

Outdoor learning policy development in England and Wales

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Introduction

In preparing this paper on policy relating to outdoor learning in England and Wales to share with the international outdoor education research network, we have focused on outdoor education, but its policies are nested within the wider educational and political terrain such as new governmental agenda, economic imperatives, curriculum reviews (Rose, 2009; DfE 2014) and devolution of power for Wales and Scotland. (See also the contribution on outdoor learning in Scotland for divergence associated with different governmental policy.) Indeed, one of the major and enduring issues for outdoor learning in England and Wales has been its position vis a vis the main curriculum; whether it is seen in support of its aims, as a distraction from them or as a vital but separate aspect of children's education. There are potential dangers in outdoor learning being colonised by mainstream schooling (Rea, 2011; Rea and Waite, forthcoming); however, if opportunities for outdoor learning are enshrined in children's rights, only through inclusion within statutory guidance may Learning Outside the Classroom become available for all children (see e.g. Waite 2010 regarding the decline in outdoor learning).

In this paper, we initially describe how policy has unfolded in England and Wales, then focus on two critical events that have proved to contribute to turning points in the development of outdoor learning policy and the potential impact of a planned deregulation of Health and Safety. We turn to a brief consideration of policy frameworks in Wales since devolution in 1998 and finally reflect on future directions for policy and practice of outdoor learning in England and Wales and its potential echoes of and resonances for other countries.

Origins and early aims for outdoor learning in England and Wales¹

Outdoor learning in England and Wales has been established for well over a century although in different forms and with a variety of different aims. Consistent with the strongly class-based society of the early twentieth century, there were two main strands up until the end of the second world war. The first was the education for character-building that was associated with the public (i.e. independent or fee-paying) schools; this encouraged qualities of courage, loyalty, endurance, a sense of honour, self-denial, fair play, public spirit and obedience, and aimed to produce disciplined, socially responsible and self-reliant young men (Cook, 1999, p.58). Activities included sailing, walking, expeditions and camping, together with the sporting activities that took place on school playing fields such as rugby and cricket, and were strongly gender-related. The all-male combined cadet force was established in 1859 for military training, for example. This type of education was purely for the boys who were intended to be the leaders and defenders of empire, and who were seen to set the standards of behaviour that the working classes should follow.

The second strand related to the improving the health and morality of the working classes, and was aimed at both boys and girls. 'Nature Study' was recommended as a subject in elementary schools by the Board of Education at the beginning of the twentieth century, although there was little central direction as to what this should include; the underlying governmental concern was with directing children's interests away from what were seen as the excesses of city life and towards a sober and healthy appreciation of country life. Organisations such as the voluntary School Nature Study Union were set up to support teachers in this subject, and provided teacher training, a library and resources, and the journal *School Nature Study* disseminated ideas and good practice. Gardening was encouraged, for example, and pupils went on pond-dipping expeditions or excursions that included study of plant and animal life which, on longer trips, incorporated aspects of geology and geography. There was little coherence to the way in which Nature Study was taught, however, and in addition to the underlying moral intentions of this type of learning, the various aims at school level included widening a child's interest and experience, awakening sympathy for nature, deepening a child's sense of wonder, fostering delight in discovery and offering practical application of science through the study of plants and animals (Jenkins and Swinnerton, 1998, pp.51-65). This variable approach in schools was complemented by various voluntary and charitable organisations that offered city children

¹ For historically, educational policy applied across the UK including Scotland and, only relatively recently, has devolution of power led to some interesting divergence in policy regarding outdoor learning. This is relevant to international cultural contextualisation especially in relation to a colonial discourse.

holidays in the countryside and founded outdoor clubs and societies for children and adolescents.

