

Is Outdoor Learning in Scotland blossoming?

Rob Bushby is UK Manager of the John Muir Award – the John Muir Trust’s environmental award scheme. Here he takes in the view of the strategic landscape of Outdoor Learning in Scotland.

How about this for a statement of intent in an education system?

- **Every learner** is entitled to experience Learning for Sustainability – where Learning for Sustainability covers Outdoor Learning, Global Citizenship, and Sustainable Development Education.
- **Every practitioner** embeds Learning for Sustainability in their professional values and practice.
- **Every school** develops a coherent community approach to Learning for Sustainability.

Pie in the sky? Not at all. It’s been part of the education set-up in Scotland since 2013 – backed up by 31 detailed [recommendations](#)¹ accepted and signed off, in full, at government minister level². These recommendations focus on 5 areas: Learners, Practitioners and Leaders, a Whole School Approach, School Grounds, and a Strategic National Approach.

The aim is for Learning for Sustainability to be an entitlement ‘experienced in a transformative way by every learner’, through a ‘coherent whole school approach’, with nothing asked of educators ‘that is not already implied by Curriculum for Excellence’ (Scotland’s national Curriculum). That’s pretty good top-line stuff.

In education terms in Scotland, Outdoor Learning is a facet of Learning for Sustainability. This has been coined ‘to simplify and bring coherence to the language being used by different agencies’³. In a broader context, Outdoor Learning is seen by some as an *approach* to learning, a significant entity in its own right – making use of outdoor settings for learning outcomes.

How’s it progressing?

Encouragingly, both Learning for Sustainability and Outdoor Learning feature in Education Scotland’s [Corporate Plan](#) through to 2016⁴. As the implementing and inspection body for government policy, Education Scotland buy-in and accountability are key. Whilst progress hasn’t been as swift as some would like (is it ever?), there is support at the highest levels, and committed leadership from senior management.

A recent Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) [report](#)⁵ looked at over 1000 outdoor lessons, comparing results from surveys in 2006 and 2014, and concluded that Outdoor Learning has increased. Teachers using the outdoors find it makes learning more enjoyable, challenging, active and collaborative. SNH Chairman Ian Ross said: “It’s clear that there’s a positive trend and it shows that teaching outside, especially in green areas, benefits pupils. It’s not just fun but it helps them learn. The challenge is to find ways to help schools - particularly those in deprived areas - get out more and make the most of the benefits nature can bring.”

From other sources and media stories, it can be hard to tell – and easy to spin which way you like – whether the glass is half full or half empty. Recent UK government reports show [increased adult nature visits](#)⁶ and that [70% of children](#) (c 7 million) spend time in the natural environment at least once a week⁷. Sounds good. However 12% of children rarely if ever visit. And a [RSPB Connecting with Nature report](#)⁸ claims that only 27% of 8-12 year olds in Scotland (21% in England, 25% in Northern Ireland, 13% in Wales) ‘have a connection to nature that could be considered realistic and achievable for all children’. You can pick your survey, make your choice.

What’s helping in Scotland?

We’ve had a confluence of positive initiatives in recent years.

The General Teaching Council of Scotland began revising its Professional Standards just as the newly-elected government asked a One Planet Schools Working Group in 2011 to propose how to embed Outdoor Learning

and Sustainability in schools. Again, some enlightened leadership was brought to bear. [New standards](#) – requiring commitment from all school leaders and new teachers – have Learning for Sustainability, values and leadership at their heart⁹. This has meant that these themes are steadily working their way into teaching practice through self-evaluations and supported opportunities for [Professional Recognition in Outdoor Learning](#)¹⁰, as well as schools’ inspection processes. Professor Pete Higgins, Chair of the Learning for Sustainability Implementation Group, recognises that: “Many teachers work hard to deliver high-quality outdoor learning experiences and are becoming more comfortable about encompassing and embracing it within their own discipline”.

A further strand is Scotland’s first [National Play Strategy](#)¹¹, launched in 2013, in which the Minister for Children and Young People commits that “All children and young people should have the opportunity to play every day”. In particular, the strategy notes, ‘outdoor play especially in natural spaces is beneficial and provides experiences which cannot be replicated indoors’.

We’re seeing numerous efforts to articulate and showcase this area of learning. An Education Scotland [Opening Up Great Learning](#) paper¹² explores how to ‘embed Learning for Sustainability within your professional values and actions.’ Specific subject areas are encouraging professional dialogue – [Religious and Moral Education through Outdoor Learning](#)¹³ is well worth a look, for example. And the recent publication [Conversations about Learning for Sustainability](#)¹⁴ celebrates the activities and achievements of 20 schools and nurseries in 14 local authorities across the country.

