Creative teaching and learning in Foundation Stage and Year 1: indications from observations inside and outside the classroom

Part of a symposium proposed by and in memory of Dr Rosie Turner-Bisset on ‘Creativity and the Primary Curriculum’

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Introduction

Current educational policy in the UK appears to be shifting from an emphasis on teaching to learning possibly in recognition that ‘delivery’ of a curriculum cannot guarantee desired outcomes such as motivated life-long learners. The move from declarative to procedural knowledge is a fitting response to a rapidly changing society where adaptability, creativity and criticality are important skills. In connection with this realignment of priorities, two major reviews of the English national curriculum have recently taken place (Alexander 2009; Rose 2009) and have been clear in their message that greater continuity between Foundation Stage and primary education would benefit children’s engagement with learning and that less attention to testing and more to the development of learning dispositions is warranted. Rose cites the INCA study on primary curriculum change in 2008 which included 10 countries and rationales given for using areas which related to:
• the cognitive development of learners;
• easing the transition from pre-primary modes of learning;
• curriculum integration to optimise learning;
• a new importance attached to cross-curricular skills/competences; and
• a need to simplify the curriculum and its assessment, or a need to make the curriculum more manageable. (Rose, 2009:115)

For some years, there has been a requirement for Foundation Stage children to experience some of their learning outside (QCA, 2001); the Rose review also advocates the use of contexts beyond the classroom. Both reviews argue that pedagogy and assessment cannot be separated from a consideration of the curriculum. Our earlier research has pointed to how outdoor contexts affected the pedagogy of teachers, from more teacher-led to shared sustained thinking practices (Rogers and Evans, 2007) and independent learning (Waite, forthcoming). The main aim of our current Economic and Social Research Council funded research is to consider the ways in which children are given opportunities to shape their learning in outdoor environments and the role of staff, student and place in this construction over a key period of transition from Foundation Stage to Year 1.

This paper then considers the ways in which outdoor contexts may facilitate more creative forms of teaching and learning over this key period in primary schooling and we contextualise our findings in the light of the recently proposed changes to the Primary curriculum (Rose, 2009) and the Cambridge Review (Alexander and Flutter 2009; Alexander, 2009). The main focus of our paper is how place, in particular outdoor contexts, is observed to coincide with interactions
between staff and children in the co-construction of more creative and integrated ways of teaching and learning.

**Research methods**

Our fieldwork at this stage of our research yields cross-sectional data from one primary school. A number of qualitative methods were employed to explore children’s and adult’s thinking and practices. Of particular relevance to our focus on creativity in this paper were detailed observations of outdoor and some indoor learning opportunities, interviews with staff from Foundation Stage and Year 1 classes and the head teacher about outdoor learning opportunities and their intended learning outcomes.

Our mixed method psychosocial approach is based on the premise that ‘what is central is not the individual[s] or the physical and social environment, but the ongoing interaction between both’ (Scherl, 1986, p.2). Therefore, developing from grounded theory rooted in emergent data, our analysis incorporates a systems framework developed from Neill’s (2008) proposed systems approach to the interactivity of seven theoretical domains: programme, individual, group, facilitator, activity, culture and environment.

Our initial findings suggest that there are opportunities in outdoor contexts to facilitate creative forms of teaching and learning. We offer some examples from our early analysis below as a site for discussion about what may encourage and contribute to more creative pedagogies across the transition from early years with particular reference to relevant sections of the Rose and Cambridge Reviews of Primary Education.

**Early indications**

In our observations, we found about one third of time was spent outside the classroom in Foundation Stage compared to about 10% in Year 1. Using our system framework, we firstly consider how the national and local context such as the National curriculum and school level requirements impinge on the teachers and children’s accessing the outdoors for their teaching and learning.

**Programme - National and Local Curriculum and Pedagogy**

The headteacher in School A was clear that wider national level pressures affected the sort of pedagogy they could engage in.

