

**“Miss, that’s the best PE lesson we’ve ever had,  
and we couldn’t see for most of it!”**

# Adventurous Activities and Physical Education in Wales

Nalda Wainwright and Andy Williams

**T**he introduction of the New National Curriculum in Wales in 2008 saw an increased emphasis on adventurous activities and outdoor learning. This has presented schools with many challenges, but also gives rise to many opportunities for transforming children’s experiences of physical education.

This article reports on the initial findings of a small-scale study into the impact of a new outdoor teaching resource upon learning and teaching of adventurous activities as part of physical education for 7-14 year olds in Wales. It also highlights some of the issues and explores possibilities for physical education in Wales.

## Education in Wales

Since the formation of the Welsh Assembly Government in 1990, Wales has sought to demonstrate that it has a different cultural and political identity to its bigger cousin across Offa’s Dyke. At the heart of this process has been reform of the education sector that has sought to ensure pupils in Wales have the knowledge, skills and attributes necessary for lifelong learning and success when they leave compulsory education. These developments have radically changed the landscape for outdoor learning in state schools in Wales in a way that has not been seen for over 20 years. Collectively, they offer a wonderful opportunity for children to experience adventurous activities as a statutory part of their physical education in both primary and secondary school and, coupled with an increased emphasis on learning in the outdoors in the new Foundation Phase, ensure pupils will experience the challenges and rewards of outdoor learning as a key component of their education and development.

Three developments are of particular importance for this research:

### 1. The introduction of adventurous activities as a statutory area of the physical education curriculum for all pupils aged 7-14 (DCELLS, 2008a)

These changes in the physical education curriculum ensure that all pupils in Wales will, in the future, experience adventurous activities as a compulsory part of the Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3 programme of study. However, the historic reliance on local authority outdoor residential centres as providers of such learning experiences has meant that many teachers have little, if any, professional experience of adventurous activities teaching, highlighting an immediate and pressing need for professional development and support around outdoor learning and adventurous activities teaching.

### 2. The introduction of the new Foundation Phase curriculum for 3-7 year olds

This new curriculum for the under 7s sees a marked increase in the provision of outdoor learning in all schools in Wales. The Foundation Phase is a holistic learning continuum with areas of learning replacing traditional subjects. A key principle of the Foundation Phase is the use of the outdoors as an integral part of children’s experience on a daily basis. In order to deliver the Foundation Phase, schools have made significant investments in developing their grounds and outdoor classrooms. Schools are encouraged to make regular use of their local environment with forest school sites in local woodlands and green spaces as well as using beaches and local parks. For pupils, these developments suggest that children entering Key Stage 2 in the future will be used to working outside and being very active in their own learning.



### 3. The introduction of an underpinning skills framework for 3-19 year olds that advocates the development of the key skills of thinking, communication, ICT and number across all subjects and areas of learning (including adventurous activities) (DCELLS, 2008b)

The skills framework identifies the need for children to develop their key skills across all subjects and in a range of learning experiences. Teachers are required to identify where and how children are developing the key skills in all subjects. The emphasis now is on a more holistic approach to learning, where the key skills enable children to learn for themselves and not just focus on memorising subject content.

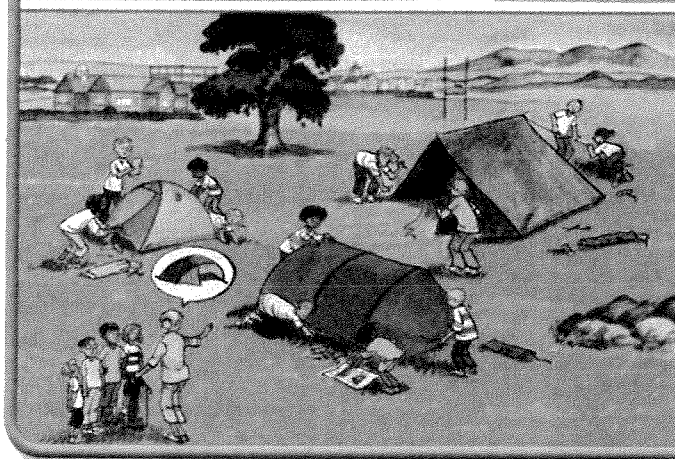
At the same time as the new curriculum was being implemented, the Outdoor Educators Advisory Panel (OEAP) developed the *Outdoor Learning Cards*, a resource to support teachers in the delivery of outdoor and adventurous activities. Teachers in Wales were quick to take the opportunity for training and resources in light of the new curriculum requirements. It is, however, well-documented that one-off training events can lack any real impact on the effectiveness of physical education (Armour and Yelling, 2002; Carnell and Lodge, 2002). Therefore, as providers of the training, we were interested to study its impact on children's physical education experiences.