Resources are clearly tight, and no significant new national or local funding is on offer for Learning for Sustainability. ‘The task is to shape, frame and where necessary develop these existing resources at school, local and national levels.’¹⁵ Creative approaches are being brought to bear. A succession of Education Scotland teacher secondments (with remits for both Learning for Sustainability and Outdoor Learning) is proving to be highly effective at joining up strategic aims with grassroots activity, through the application of valuable insights, experience and enthusiasm. And to show the breadth of commitment, all 12 Education Scotland Senior Education Officers, with individual remits from arts to maths to health and wellbeing, are spending time being mentored by third sector practitioner organisations throughout 2015.

There’s further integration in quango and council infrastructure. Both Cairngorms and Loch Lomond & The Trossachs National Parks have roles and resources dedicated to supporting Outdoor Learning, linking Curriculum for Excellence to their special qualities and statutory aims. And Edinburgh Council, for example, has a comprehensive Outdoor Learning Strategy that gives focus to the benefits of its own delivery and partnership working in this area.

So is it all rosy in the garden – or school grounds - and beyond?

Clearly, there’s lots going on. The momentum – and potential – is truly exciting. But there are growing pains, gaps, and some muffled alarm bells.

Firstly, terminology. ‘Learning for Sustainability’ has become a shopping basket of a term, overloaded with content. The initial thematic trinity of ‘sustainable development, global citizenship and outdoor learning’¹⁶ has been extended and re-interpreted to incorporate up to 7 separate themes. It’s not quite as bad as the take on the term ‘sustainability’ by Grand Designs’ Kevin McCloud - “it’s now a big baggy sack in which people throw all kinds of old ideas, hot air and



Diagram 1: Learning for sustainability word cloud

dodgy activities”. But whilst this current [word map](#)¹⁷ offers coherence and clarity for some, it’s confusing for others trying to get to grips with the concept.

Organisational references are tripping us up, too. There’s confusion over identities and roles of Learning for Sustainability (the umbrella term) and [Learning for Sustainability Scotland](#)¹⁸, a UN-Recognised Regional Centre of Expertise on Education for Sustainable Development membership body (currently free to join). There are misperceptions that this has a role to implement Learning for Sustainability recommendations; both names and abbreviations (LfS/LfSS) are at times used interchangeably; web search for one and the other pops up at the top of the list.

Inevitably, it’s difficult to balance the messaging around this myriad of themes. Certainly, many in the Outdoor Learning world are feeling a bit squeezed out (although a dedicated soon-to-be-published Education Scotland paper should help address this).

There is a striking absence of ‘adventure’ in the lead ‘Opening Up Great Learning’ paper, and very limited reference to what might be called ‘further away’ outdoor experiences, both of which are fundamental features of the Outdoor Learning landscape. The Education Endowment Foundation recently identified, for instance, that “outdoor adventure learning interventions consistently show positive benefits on academic attainment and wider outcomes such as self-confidence. The [research](#) found that, on average, pupils who participate in adventure learning interventions appear to make approximately three months additional progress over the course of the year”¹⁹. The evidence suggests that the impact is greater for longer courses (more than a week), and those in a ‘wilderness’ setting, though other types of intervention still show some positive impacts.

The way to create wider buy-in (particularly amongst those less familiar and lacking confidence in this area), and better engage those that can help in its delivery, is to ensure that concepts, resources and support are clear and accessible, not overcomplicated. Consolidation, clarification and simplification are required.

Uneven ground

Much of a UK-wide commentary in recent years refers to children being ‘disconnected from nature’, in blanket terms. What this often obscures is that there is a huge amount of commitment and delivery, from ground level through to government support. What it also neglects is that socio-economic factors significantly influence the amount and quality of access to the outdoors. If you’re amongst the poorest 15% in Scotland, you’ll be 6 times less likely to access wild places²⁰. Back to the SNH report on ‘Teaching, learning and play in the outdoors’. Co-author Greg Mannion notes that while there is more outdoor learning on average than in 2006, “what pupils get varies a lot from school to school and schools in deprived areas are offering noticeably less time outdoors.”