> I think that the current expectation and accountability through league tables for SATS is a major restricting influence on the creativity that we could engage in with children in teaching and learning. (Headteacher, School A)

In further discussion it was apparent that alternative approaches would be adopted if he felt he had freedom to choose how to meet the needs of the children at the school.

> So if there wasn't the pressure for performance towards standards and so on, how do you think you would manage your curriculum, your use of staff and resources differently?

R: I would look at, first of all, individual children’s needs and there is a small minority of children who are really struggling to access the formal curriculum and I think getting them outside and stimulating their interest in what’s around them is one key to unlocking access to the formal curriculum, reading, writing and numeracy in school. I would spend more time in preparation, in stimulation of their interest and helping them to see that
actually they need to read and be able to count rather than taking that as a thing that just saying well you’ve got to. So actually getting them out and using the outdoors in that way would prove a better way for children to learn than to do things artificially but to stimulate them just with indoor environment and resources we have indoors.

(Headteacher, School A)

This alternative approach was one that was personalised, authentic and linked to children’s interests and enjoyment in order to develop a disposition for learning i.e. much more akin to meeting some objections to the current systems highlighted in the Cambridge report, such as authenticity and relevance and demonstrating locally tailored creative approaches lauded in the Rose report.

The Foundation Stage teachers mourned the passing of outdoor play as children entered Year 1. This was attributed to a lack of time and pressure to deliver the national curriculum.

Yes, [outdoor learning is] a positive, definitely. They do really enjoy it and I think that’s what they find hard going into year 1 because they don’t have as much outside play probably because of the curriculum – I think it could be more put into it but it doesn’t always get put into it because they’ve got more pressures with national curriculum areas which in foundation you haven’t got because you can allow that freedom a bit more. (FS Teacher 1, School A)

Are there any other things that get in the way?

R: I think sometimes, time. If you’re outdoors you might want to get by the end of the week a certain outcome, you might want to have some writing or some evidence. Sometimes, if everyone is busy you think, well can I really fit in that outdoor session; I’ve got to do this writing. So I think expectations of evidence really. Time as well, time is an issue. (FS Teacher 2, School A)

A Year 1 teacher also felt the pressure of time with other priorities as the national curriculum bit.

Having the time to actually think well, they would quite like to do … or asking the children what they would like to have out and putting that out. It tends to be whatever you can get your hands on and also the fact that other people might be using it. Whereas when you’re in foundation because it is play based it’s the first thing you do rather than the last thing you do. First thing you do is say well this is the topic for the week right what can we have, you list the resources and link them whereas in Year 1 you don’t really get that time. (Y1 Teacher 1, School A)

Although she saw some freedom within that because of local school-level attitudes and the processes of enculturation in local school norms she could not consciously remember being told the importance of outside play before she worked at the school and suddenly became aware: ‘Oh I’ve got to do lots of outside, better plan that in then…. We’ve got cross curriculum in the school and it’s very flexible, we’re not dictated to by anybody like ‘you have to do this topic’. It’s very free here, so as long as you are covering those objectives and your topic is animals you can pretty much do what you like, which is nice. (Y1 Teacher 1, School A)

This suggests that Rose’s suggestions for areas of learning and their cross-curricular application might represent less conflict for year 1 teachers but as Alexander (2009: 42) points out ‘In terms of the EYFS/primary interface, the crucial condition for progression is that the EYFS areas provide, as their name requires, a curricular foundation upon which subsequent learning can build. We believe that the framework encourages this.’ However, there is danger that while this progression reaches upwards, the conflict is merely postponed if subjects at KS3 place pressure
on the upper primary phase to prepare children for this way of working. The desired improved progression and continuity does not continue to build upon what comes before throughout the school career but the direction of change abruptly shifts so that subjects become necessary to prepare for KS3 and place requirements on provision in upper primary. Subjects as disciplines are valued in both the Rose and the Cambridge reports and the compelling rationale for areas of learning seems ignored as children get older. This seems somewhat odd given that post-schooling subject-specific disciplines seem mainly to exist within the academy while interdisciplinary approaches are the norm for problem solving in the ‘real world’. Although Rose (2009) reports a positive response to the extent to which the areas of learning provide a foundation for more specialist subject teaching in secondary school in the NFER teacher survey in November 2008, the results are less conclusive than views on transition between EYFS and primary settings. As Alexander argues it is ‘clear that in a world where pre-school education and care are increasingly the norm the argument is less about starting ages than the nature and appropriateness of provision on either side of the line, wherever it is drawn’. (Alexander, 2009: 5)