A further influential, yet often overlooked, antecedent of modern outdoor learning is rooted in religious practice. Pilgrimage was a significant feature of the early church in the UK, and it is possible to see some attributes of modern outdoor learning such as spirituality and personal journeying in such religious travelling. However, with the rise of Methodism and non-conformist religious movements, there was a move towards a 'muscular' morality foundation in UK Christianity and an understanding that virtue and moral values could be developed through physicality. Whilst the rise of non-conformism was not limited to the industrial areas of the UK, it is in these areas where there is the greatest evidence of advocacy of outdoor learning. This advocacy took many forms – influencing local decision making, developing local charitable associations, lobbying government as well as through direct action, and led to increased use of the outdoors – both in the management of schools, the development of urban recreational spaces, in setting up sanatoriums and in the creation of cycling and rambling associations. An underlying purgative quality of 'a healthy mind in a healthy body' can still be detected in current wellbeing policy discourse.

The statutory element of outdoor learning was widened by the 1944 Education Act, which made it a duty of Local Education Authorities (LEAs; the government-funded bodies in England and Wales concerned with local implementation of policy) to ensure that the provision for primary, secondary and further education included 'adequate facilities for recreation and social and physical training' (Education Act, 1944, cited in Cook, 1999, p.161). This meant that LEAs could establish and maintain camps, playing fields, play centres among other facilities, and the Act encouraged the establishment of residential centres, which subsequently became part of many children's education through the 1950s and 60s – although these were generally based on offering working class students a replica of the public school experience and aimed at modifying young men's behaviour in response to rising juvenile crime rates (Cook, 1999 p.170-1; Freeman, 2011, p.27). This 'character training' aspect of outdoor learning was gradually redefined from the 1950s, however, as its links with war and empire seemed increasingly anachronistic; welfarism, equality and democracy were more central to the political agenda and fostering personal growth in terms of self-efficacy and confidence building was seen as a more appropriate form of education (Freeman, 2011, p.40). Greater resources made available through the post-war boom also contributed to an increase in the number of voluntary and charitable organisations involved with outdoor learning, and by the 1970s associations included, for example, the Field Studies Council, the Outward Bound Trust, the Council for Environmental Education, and the

National and Rural Studies Association. There were also a wide range of facilities offered by the public, private and voluntary sectors, together with youth work organisations such as the Scouts and Girl Guides and schemes such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award (<http://www.outdoor-learning.org/Default.aspx?tabid=199>).

Thus historically, there had been steady support for the benefits of challenge, forms of discovery learning and healthy outdoor living; although much of this was in response to a deficit view of the socio-economically disadvantaged. A series of critical events during the last twenty years have unsettled taken-for-granted acceptance of benefits, challenged attitudes to acceptable risk, reduced willingness of staff to undertake provision, and put wide access to outdoor and adventurous education under threat.

Critical incidents around the safety of young people in the UK 1990-2011

Outdoor learning in the UK has a very good safety record. Between the years of 1996 and 2008 there have been 4232 pupil deaths, 20 of which occurred abroad. In the context of the estimated 10 million school age children all of whom might spend on average one or two days on out-of-school activities, the average of 3 deaths per year represents a very low fatality rate (Fulbrook 2005). Indeed, The Guardian suggested that, “just about the safest place a child could be is on a school trip” (Revell, 2005).

Despite this, there is considerable public interest in the safety of young people on school trips and the following two critical incidents have had a significant impact on safety management in outdoor learning in the UK of practice-based events.

- **Lyme Bay kayaking incident 1993**
- **Glenridding Beck drowning incident 2002**

Lyme Bay 1993

The incident: On 22 March 1993, a group of eight schoolchildren and their teacher were accompanied by two instructors from an outdoor centre on a kayak trip across Lyme Bay, on the south coast of England. As a result of a series of errors and circumstances, four of the teenagers drowned. The party had run into difficulties straight away as one kayak became swamped. The group was swept out to sea, where all their kayaks were quickly swamped.

