

### **Benefits of outdoor education and barriers to its provision**

The following studies were conducted under the supervision of members of academic staff by now a postgraduate student, degree subjects Psychology and Education, at the University of Glasgow, in partnership with the Children's Wood based in the North Kelvin Meadow.

The first research conducted as part of undergraduate degree dissertation project has based its idea upon the Attention Restoration Theory (ART) and its potential value in the early-years classroom settings. The ART theory suggests that time spent in the natural environments results in increases attentional functioning. To explore how the impact of the natural outdoors compares to that of built environment, the study compared children's attention after regular school lunch breaks in the classroom and in the school playground to that of non-routine lunch time experiences, off the school premises, in the nearby meadow. The findings indicated significantly higher attention span for children following a lunch break in the natural environment as opposed to that of school yard or the indoors. The lunch break in the meadow was also rated as the most preferred type of lunch break location.

Given the profound impact of the natural environment on one's attentional functioning found in the study mentioned above, questions were raised as to why is the outdoor education not an every-day practice for schools in Scotland today. Therefore, the second study carried out as part of postgraduate, master's degree dissertation project explored the reasons which prevent the use of outdoors as an educational platform. In a qualitative piece of research the views of parents and teachers concerning outdoor education were explored. Although the write-up is still underway, indicative findings of the study suggest social factors to be most influential in provision of outdoor education as well as widely reported physical barriers to the use of outdoors such as the access to natural environments, design and quality of facilities, weather and other. Social factors include that of overwhelmingly consumerist culture, parents' and teachers' beliefs and perception of outdoors, narrowing of the curriculum and curricular pressures resulting from the policies such as the National Improvement Framework and other governmental policies. Schools are found to be increasingly under pressure to deliver results, and experience increasing constraints on time, finance and other resources. It indicates that wider societal perceptions need to be changed in order to allow for wider provision of the outdoor education in and outside of statutory education.

Therefore, overall, the studies highlight the importance of preserving the type of spaces in the inner city areas such as the Children's Wood and organising children to access it on a regular basis is of high importance, given the profound impact that the ability to concentrate has on one's educational achievement hence closing of the achievement gap in Scotland. Presence of such does not only allow easier access to the natural outdoors in urban areas but is a justifiable reason for policies promoting outdoor education to be issued giving that extra reassurance to teachers and parents that outdoor learning is something worthwhile to consider. Linking outdoor activities to learning outcomes would also allow it to become part of a curriculum so it would not be necessary to find extra time and opportunities for outdoor learning in schools. The natural outdoors should be better integrated into the health-care system, experiences of the natural environments into our classrooms, satisfaction into our

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lives. We encourage researchers and policy makers to meet at the interface of research and policy in order to shape a positive future for our children. It is not a matter of going back to the free-range childhood of the previous centuries but rather a better understanding of principles of healthy child development, where a sense of connection to the world is created through the use of outdoor natural spaces.

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