The training was delivered to both primary teachers and secondary physical education specialists. The initial response to the research has been from primary schools, and we are continuing the research with a secondary focus in light of some of the implications raised from our findings, which we discuss later.

## The Outdoor Learning Cards

Developed in 2008 by the OEAP, the *Outdoor Learning Cards* are a resource and training programme to assist teachers in the delivery of high quality outdoor learning activities and to support the development of a range of pupils' skills related to these activities. Four adventurous activities are identified by the *Outdoor Learning Cards* as: journeying, bouldering, team building and orienteering. Key principles underpinning the development of the cards are outlined below. They are:

- for use in and around the normal school grounds
- require no specialist outdoor qualifications on the part of the teacher
- require no specialist equipment
- can be delivered after a one-day professional development course.



#### Activity

**Aim:** This session will illustrate the considerations needed to pitch a tent.

- Organise the young people into small groups – 4 is a good number.
- Each group is provided with a tent – they must pitch the tent on an area of the site and when the exercise is complete take down the tent and pack away all the equipment.
- Where possible choose different places on the site – i.e. next to a ledge, by a tree or on a slope. Where this is not possible give the group a scenario, for example Group 1 must assume that they are pitching the tent underneath a large horse chestnut tree. Group 2 must assume that they are pitching the tent on a slope, etc.
- When they have erected the tent they must tell the leader who will then instruct them on the next part of the task.

In addition the cards are:

- bilingual
- progressive in their demands on pupils
- differentiated according to pupils' needs
- cross-referenced to physical education and skills framework outcomes
- visually engaging and easy to handle.

Our focus was to research the impact of the *Outdoor Learning Cards* upon students' learning as well as teachers' practice.

Data for the study was generated via a questionnaire and selected semi-structured interviews from the 90 teachers who took part in five separate one-day *Outdoor Learning Cards* training courses (Wainwright and Williams, 2011). The initial findings suggest the provision of adventurous activities in schools is already changing for the better, with teachers responding enthusiastically to the opportunity to introduce pupils to a more adventurous, outdoor and experiential approach to learning in the physical education curriculum.

## Increase in teacher confidence to deliver adventurous activities in school

Without exception, all of the teachers on the training course reported they were more confident, or much more confident, to deliver adventurous activities in school as a result of their training course attendance. Even those teachers (the majority) who had very little previous outdoor teaching experience commented positively on their new found confidence. This they attribute to attending the training day and having the opportunity to work with the resource cards.

*“ [The training] gave me numerous ideas to develop in school and gave me the confidence and security....I never taught it before and now it features regularly in the teaching of PE.... They were easy to explain to other staff, which is vital as I am the co-ordinator but do not teach KS2....*

*I would encourage any teacher who has the opportunity, to make the most of this course, especially the non-specialist PE teachers.”*

It is encouraging that many teachers feel they have gained confidence in the teaching of adventurous activities. Certainly, for non-specialist physical education teachers operating at Key Stage 2, with little or no previous outdoor teaching experience, there was clear evidence of them reflecting on improvements in their own knowledge and understanding around adventurous activities.

*“ In primary we're not specialists....I'm PE co-ordinator, but my subject was always literacy in college and I'm now PE co-ordinator, and I'm not a specialist in any way, so I'm completely reliant on these courses really, so it's had a huge impact on us because it's shown us the sort of things that we need to be doing to develop these children in these outdoor and adventurous activities.”*

However, it is important not to get too carried away with these initial responses. Indeed, it is quite possible that what teachers are reporting is not that their teaching is any more effective than it was prior to the training, but that they simply feel more confident doing it with a ready made set of resource cards to guide them. This would not be an unusual outcome of a one-day training course and it mirrors Healy's (2010) findings, which highlighted how teachers are often more concerned with the practicalities of introducing new ideas to their pupils than they are with the theory and philosophy underpinning those ideas.

Irrespective of whether teachers are better (or just think they are better) at adventurous activities, what really matters at this point is that pupils are having more in-school opportunities to explore and learn more about a range of these activities than they have had for many years. What may be more problematic for traditional, national governing body (NGB) qualified outdoor educators is the thought that non-NGB qualified physical education teachers will now be teaching adventurous activities!