The impact: The subsequent trial resulted in the prosecution of the parent company and the centre manager. The owner of the activity centre and the centre itself were convicted of

corporate manslaughter over the deaths. This was the first conviction for this offence in the UK. The owner was jailed for three years, but his sentence was cut to two years on appeal. This tragedy accelerated governmental discussions to end self-regulation of outdoor education centres. The Activity Centres (Young Persons' Safety) Act 1995 was passed and an independent licensing authority, the UK Adventure Activities Licensing Authority (AALA) was formed, funded by the Department of Education and Employment (now DFE) and under the guidance of the Health and Safety Executive (HSE).

The consequences for child safety: The Lyme Bay disaster led to the introduction of regulation into an industry that was formerly largely self-regulated. The incident followed a number of high-profile television reports into poor safety standards in the commercial sector, and concentrated attention on the safety of commercial provision of residential outdoor education. However the legislation was widely seen as flawed. It established AALA with a remit to inspect and licence commercial operators offering residential courses for young people that included caving, climbing, trekking and watersports. This excluded all non-commercial operators including large voluntary bodies such as the Scouts, and all state funded organisations. It also excluded all non-residential provision, provision outside of the UK and any adventurous activities that were not included within the legislation. The inspection regime was thus highly patchy.

At the same time, AALA developed guidance on safe practice across a wide range of provision. Particularly on issues of qualifications, this drew heavily on existing training programmes and reinforced the role of National Governing Bodies (NGBs) in each outdoor sport as arbiters of safe practice and professional standards. Many of the NGB training schemes had been developed to support voluntary clubs and they were often very hierarchical, stressed technical competence in the sport and the ability to deliver the NGB's own qualifications. The use of these schemes as arbiters of good practice led to considerable standardisation of commercial provision and working practices around the NGB awards. Whilst this may well have resulted in fewer accidents, it also arguably reduced the quality and variety of experiences in commercial provision and tended towards risk aversion in programming. It is significant that during this period, many outdoor centres moved to providing all the activities on-site, to highly standardised sessions, and to the exclusion of participants with additional needs that could not be addressed within standardised sessions.

At the same time, the AALA licence was recognised by clients (particularly schools) as an external audit of provision and a 'badge' of safe practice. Thus whilst the requirement for inspection was limited to commercial providers, many state and voluntary organisations, as well as commercial providers not required to be licensed, joined the licensing scheme in

order to benefit from external review and the commercial advantages of holding a licence. Overall this meant that the impact of licensing had an impact considerably beyond the initial limitations of the legislation leading to considerable convergence in staffing, professional practice and programme structure across all sectors.

Thus the consequence of the tragedy in Lyme Bay can be seen as increased state regulation of risk in outdoor learning, and a widespread withdrawal from higher risk, unpredictable and independent activities for young people.

Glenridding Beck 2002

The incident: Three staff from a Lancashire high school took a party of twelve Year 8 pupils and three primary school aged children on an activity weekend. The party went to a pool in Glenridding Beck to do an activity called “plunge pooling”, jumping 4 metres into a rock pool in a mountain stream and swimming to an exit point. On the weekend of the tragedy, the weather was cold and wet. The stream was in spate and the water very cold. Immediately after jumping in, a child was seen to be panicking and was unable to get out. The leader jumped in to rescue him, but after a few minutes was overcome by the cold and left the pool. The child's mother who was helping out on the weekend then jumped in, but was also overcome by the cold and had to be rescued. The pupil who pulled her from the water was also affected by the cold. Both he and the mother were airlifted to hospital and treated for hypothermia. The child was pronounced dead at the scene.

The impact: The party leader was jailed for manslaughter, after investigation by the HSE and Police showed the main cause of the tragedy as serious errors of judgement by the party leader in planning and leading the activity; some shortcomings in checking procedures; some shortcomings in the LEA's arrangements for educational visits; and misunderstandings between the LEA and the school as to certain responsibilities.

