

Can I do it outside?

How to introduce a CIDIO (Can I Do It Outside?) approach in a primary school



I have often described myself as being a 'lucky one'. Growing up in an inner city where the views from home and school were of the local gas works and tightly-packed, neat rows of pit cottages; access to green spaces and the outdoors was not easy. Outdoor Learning did not feature as part of the curriculum at the large primary or comprehensive school I attended, despite the vast grounds. Many of my peers did not venture far from the boundaries marked by the 'long streets' of the area local to my home, resulting in

minimal engagement with nature, environment or exercise.

As a young girl of a very active father who was a member of a local mountaineering club, my experiences growing up were varied and I was 'lucky' enough to enjoy regular outdoor experiences in the wider local area and weekends away to stay at campsites, climbing huts and bothies. Fast forward through years of working in outdoor centres, world travel and finally settling in one of the national parks which

was my playground as a child, I describe this as being 'lucky' as my health, happiness and outlook on life have been moulded by these childhood outdoor experiences. Qualifying as a teacher in 2002, my aim and ethos, was to provide similar experiences for children within a school setting. However, 13 years after qualifying the realisation that my ethos had changed, and I was not venturing far from a classroom which was just as tightly packed within a school as the pit cottages of my childhood, I recognised the need for change.

AUTHOR: Jen Ager

Jen Ager is the Assistant Headteacher of a primary school in the North of England. She teaches year 6 children but has taught across most of the primary school age range. Jen recently completed an MA in Outdoor and Experiential Learning at The University of Cumbria and is a Level 3 Forest School Practitioner. She is passionate about ensuring that children of all ages access the outdoors and that the benefits of this are vast.

Photos: All from the author.



Here I share my attempts to ensure that school children regularly access green spaces and are exposed to a variety of experiences that can help mould and shape them as people. By doing so maybe they too can describe themselves as 'lucky ones' in the future.

The benefits of learning outdoors are well documented. Although difficult to quantify using a method comparable to school performativity and data driven outcomes, I've yet to meet an educator who disputes the incalculable value that outdoor experiences can have for children and young people. I work in an Ofsted rated 'outstanding' primary school, where 'Outdoor Learning' was mentioned eight times in the Inspectors' report. Due to this one could deduce that 'Outdoor Learning' was valued, integrated and present across the whole primary school. However, following the introduction of a revised National Curriculum (2014) and a new statutory assessment testing format (2015), introspectively reflecting on my own philosophy of teaching, the dichotomy between a creative and enriched curriculum and maintaining high standards of attainment based upon test data, became increasingly apparent. An audit of the frequency of school ground use by each year group showed that Outdoor Learning opportunities were not consistent across the whole school, or the whole academic year. Indeed, some year groups very rarely left the confines of their school classrooms. This may sound like a familiar scenario to outdoor learning co-ordinators— some teachers utilising the outdoors more than others and a patchwork effect of progressive outdoor learning opportunities across a whole school. Although great strides have been made recently in the field of outdoor learning in schools, indicative in reports such as The Natural Connections Project¹, Evaluation of Learning Away² and The Blagrave Trust Report³, there remains the question of what is happening across whole primary schools, from five-year olds to eleven-year olds, that constitutes as outdoor learning, and why there is little consistency.

In 2015, as coordinator of educational visits and enrichment activities in the school, I noticed a decline in both visits outside of the school and using school grounds as a teaching resource. The semi-rural primary school (with 197 children on roll and eleven teachers) though benefitting from extensive grounds including an outdoor classroom and wildlife area, had grounds being vastly underused by some year groups. This became the impetus for staff discussion: evaluation of how the school facilities were being used and an opportunity to share current research. Over the academic year of 2016/2017, I devised the acronym CIDIO (Can I Do It Outside?). CIDIO was intended to be a meaningful mental thought, with the aim of becoming an inherent action. The teaching world is full of acronyms and some may groan at the thought of yet another. However, acronyms are a powerful cue, described by Kenneth Higbee⁴ as a method of gathering information and making links cognitively. They signpost deeper, more advanced meaning and further memory retrieval. This acronym was received positively by colleagues in a staff meeting where I also showed a video of all the areas in our school grounds, interlaced with some hard-hitting facts relating to how disconnected children are

“Can I Do It Outside?” (CIDIO) intended to be a stimulus for colleagues when planning lessons, to literally get learners outside of the constraints of four walls and a classroom.

becoming to nature and the lack of time spent outside each day. This was significant as it got the staff thinking about the school grounds and how often they visited the different areas available. My 'piste de resistance' to get staff to consider the declining use of our school pond over the previous year, was to take a photograph of me standing in it holding a metre stick – the water reached 55cm at the deepest point. This final photograph opened the gateway to valuable discussion and information sharing regarding school policy, ratios and risk assessments. Staff were engaged in discussion, they were motivated, and they wanted to embrace CIDIO; one person describing it as feeling like they had been given permission to do so.

