makes them safer. Facilitating experiences where groups and individuals are suddenly asked to interact and explore the concepts of personal space and tolerance of others can raise eyebrows and send the apprehension and tension levels of staff within the secure establishment through the roof.

BUT with good planning that's shared with staff supporting the young people. A clear set of expectations of both staff and the young people. Time spent generating trust and positive relationships where the focus is on the fun activities and not peers will enable individuals within a secure environment to thrive. They can succeed, they can achieve, they can shed some of the restrictions imposed within this environment, they can smile and laugh with each other, at each other and adults around them without fear of embarrassment and ridicule when things may not go as planned. 'It is recognised that some pupils with behavioural, social and emotional difficulties have a thirst for excitement': Frank Stanford, Executive Headteacher of a SEMH Academy of provisions.

Lets fulfil this lust for excitement in a controlled, safe and meaningful way. Within the Every Child Matters agenda, 'LOtC Inside' can foster opportunities for learning outside the classroom can contribute to developing personal self-esteem and emotional well-being. This is achieved by developing confidence, teaching young people to live with others and responding to challenge all vital to develop in a secure environment. This learning will contribute to that young person's ability to recognise and manage risk, stay safe and adapt to changing conditions. This alternative approach to learning can develop programmes to engage youngsters at risk of further educational and social exclusion and re-integrate them into education, training and the local community.

Learning can take place anywhere of course it can, and young people with often chaotic and disadvantaged backgrounds can thrive in any environment with appropriate support and understanding of the dynamics and needs that they present often on a minute by minute basis.

LOtC is a fantastic vehicle to facilitate this personal development. With careful management young people in a secure setting can break free of their inhibitions, leap out of the box they can shut themselves in and have experiences that we all often take for granted. ■



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Frank Stanford – Executive Headteacher of the SABDEN Multi Academy Trust: OFSTED Twelve outstanding special schools
Excelling through inclusion 2009
The Health and Safety Executive, RSA Risk Commission
Lansdowne Secure Unit, Secure Accommodation Network
If you have any general questions about Secure Children's Homes please direct them to Secure Accommodation Network by emailing: SAN@securechildrenshomes.org.uk.
Council for Learning Outside the Classroom
Every Child Matters – Department of Education 2003
Secure Childrens Homes : <http://www.securechildrenshomes.org.uk/>

About the Author

Paul Senior is an APIOL and an Assistant Headteacher. He works in a provision for up to six students. Students who are referred are those that have not been able to be successfully placed in existing East Sussex SEMH provision having exhausted all other possible placements within the County. Pauls LOTC qualifications include the ML(summer) award, CWA, MBLA . He has worked within The SABDEN Academy in East Sussex for fourteen years in a variety of capacities and within special educational needs for twenty years. The Academy consists of three SEMH schools, a PRU service and secure accommodation all providing specialised education to young people that experience severe and complex social, emotional, mental health difficulties.