## Adventurous activities in the curriculum

Since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1990, adventurous learning outdoors has had a difficult and often marginalised presence on the curriculum, often existing as a somewhat detached week-long, end of year 6, residential experience. Whilst we fully recognise and support the value of such experiences and the learning opportunities they continue to provide, many would agree that the real potential of this approach to learning has never been fully realised. In the unseemly squabble for space and recognition that was the first draft of the National Curriculum (1990), outdoor and adventurous activities (as it is still known in England) was identified as one of two optional areas of learning (the other being athletic activities) in the subject area of physical education, alongside games, dance, gymnastics and swimming which were compulsory. In reality, this optional status meant that the stronger athletics-based traditions and interests of many schools, and the simpler practicalities of marking out an athletics area (as opposed to taking pupils off-site with all the red tape and risk assessment implications that would entail), militated against many pupils ever actually doing any adventurous activities, other than orienteering around the school grounds or the occasional problem-solving exercise, all neatly packaged into a double lesson on a wet Friday afternoon. So, for many years, the outdoor residential experience has fought a gallant, though undervalued, fight to provide pupils with the broad and balanced (physical) educational experience that is the key principle upon which the National Curriculum was built.

It was a particular interest of ours to explore the impact of the *Outdoor Learning Cards* training upon the provision of adventurous activities curriculum opportunities within the school setting. Somewhat unexpectedly, the findings were very positive for, whilst a small number of schools did indeed identify a move away from the traditional outdoor residential in favour of school-based and in-house delivery, most did not. In contrast, the majority of schools felt the *Outdoor Learning Cards* had actually expanded their school's provision of adventurous activities. Many teachers commented on the extended provision that was now evident across the full four year range of Key Stage 2, with particular emphasis on adventurous activities being timetabled into the curriculum on a regular basis for years 3, 4 and 5 as well as year 6 – something that did not happen very often in the past. Most encouragingly, these new opportunities for regular, on-site, teacher-facilitated adventurous activities appear to have been introduced to complement, rather than

replace, the outdoor residential. If this trend continues, it is reasonable to think that, in the future, the outdoor residential experience may become more integrated and valued as the natural culmination of Key Stage 2 adventurous activities learning. At the same time, it will inevitably challenge outdoor residential centre staff to make sure that the experiences they offer pupils connect with, and further extend, what those pupils have already done with their teachers in school.

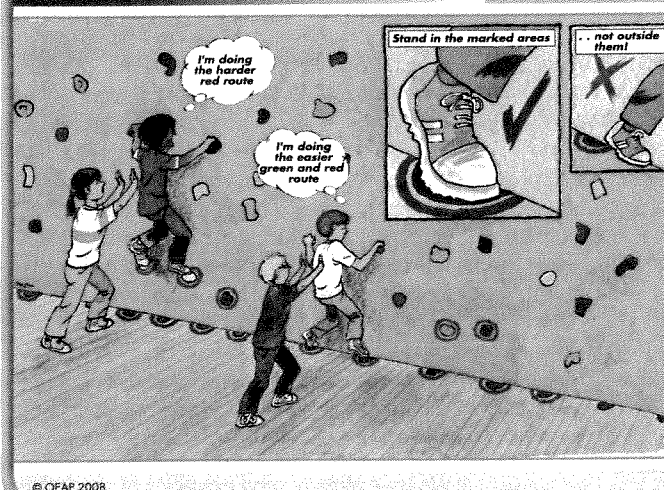
## Positive impact on children's learning

We asked ourselves the question: why have the *Outdoor Learning Cards* proved so popular with teachers and pupils that they are now keen and motivated to use them to deliver adventurous activities with all year groups? A number of possible explanations are possible.

Some teachers highlighted the particular value of the new adventurous activities opportunities to expand provision for pupils who have often felt excluded from any previous physical education success because of the dominance of team games and sports. This greater inclusivity of all children has been a major strength of outdoor pedagogy for many years and resonates strongly with the more traditional term 'outdoor education' and its holistic approach to learning.

“OAA (outdoor and adventurous activities) is a great way of keeping everyone active at a non-competitive level. It has proved a great success with children that are not keen on sport.”

Alternatively, it may well be that the greater diversity of learning offered by the statutory inclusion of adventurous activities within physical education is evident in the high levels of enjoyment and increased pupil motivation being reported by teachers.



### Activity

- Working in spotter/climber pairs, take turns to traverse along the base of the wall, keeping your feet inside the marked footholds on the floor.
- Try to use the edges of your toes to stand on the footholds.
- Don't forget to spot and encourage your partner as they climb.

### Review & Evaluation

- What footwork techniques did you use on the traverse? Edging? Foot-swap? Cross-through?
- What was the hardest part of the traverse for you?
- How did you solve this 'crux' move?
- Was the crux in the same place for your partner?
- Did your partner use the same technique to overcome the problem or a different one?
- How did your partner help you to overcome the challenge?
- What did your partner do well?

“The children are very motivated; they cannot wait for the summer term when they know the adventure cards are coming out. ...I did one last week, I did the blindfold one and set up a course. They were being blindfolded and working their way through the course and two children came up to me at the end and they said 'Miss, that's the best PE lesson we've ever had and we couldn't see for most of it'. They loved it because they are so fun.”