Consequences for child safety: This was not an incident related to outdoor professionals, but highlighted the role of teachers in the safety of young people. The incident, its publicity and the subsequent HSE report identified a number of areas of concern. Foremost amongst these was the issue of responsibility. Three teachers (and the mother of the child) were present at the incident and thus had responsibility for the safety of the children under their care. The leader had run the same trip in previous years, but was not properly qualified or experienced in the activities and ignored existing guidelines and good practice. He was convicted of manslaughter on the grounds that he had not taken reasonable care. However the management and governors of the school and the local authority were also criticised as they also had responsibility to ensure that the supervision was appropriate. Although the

investigation identified weaknesses in the administration of the supervision, it also highlighted uncertainty over who was responsible for checking qualifications, approving new activities and making decisions relating to the off-site visit.

The prosecution of a school teacher raised considerable concerns in the profession about the risks of taking young people on adventurous activities. Guidance from the National Association of Schoolmasters, Union of Women Teachers (NASUWT), the largest teachers' union in England and Wales, went on to issue guidance advising its members against certain school visits and to consider organising them with extreme care. Such guidance was criticised by the HSE, but is indicative of concerns in the teaching profession about the extent of individual responsibility within a culture of litigation.

The incident reinforced the importance of properly qualified supervision, so that the planning and risk management of an activity is informed by good practice. The incident also highlighted how school procedures and decisions have a direct impact on the safety of young people.

Undoubtedly these are examples of a tragic loss of young lives, however, government policy response to a subsequent retrenchment in opportunities for adventurous education and concern about an increasingly risk averse culture in the UK raises further issues for future provision.

Deregulation with the Expected Repeal of the Activity Centres (Young Persons' Safety) Act 1995

In September 2011 the UK Government announced its intention to repeal the legislation and remove the current inspection scheme for adventurous activities. Separate consultations were held in Wales, Scotland and England, to determine what would replace inspection. After a process of consultation between the HSE and representatives of the outdoor sector, a draft proposal was developed that suggested that the inspection regime could be replaced with guidelines for outdoor providers that identify legal obligations and implications for practice (HSE working group, 2012). The draft document states:

Following the guidance is not compulsory and you are free to take other action. But if you do follow the guidance you will normally be doing enough to comply with the law. Health and Safety inspectors seek to secure compliance with the law and may refer to this guidance as illustrating good practice.

In addition the document proposes a central register of providers based on referral from existing accreditation schemes. Whilst the register is voluntary it is intended that it will provide recognition that providers are accredited to an appropriate scheme and thus have appropriate safety management systems.

The impact: The impact of the proposed changes is unknown. The government argues that it will free up the industry from unnecessary regulation and expense. The changes would mean that the HSE would no longer be responsible for licensing (through the licensing scheme) but would still investigate incidents and prosecute breaches of the law. The outdoor industry would become largely self-regulated probably through a number of existing accreditation schemes.

Consequences for child safety: This is a new direction for the UK. Whilst the regulatory framework will probably be similar to how it was prior to Lyme Bay, the scale of provision has changed significantly. This raises a number of concerns.

First, it seems likely that child safety will remain a sensitive area for the law, politicians, the media and professionals. To some degree political and media pressure has been mediated in the last few years with a state inspectorate setting standards, and providing oversight. Following incidents or media interest, providers have been judged against their compliance to AALA guidance, and as in the case of Glenridding Beck failure to follow this guidance has been seen as evidence of poor practice. With the removal of the inspectorate, there will be a more complex landscape of good practice with no clear arbiter or standard. It seems probable that this will mean that courts, politicians, the media and professionals will make very different judgements on what constitutes good practice. This may lead to a withdrawal from the areas of professional practice where good practice is hardest to define, possibly as a result of increased insurance costs, or as a reaction to increased exposure.

Second, the withdrawal of state regulation opens the possibility of potentially under-qualified or experienced operators trading on the previous generally good safety record of outdoor learning. Indeed currently AALA accreditation acts as a 'badge of quality' with many schools relying on this as a means of assessing the safe operation of organisations involved in the outdoors. It seems likely that the withdrawal of a recognised benchmark will mean that small providers in particular will have difficulty in demonstrating their commitment to good practice in safety management.

