

MEETING CHALLENGES IN OUTDOOR LEARNING ASSESSMENT

Maria Kmita
Plymouth University

Keywords: outdoor learning; assessment

Learning Outside the Classroom in Natural Environments (LINE) as an integrated part of education in the UK is a relatively new but rapidly burgeoning area. The Natural Connections Demonstration Project, funded by Natural England, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and English Heritage, is a large outdoor learning project in the UK that seeks to encourage the use of local natural environments for curricular learning in 200 schools in areas of high multiple deprivation. Assessment of this learning represents a challenge for many teachers. In the absence of an universal standardized tool for assessing outdoor learning in UK schools, there is a need to review and evaluate existing approaches to assessment in preparation for further empirical work on assessment of outdoor learning.

This paper provides an overview of literature reporting the use of different assessment tools to measure the outcomes of outdoor education between 2000 and 2013. The review shows how many diverse approaches to measuring the outcomes of outdoor education exist and how much they are linked to and result from theoretical and methodological concepts underpinning them. It discusses the strengths and challenges that different assessments present in the following areas: (1) role of teacher, student and researcher in the process of assessment (2) methods of assessments (3) length, depth and frequency of assessment. In terms of the role of teacher, student and researcher in the assessment process, the issues of control and ownership of the assessment are discussed. As for methods of assessments, this paper shows how the selection of a method (questionnaire, interview, observations) determines data generation, and thus highlights some aspect of outdoor education outcomes while, at the same time, marginalizing the others. The paper also discusses how length, depth and frequency of assessment impact the quality of the assessment. The review highlights the gaps in current outdoor learning assessment to support teachers' practice and children's learning. It makes suggestions as to possible future research and development in this area and invites further debate about assessment methods that could meet the demands of this mobile and flexible educational milieu.

H1

Supported by Plymouth University, Natural England, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and English Heritage.