

Outdoor Learning Research Hub Project

UPDATE by Carrie Hedges, Research Coordinator



The benefits of outdoors experiences for all are wide-ranging and increasingly supported by a growing evidence base. This evidence consistently highlights positive impacts on mental health, wellbeing and increased physical activity.g. ^{1,2}, and improved behaviour, concentration, independence, and increased attainment in schools e.g. ^{2,3,4} - and this list is by no means exhaustive! These impacts are recognised and reflected in a varied and wide-reaching field who have come together under the Research Hubs Project to support and strengthen the delivery of outdoor experiences and for all.

In recognising the recommendations of the Blagrave report⁵, to prioritise and focus resources and to increase evidence-based practice, the Institute for Outdoor Learning, University of Cumbria, Natural England, and The Council for Learning Outside the Classroom (CLOTC) together facilitate the Research Hubs Project of which the core aim is:

To meet the need for better joined-up research development in outdoor learning, to enable the nationwide development of an evidence base to support the delivery of high quality, frequent and progressive outdoor experiences for children and young people, and to raise the standards of professional delivery in outdoor learning research and practice.

By unifying a voice for outdoor learning, the project will influence policy and practice and establish a platform on which to seek further funding for targeted action-research to extend the evidence base. To do so, the project continues to develop in response to the Government's 25-year Environment Plan and Campaign 2022 – a project being developed by the Outdoor Council to deliver a joined-up and progressive outdoors experience for all school-aged children by 2022.

What has happened so far?

There are now 5 hub groups and several more in development. Participants come from all walks of life, from schoolteachers, academics, beekeepers, artists, farmers, representatives of charitable trusts and local authorities, to organisers of outdoor pursuits and those providers of the training or infrastructure to do so – the backbone to enable learning in the natural environment – the list goes on! The discussions have been eye-opening and interesting and illustrate the need for more joined-up research and opportunities for knowledge exchange. As has been said at more than one meeting - it feels as if the time is right, that we are on the cusp of a major shift in the wider acceptance and understanding of the importance of outdoor learning practices.

What are we asking?

To meet project aims, hub groups have been tasked to look at the capacity – the ability to provide opportunities, such as infrastructure and training - and reach – are we reaching everyone we should be? - of their region for OL opportunities and establish how progressive and joined-up those provisions are. From this we are building a picture of the regional priorities and recognising what the needs are to support the development of local action-research. The hub groups have also been asked to uncover unpublished evidence (e.g. PhD theses and data gathered within organisations) that might deliver answers to some of the gaps in the evidence base.

The Outdoor Learning Toolkit and Research Repository Moving forward the project has begun development of an online-accessible Outdoor Learning Toolkit and a repository of OL research and evaluation. The Toolkit will be searchable for information on practices (sailing, gardening, etc), practice styles (forest schooling, etc.), or impact outcomes (cognitive development, independence, etc.), and will provide information on impacts, accessibility, and the strength of supporting evidence. From this, users will be able to directly access and read that supporting evidence.

How can I take part?

Participation is open to anyone and you can find out more through the Research Hub webpage: www.outdoor-learning-research.org/Research/Research-Hub. Here you will find information on upcoming meetings, news and events (via our blog) and you can also access the April 'Hubs Project Report' which provides details of the highlights, aims, and developments of the project so far.

For more information and if you would like to contribute to the blog, please send your ideas to me at the email address below. I look forward to seeing you all at your next local hub meeting! ■

CARRIE HEDGES

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References:

1. Gill, T. (2011). Children and Nature 2008. Children and Nature: A Quasi-Systematic Review of the Empirical Evidence, (November) 1–34.
2. UKNEA. (2011). UKNEA Synthesis of the Key Findings. Unep-Wcmc, 87.
3. Dillon, J., Morris, M., et al. (2005). Engaging and Learning with the Outdoors (April) 90.
4. Waite, S., Passy, R., et al. (2016). Natural connections demonstration project, 2012- 2016: Final report.
5. Fiennes, C., E. Oliver, et al. 2015. The Existing Evidence Base about the Effectiveness of Outdoor Learning. Giving Evidence.

These referenced articles, and more, can be viewed on the IOL Research website.



www.outdoor-learning-research.org