Thus, a consequence of the repeal may be a period of uncertainty over what constitutes good practice, possible incentivising of less safety-conscious operators and ultimately a consolidation of provision which is concentrated within larger organisations based on a cost-effective low-risk model of highly standardised sessions, provided on-site. The resultant policy outcomes will arise through market forces of business rather than evidenced appropriate learning opportunities for young people and a choice of outdoor activities to provide for a range of educational purposes.

UK outdoor educators are starting to question whether this commodification of outdoor and adventurous learning is necessarily a good thing and the next few years may be a key period in the history of outdoor learning in the UK. As Allison and Telford (2005) suggested,

British outdoor education is strengthening in many areas and receiving funding and support from sources outside mainstream education such as social services and community education. Hopefully, in coming years, a balance of safety issues and educational issues can be reached in order to address the current imbalance and over emphasis on safety. It also seems that the time is approaching in the development of the field of outdoor education when dominant paradigms and assumptions can be challenged, such as adventure and risk as the primary philosophical theme, in favour of pluralistic themes such as creativity, trust, learning, care and critical discourse alongside adventure.

Since devolution in 1998, educational policies in England and Wales have diverged and, in the next two sections, we describe recent relevant policy initiatives.

Current policy in England

Although LAs have continued to have the statutory duty to provide outdoor learning facilities, learning outdoors has never been a national movement as in some other European countries such as Denmark or Germany. In addition, the status of outdoor learning has always had a vulnerable and marginal position within the school curriculum; funding cuts during the 1980s reduced the number and quality of facilities on offer (Taylor, *et al*, 2009) and a more prescriptive national curriculum has encouraged teachers to remain in their classrooms rather than explore the opportunities afforded outside (<http://www.outdoor-learning.org/Default.aspx?tabid=199>). Nonetheless the Labour administration (1997-2010) recognised the benefits that outdoor learning can bring, and implemented a number of initiatives when in office. In 2006 the *Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto* (DfES, 2006) was issued, defining learning outside the classroom (LOtC) as:

raising achievement through an organised, powerful approach to learning in which direct experience is of prime importance. This is not only about **what** we learn but importantly **how** and **where** we learn' (DfES, 2006, p.3).

By 2010 there were around 1,920 signatories to this Manifesto, including schools, Local Authorities (LAs, which have superseded LEAs), museums and outdoor centres (HoC, 2010), who, by signing the Manifesto, promised to take a range of actions including:

1. providing young people with a wide range of experiences outside the classroom
2. promoting LOtC 'so there is widespread appreciation of the unique contribution these experiences make to young people's lives'
3. improving professional development
4. enabling schools and other key organisations to manage visits safely and efficiently
5. providing easy access to information, expertise and guidance
6. offering high-quality learning experiences

(DfES, 2006, p.7).

In 2008 the Quality Badge scheme was launched, which offered accreditation to providers, and in 2009 the government established the independent Council for Learning Outside the Classroom for the UK, whose remit covers ten areas that include arts and creativity, sacred space, school grounds, natural environment and adventure education. In addition, a Teaching Outside the Classroom initiative offers placements for trainee teachers in settings other than schools, including outdoor education centres, city farms and environmental centres (<http://www.teachingoutsidetheclassroom.com/introduction>). However it is worth noting that the core funding is due to be discontinued in 2011, making provision for future funding at best limited in the current economic conditions.

While these different policy measures appear to offer financial and structural support for LOtC, there is still a wide variation between schools in the way that LOtC is interpreted and implemented, and it remains a matter to be determined by individual schools. Some clearly believe that learning outdoors is a priority, with examples of Forest Schools, school gardening and school farms seen in schools across the country, while others remain unpersuaded of the benefits. A recent House of Commons report (HoC, 2010, p.5) suggested that there are two ways in which to ensure that LOtC is taken seriously by all headteachers; the first is to make it an entitlement within the national curriculum and the

second to ensure it is considered by Ofsted (the English school inspection body) as part of the inspection process. Until this happens, the *status quo* is likely to remain.