This comment in the same report, from Suzanne Hargreaves, Senior Education Officer for Health and Wellbeing and Outdoor Learning at Education Scotland, gives an indication of distance travelled and areas to address – and also demonstrates the commitment referred to earlier:

“Whilst these findings are positive we have some challenges ahead. Greater provision is required, particularly in secondary schools in order to capitalise fully on outdoor learning of all kinds, including residential experiences. Schools in areas of deprivation also face challenges in providing this type of learning. We will continue to work with schools and outdoor learning organisations to support practitioners in realising and capitalising on the benefits of outdoor learning, and to help ensure these opportunities are open to all learners across Scotland.”

Roots and Shoots

Imagine 10 years ago, if every school educator was told that they had to use a new-fangled gadget as an integral part of their job. Cries of “I need training”, “That’s only for specialists”, “Not my skill-set, I don’t do hi-tech” might resound. Now the smartphone, iPad and smartboard are pervasive. They’re used broadly, frequently, effectively, instinctively. Yet the vast majority of teachers don’t have an IT degree...

So, in another 10 years, why not the same with learning outdoors? We're on track for teachers and educators, whatever their background and skill-set, to confidently use the natural environment to enhance the learning, wider achievements and attainment of pupils. The outdoors isn't the realm of specialists, it's there to be integrated into good teaching, effective learning.

There have been two common refrains in recent years: that children are disconnected from nature; and that we need government commitment to put the outdoors at the heart of the curriculum. That commitment, in Scotland at least, is present. Politicians, policy makers and implementers, educators, third sector and private sector organisations, pupils and parents have the opportunity, albeit with limited resource, to stimulate a culture change in education. We have a once-in-a-generation chance to shift the learning landscape.

¹ Learning for Sustainability Report, 2012

<http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools/curriculum/ACE/OnePlanetSchools/LearningforSustainabilityReport>

² Learning for Sustainability Report: Government response, 2013

<http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools/curriculum/ACE/OnePlanetSchools/GovernmentResponse>

³ Education Scotland 'Opening Up Great Learning', 2015

<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence/keydocs/openingupgreatlearning.asp>

⁴ Education Scotland Corporate Plan 2012-2016 www.educationscotland.gov.uk

⁵ SNH Commissioned Report 779: Teaching, learning and play in the outdoors: a survey of school and pre-school provision in Scotland, 2015

<http://www.snh.gov.uk/publications-data-and-research/publications/search-the-catalogue/publication-detail/?id=2225>

⁶ Monitor of Engagement with the Natural Environment: survey purpose and results 2014

<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/monitor-of-engagement-with-the-natural-environment-survey-purpose-and-results>

⁷ Children's visits to natural environments: new evidence, 2014 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/childrens-visits-to-natural-environments-new-evidence>

⁸ Connecting with Nature, 2013 http://www.rspb.org.uk/Images/connecting-with-nature_tcm9-354603.pdf

⁹ The General Teaching Council for Scotland: The Standards: Learning for Sustainability

<http://www.gtcs.org.uk/standards/learning-for-sustainability.aspx>

¹⁰ Teachers awarded Professional Recognition at GTCS Outdoor Learning Event, 2014

<http://www.teachingscotland.org.uk/professional-update/professional-recognition/news-professional-recognition-outdoor-learning-event.aspx>

¹¹ Play Strategy for Scotland, 2013 <http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0042/00425722.pdf>

¹² Education Scotland 'Opening Up Great Learning' 2015

<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence/keydocs/openingupgreatlearning.asp>

¹³ Education Scotland 'Religious and Moral Education through Outdoor Learning' 2015

<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/resources/r/rmethroughoutdoorlearning.asp>

¹⁴ Education Scotland 'Conversations about Learning for Sustainability' 2014

http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/Images/ConversationsaboutLfs_tcm4-844123.pdf

¹⁵ Learning for Sustainability Implementation Group Work Plan, August 2014 (previously on Scottish Government Learning for Sustainability web pages)

¹⁶ Learning for sustainability Report 2012

<http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Education/Schools/curriculum/ACE/OnePlanetSchools/LearningforSustainabilityreport>

¹⁷ Education Scotland 'Opening Up Great Learning' 2015

<http://www.educationscotland.gov.uk/learningandteaching/thecurriculum/whatiscurriculumforexcellence/keydocs/openingupgreatlearning.asp>

¹⁸ Learning for Sustainability Scotland <http://learningforsustainabilityscotland.org>

¹⁹ Education Endowment Foundation, Evidence and Data, Outdoor adventure learning 2015

<https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/toolkit/toolkit-a-z/outdoor-adventure-learning/>

²⁰ Health Impacts of the John Muir Award 2008

<http://www.jmt.org/assets/john%20muir%20award/gcph%20bp%20fs%2018%20web.pdf>