For us, however, the most significant impact of the *Outdoor Learning Cards* upon children's learning and teachers' teaching has been in relation to the focus on the development of key skills (thinking, communication, ICT and number) that are felt to underpin lifelong learning (DCELLS, 2008b). Teachers commented enthusiastically on the positive contribution of adventurous activities to this crucially important initiative. In so doing, they have identified not only how valuable adventurous activities are as an alternative (non-competitive, outdoor, experiential) approach to physical education but also, and most crucially, to the contribution that adventurous activities have been making to pupils' non subject-specific development of life skills.

“The *Outdoor Learning Cards* have a large impact on children's thinking skills and problem solving.... [children] solve problems more efficiently and communicate better with each other....For us its all about the skills, its teaching all those different key skills and they really come through in this because you've got your communication skills, you've got your creative thinking, you've got every skill, you've got the problem solving element of it.”

Outdoor educators throughout the land may well throw their hands in the air in asking how this is any different to what they have been saying and doing for the last 30 years. The answer we would suggest is that learning

outdoors is no longer on the margins of pupils' educational experience. On the contrary, in Wales at least, and in the guise of adventurous activities, it is now valued equally alongside other aspects of the subject area of physical education, as well as alongside all other curriculum areas, in its ability to contribute to the development of pupils' key skills. This dramatic change in the physical education-adventurous activities relationship has been brought about by the changes in the National Curriculum in Wales. The introduction of the *Outdoor Learning Cards*, as a user-friendly way of bringing outdoor learning and adventurous activities into the physical education programme of study, has been a significant vehicle in supporting teachers' ability to respond to these changes.

## Conclusion

Bringing adventurous activities into the physical education curriculum and school grounds, placing it in the hands of the teachers who best know and understand the particular needs of their pupils, and giving them the *Outdoor Learning Cards* training and resource to support their teaching have all had a positive impact upon children's learning. At a time when teachers in Wales have to identify how their teaching delivers the skills framework, it appears that they welcome both the *Outdoor Learning Cards* resource and the adventurous activities medium that so readily enables children to develop these key skills. Importantly for outdoor educators, these changes have also provided the long-sought after opportunity for their holistic, outdoor and experientially focused approach to learning to become a statutory and regular part of young people's education.

## Thoughts on the future

A number of questions are raised by this study which we are continuing to explore in ongoing research. In particular, teachers have highlighted concerns relating to moments of transition from the Foundation Phase (3-7 years) to Key Stage 2 and how the cross-curricular potential of the newly accessible school grounds can be harnessed across all Key Stage 2 subjects.

At Key Stage 3, we are concerned to know more about how physical education in secondary schools will respond to and build upon pupils' adventurous activities experiences of primary school. Secondary school physical education departments face a considerable challenge in extending the provision that is developing in primary schools. Primary school pupils used to working outdoors from the age of three through Foundation Phase and

adventurous activities in Key Stage 2 physical education will have greater confidence and an expectation to continue these activities. Primary teachers have reported high levels of motivation and enthusiasm for these activities; maintaining this into Key Stage 3 may go some way to reducing the fall in participation rates. Perhaps, this area of activity which has long been recognised for its ability to include all pupils may also see a different group of children (not just traditional games players) wanting to engage in physical activity in both school physical education and out-of-school opportunities.

We have already seen examples of secondary schools investing in climbing walls and developing mountain bike courses in school grounds. However, the prevailing timetabling constraints appear to be a major barrier to developing this aspect of the curriculum to its full potential. Secondary schools may need to think very creatively about their approaches to adventurous activities and look to ways of utilising school grounds, the local environment and local outdoor centres in a way that engages and motivates pupils, enabling them to develop activities they can access and continue for life.

At a time when there are concerns about children's health and wellbeing, and young people are increasingly disconnected from the natural environment, the need for adventurous activities in physical education is greater than ever – particularly in light of a growing body of research that identifies increased motor development, higher levels of physical activity and improved mental wellbeing when learning outdoors (Fjørtoft, 2004; Mygind, 2007; Louv, 2005; Bird, 2007). With the clear potential for transfer into adulthood of many outdoor and adventurous activities (Kirk, 2010), there needs to be a clear model that secondary schools can use and adapt to their individual settings and locality. Learning how to access and use the local environment is crucial if children are to lead healthy, active, fulfilling lives. We believe that outdoor and adventurous activities have a key role to play in ensuring children experience a rich variety of physical learning opportunities that develop their understanding of movement as an integral part of who they are, not just something that they do.

**NB.** *Adventurous activities is the term used in Wales to describe activities of a challenging and outdoor nature in the physical education programme of study (DCELLS, 2008). Other terms such as outdoor and adventurous activities and outdoor education, which reflect earlier curriculum models and teachers' personal preferences, are, for the purposes of this research, used synonymously.*

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