

Don't drown in change

Preparing for the challenges of introducing an outdoor learning curriculum

Outdoor learning approaches in schools are becoming increasingly widespread across the U.K. There is a growing range of resources available to support teachers with ideas and ways of using the outdoor environment to enhance the curriculum, and some providers offer staff training to support the development of an outdoor learning curriculum. Many primary schools rely on the skills of trained staff, such as Forest School leaders, to run their outdoor provision, but there are big opportunities for all staff to be involved. As this strategy is not without some fundamental challenges, this article focuses on the gap that often exists between a great idea (e.g. "let's make more use of the school grounds") and the point where there is regular and progressive use being made of the 'outdoor classroom'.

Although being introduced to a new teaching methodology can be an exciting experience, being expected to implement that new approach with little practice or immediate support, can be both daunting and stressful. One way to help manage this stress is to consider the journey the teacher takes to become confident with embedding outdoor learning across the curricula. Changing behaviour isn't easy and there are multiple barriers to be overcome. For some teachers the biggest barrier may be that outdoor learning is not currently on their radar. Others may have expressed an interest but remain unsure, for example, on what clothing should be worn or what technical skills they need. Extending from this, if we begin to think about the different stages of 'readiness' of each teacher, we automatically begin to consider the variety of support needed by teachers depending on their readiness for outdoor learning.

To help reinforce this point, we can look at longstanding behaviour change models such as the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) (Figure 1) which has been used widely in health and wellbeing projects to build support and strategies for change which have real impact¹. Though this model of change outlines five stages it also recognises how change is not always straightforward; sometimes we take a small step forward and a big jump back. In brief the stages are: precontemplation (not on radar); contemplation (thinking about a change in the next 6 months); preparation (have a clear plan); action (doing it/ making changes); maintenance (keeping it up). Already from this, we can appreciate how the behaviour change equivalent of 'throwing someone in the deep end' is pushing them straight into 'action', or in this instance pushing them into outdoor learning, when they're not ready.

What does this look like in practice?

It sounds obvious, but first make sure teachers have all the information they need to be inspired and are reassured that the long-term support they need is in place. This means having the full backing of colleagues and senior leaders is essential. For a successful school-wide outdoor learning approach, there needs to be a supportive culture which encourages and celebrates innovation in learning. Teachers need to have the freedom to explore, play and re-imagine their cross-curricular links for pupils to really benefit from outdoor learning. Of course, teachers also need to be ready to learn and willing to try new learning approaches themselves.

Figure 2 (in development by Harvey, 2018) shows how we can visualise the journey involved in introducing outdoor learning, by using a 'building block' approach to achieve academic outcomes.

Assuming there is a whole school approach to Outdoor Learning (level one), the second level is all about helping teachers take their first steps towards feeling comfortable with engaging learners in the outdoors. This level reflects the importance of not jumping straight into meeting your lesson objectives, as just being outside can have a disruptive effect on the group if they are not used to it. Children might be used to P.E. outside, but using the outdoors to teach art, science, mathematics or languages, for example, will involve different skills, routines and boundaries. Taking the group outside to get used to a new way of working will pay dividends. The weather is also a significant factor and being able to stay warm and dry in the winter, or cool in the summer, is a basic requirement to enable learning. It is also important to remember the adults in this situation, who also need the right clothes and footwear.

Practicing the basic skills of working together (such as co-operative problem solving) is also an essential part of level two. Many outdoor learning tasks involve children working together, and it is easy to forget that classroom cooperation might not transfer smoothly to the outdoor environment. Spending time outside undertaking team-building and problem-solving tasks will help to cement behaviours and awareness that will enable greater success when it comes to the actual lesson objectives.

The third level is concerned with teachers and learners developing the specific skills they need for learning to happen. For example, setting a challenge that combines mathematics with