Over the following year various staff meetings and spontaneous idea sharing or demonstrations of good practice unfolded as and when they felt needed. We organised focus days to kick-start teachers to embrace being outside and try out different teaching styles whilst supported to try and change the attitudes towards some common invisible barriers. Initial audits and feedback showed that there was a significant improvement in teacher's confidence to take more of their lessons outside, using the school grounds. Anecdotal feedback from colleagues was incredibly positive. As a co-ordinator this was wonderful to see, if not frustrating. What had once been my domain whereby I had a daily choice of a variety of outdoor spaces had changed; now it was a struggle to find somewhere to work that wasn't already in use by another class! I resisted the urge as a seasoned primary school teacher to timetable and rota the various areas as spontaneity, serendipity and child-led learning were all a big focus towards being creative in the way we approached our lessons. To date, this has not been a problem and the classes have worked around changing their working space unless needed for a very specific lesson for which it is then requested.

The success of this CIDIO approach evolving has been hugely dependent upon open conversation, timetabled meetings for discussion, CPD and shared planning. We have made use of peer to peer observations to safely explore and experiment with different teaching approaches and being confident to take whole classes outside regularly. Giving outdoor learning prominence in the school action plan and providing teachers with current research has been crucial in championing being outside and raising the profile across the whole school. Examples of where CIDIO had been linked to the curriculum, often in the form of photographs and writing examples were also powerful to share to show the teachers that high standards and expectations were still being achieved. Key stage two teachers

The mindset of some teachers regarding behaviour, ratios, routine and risk slowly changed over the year and the school grounds were visibly utilised more on a daily basis.



Find useful outdoor learning resources for teachers on the IOL website: www.outdoor-learning.org/Good-Practice/Develop-your-Organisation/Outdoor-Learning-in-Schools/Teaching-Outdoors*

found this particularly helpful and again it was commented that this felt like the opportunity for more freedom and creativity was being given – although this had never been withdrawn!

Success!

CIDIO has been successful in instilling confidence and expectation for learning opportunities to be provided outside the constraints of the four walls of a classroom. Some links may indeed have been tenuous in terms of curriculum coverage, but the benefits of oxygen, space and a different learning environment have been noticeable. Now in 2018, CIDIO is a driver in our whole school learning progression framework; regular opportunities for progressive outdoor experiences as an approach to teaching the National Curriculum requirements is an expectation for every year group from Foundation Stage to Year Six. These are in addition to the progressive residentials and half termly enrichment activities organised by the school. The outdoor experiences we offer the children are all aimed at the children interacting with the natural, outside world around them in the school grounds and local area.

We strongly believe that by taking our curriculum outdoors regularly, it promotes an enquiring, healthy connection with the place that children and staff spend many hours each week learning within. Some examples include:



Run for Fun

Each day, all the children have a 'Run for Fun' session – in all but the most extreme of weathers. This provides fresh air, interaction with peers and is symbolic of preparing the children for their own learning in terms of focusing concentration, oxygenating their bodies and minds and engaging in dialogue with teachers and peers about the day.

High Hopes

Our school grounds include an outdoor classroom area, rich wildlife garden, 'High Hopes' garden/ outdoor learning space, well-resourced Foundation Stage unit and large school field bordered by a tree line. These areas have been developed over the last two years to ensure accessibility and resources are easily at hand.

Mini Me Yoga

Alongside teachers planning to use the outdoor areas regularly, we also run Mini Me Yoga sessions and nurture groups in our outdoor areas to promote health and wellbeing.

Forest School

The year 6 children have also participated in weekly Forest School sessions and this has continued throughout the whole of the school from September 2018.

All the teachers at the school appreciate that outdoor learning is not a separate subject; it is a part of their pedagogical approach to teaching the National Curriculum. We encourage community and parental support and have received volunteer help from professional parents to maintain and create some of our outdoor space: such as the improving the health of the pond, developing gravel and wood bark pathways, and gardening. We have also held open days where parents have spent time in the school grounds with the children finding trails, orienteering and exploring the school grounds together. Regular CPD and staff meetings have encouraged shared planning, resources and appreciation of the benefits that outdoor experiences can have for the children at the school and it is championed by all the staff and children. ■

References

- (1) Plymouth University. (2016). The Natural Connections Demonstration Project, Natural England.
- (2) Sally Kendall, John Rodger and Paul Hamlyn Foundation. (2015). Evaluation of Learning Away: Final Report, York Consulting LLP.
- (3) Fiennes, C. et al., (2015). The Blagrave Report: The Existing Evidence-Base about the Effectiveness of Outdoor Learning, Giving Evidence.
- (4) Higbee, K., (2001). Your Memory: How It Works and How to Improve It, Da Capo Lifelong Books.
- (5) <https://outdoorclassroomday.org.uk/>



Top tips!

- Walk around the whole school grounds as a whole staff or in small groups. Discuss how you could see each area being used.
- Get teachers to audit their use of the different areas over a half term. Which areas do they not use – is there a reason why?
- Consider long term plans and look for opportunities to include CIDIO opportunities.
- Train children to get coats and be outside in one minute.
- Wish list for curriculum areas – where do teachers struggle to make links? Provide relevant CPD or signpost them to the wealth of free material online.
- Sign up to initiatives such as Outdoor Classroom Day⁵ to celebrate and utilise all the grounds. Invite parents and governors too.
- Allocate CPD time / staff meeting time.
- Offer peer to peer if there is an expert in the same school.
- Use it as an approach – CIDIO? – get out then! The more you do this the more connected opportunities will present themselves to you. The outside is full of invitations and school grounds can be used in many ways.