A more embedded approach to outdoor learning and the effect of direct governmental policy in support of outdoor learning may be seen in the following brief description of outdoor learning in Wales since devolution².

Current policy in Wales

The Minister for Sport introduced the Climbing Higher policy document in 2005. This has ambitious targets to get the people of Wales more active and involved with the countryside in their localities by 2025. For example, 95% of people in Wales will have a footpath or cycle-path within a ten minute walk of their home and no one should live more than 300 meters from their nearest natural green space. Subsequent updates on this have appeared but the ambitious twenty year targets remain.

A new play-based curriculum 'The Foundation Phase Curriculum' and the Framework for Children's Learning for 3 to 7-year-olds in Wales draw on evidence of international best practice and research and strongly emphasises the need for young children to be active outdoor learners as well as in the classroom. This means that outdoor learning is embedded into education policy in Wales and is informed by international research on its educational benefits. The Welsh National Curriculum now has a great emphasis on learning in the outdoors for under 7s with a strong commitment to Forest Schools. Outdoor Learning is then a statutory part of PE at both key stage 2 and 3.

A professional development resource, Outdoor Learning Cards, was developed in 2008 by the Outdoor Education Advisors Panel. These cards, which are in English and Welsh, are designed for teachers to deliver Adventurous Activities. The impact of the cards has been reported by Williams & Wainwright (2011), who suggest improved teaching and learning especially in the area of the key skills. They say "the introduction of the Outdoor Learning Cards, as a user-friendly way of bringing outdoor learning into the school timetable, has been a significant vehicle in supporting teachers' ability to respond (to changes)".

² Devolution in Wales takes the form of a Welsh National Assembly, created by the Government of Wales Act 1998, that has responsibility to legislate on education, amongst other responsibilities.

Changes have also made in secondary education with the introduction of The Welsh Baccalaureate (2007) that has a strong experiential / vocational emphasis. Many schools see Outdoor Education as the vehicle for delivering aspects of the Welsh Baccalaureate. In addition Adventurous Activities become a statutory component of PE for 8-16 year olds.

All the above developments are underpinned by a 'Skills Framework' for 3 – 19 year olds with a focus on thinking, communication, ICT and number (DCELLS, 2008).

Education for Sustainable Development and Global Citizenship have been introduced as important concepts within schools. These are themes in the curriculum rather than subjects and can therefore contribute to outdoor learning by offering new foci for its implementation across subjects.

Future directions for policy and practice

There are some signs that the current coalition Government supports the provision of outdoor learning in their educational policies; however the impetus and enactment of policy is equally important and the impact of major policy changes such as the deregulation of health and safety around adventurous activity provision is as yet unclear.

The motivation for the growth of popular support for outdoor learning support seems to be derived from a return to a discourse of character building, mingled with a deficit view of the 'disadvantaged child'. This may well be underpinned by current socio-economic drivers for advocating nature as a low cost antidote to society's ills.

A more positive interpretation might be that a government in search of new entrepreneurial solutions to economic problems may recognise the potential of outdoor learning to foster creative thinking, practical hands-on active learning and the co-construction of successful learning experiences outside of school. Potential social cohesion benefits for local community learning may also be a driver in the context of the government's proposal that a "Big Society" step up to meet local needs. Furthermore, policy to increase Learning Outside the Classroom might be in response to the perceived current failure of education in England and Wales to meet worldwide educational standards (see, for example, the PISA reports).

Many countries are facing economic crises and challenges to improve educational standards. It will be interesting to see in our various policy paper contributions how such global concerns are being played out in relation to outdoor learning in other national contexts.

There may be key commonalities and differences that help us to distinguish the different contributions to policy and future directions for outdoor learning.

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