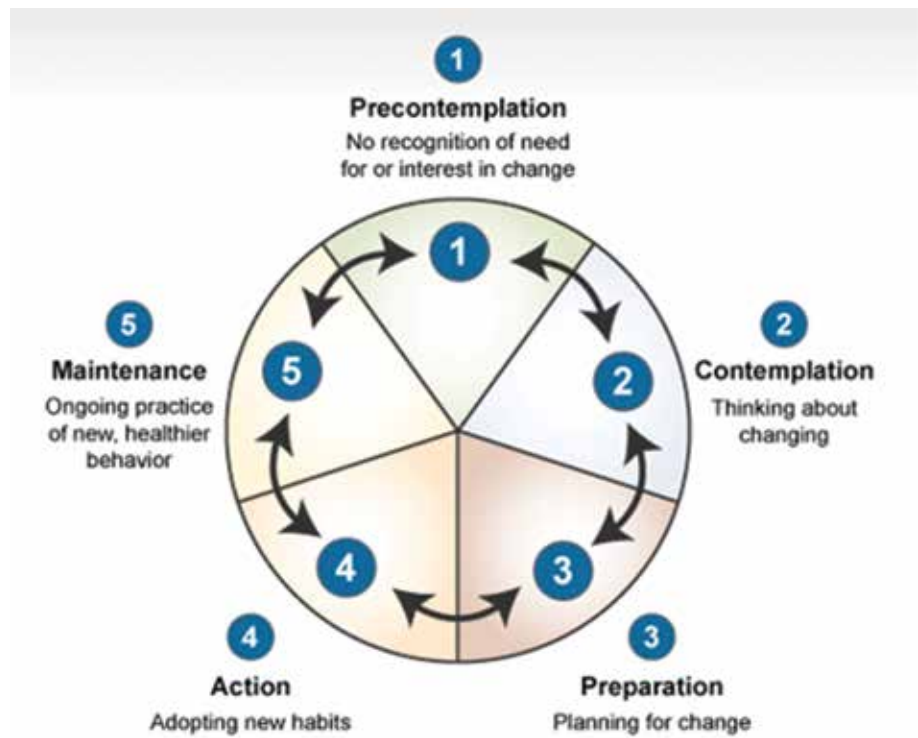


Figure 1. Transtheoretical Model of Change ²

basic map reading skills, is less likely to be successful if the children aren't yet confident in their map reading. A progression of technical skill development thus goes hand in hand with more challenging tasks. This sounds obvious, but some suggested lesson ideas involve an assumption that the pupils are competent, and of course, this same idea also applies to teachers' own development as well.



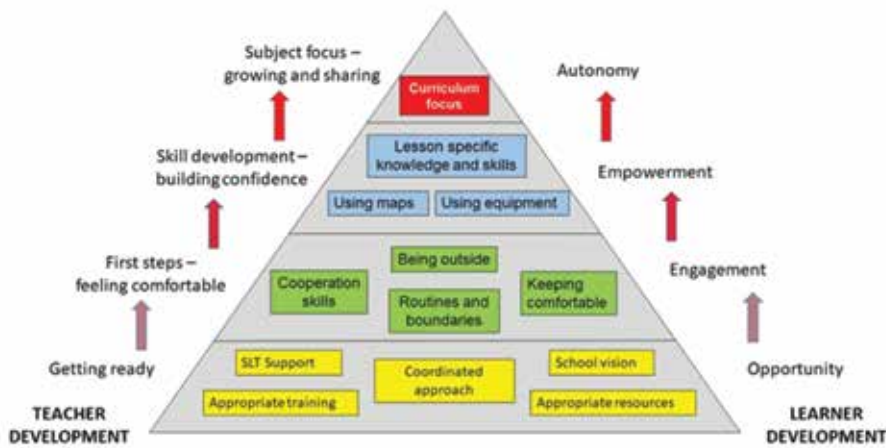


Figure 2. Outdoor learning and teaching development model³

The top of the pyramid represents the subject focus. It might be that the lesson is geared around objectives connected to the lower levels, but by thinking about the development journey as a series of stages there is a greater chance of success when the subject focus is introduced. Here we define success as being more than the meeting of lesson objectives, as successful outdoor learning can also be measured by the confidence felt by the teacher in delivering the session and the likelihood of their ongoing use of the outdoor classroom.

Although introducing new approaches to any work context is potentially challenging and stressful, outdoor learning can be an exciting, effective cross curricula experience, if the different states of 'readiness' for teaching and learning are recognised, needs are addressed, and reassurances made. Overall, the models outlined in this article offer a simple framework to help guide the introduction of outdoor learning into schools, resulting in confident teachers and engaged, autonomous learners. ■

References

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2. Prochaska, J. O. & Di Clemente, C. C., (1982). Transtheoretical therapy: Toward a more integrative model of change. *Psychotherapy: Theory, research and practice*, 19(3), 276-288. Figure 2, p. 283. Diagram accessed 2018: <http://www.esourceresearch.org/Default.aspx?TabId=732>
3. Harvey, D. (2018). Outdoor learning and teaching development model. In development as part of PhD research at University of Cumbria.

Further Reading

1. Robertson, Juliet (2014). *Dirty Teaching: A Beginner's Guide to Learning Outdoors*. Independent Thinking Press.
2. Casali, Davide 'Folletto' (2015). A framework for thinking about systems change. Accessed 2018: <https://intenseminimalism.com/2015/a-framework-for-thinking-about-systems-change/>
3. Natural Connections Demonstration Project, 2012-2016: Final Report <http://tinyurl.com/h8vwznz>

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