Yet not all staff at the school see a distinction between their own intentions and those dictated by the curriculum or between mediated and independent learning as clear cut. The Foundation Stage teachers talk instrumentally of the opportunities in the outdoors as if official guidance is sufficient justification. The heavy weight of performance related learning objectives dominates the teacher’s intuitive awareness of her children’s progress.

R: I think we could plan in more our objectives more around our outside area but I don’t think we do but I think we should probably do that a bit more.

I: What would be the advantage of having ..?

R: Maybe it would be a bit more focussed. I think it would be a good idea to do that, definitely.

I: You can see a lot of opportunities for meeting objectives.

R: Yes, I think a lot of the objectives get met but whether they’re not necessarily specifically planned in like that.

I: Right.

R: I don’t know why. There’s all the things that we have to make sure they’ve experienced throughout the year but you just know things, I don’t know if it’s just from experience or working with them, I don’t know you just know, don’t you?

I: So it’s not that you’ve got a checklist?

R: No but that would be brilliant. I’d love to have a checklist of something to go ‘we haven’t actually covered that this year’ in that. Sometimes we have musical instruments outside and things like that. You do, when you go through assessments, think ‘we haven’t done that for a while or we haven’t done that’ so I wish someone would invent a checklist and then it would be easier.

I: It seems you were saying you know it?

R: Yes, you do really.

I: So, what do you need a checklist for do you think?

R: I don’t know, I suppose it’s just paperwork. (FS Teacher 1, School A)
While spontaneity is welcomed, reasons for that are explained as because it is what the children are supposed to be receiving in Foundation Stage rather than specific benefits to their learning.

I think there’s loads of opportunity to be spontaneous when you’re outside because you can’t plan for a bird to land on a tree at a certain moment or whatever. I think there’s loads of spontaneity when you’re outside, which is really good. That’s what they’re supposed to – at this point in time in their school career – this is the sorts of skills they’re supposed to be learning about. You know, they’re supposed to be learning about their environment and finding out all about themselves and things like that so that’s really nice. (FS Teacher 2, School A – our italics)

Although this requirement is elsewhere qualified with a personal rationale

**I: What do you think should be the balance between that sort of thing, where you’re not necessarily directing it but you’re sort of influencing what happens and the balance for them to choose and have free choice?**

R: I think the balance for them for free choice is more than directed by the adult but I think that sometimes you can direct them because otherwise they won’t know what it’s like, they wouldn’t have experienced it. I can think of one little boy who would just always go on the bikes and he’d never come and hang the washing or hold a peg unless I went ‘come and help me I don’t know how to use it’, you just make yourself look stupid. Then they’re experiencing that and they might really like it and then they might choose to go and do it again or they might choose to … so sometimes there is a need for it; they need a bit of directing sometimes.

**I: Yes.**

R: It’s supposed to be 80% child initiated and 20% adult-directed and it probably is actually but there is a place for directing it as well. (FS Teacher 1, School A – our italics)

The Rose report may reinforce the beliefs that this teacher expresses in her planning explanation:

We both kind of said in the first term we need to try and keep it varied and play based and not so structured being conscious of the big jump and we’re kind of trying to do that now from foundation to year 1 with that intervention programme in the Summer term we bring the foundation children in because it is a big change to have that structured session … whereas before perhaps I would have just gone into year 1 and thought well it’s year 1, knuckle down and lessons all the way. (Y1 Teacher, School A)

The school had tried to develop their curriculum about five years ago from subjects to a more thematic structure, but the head teacher had noticed difficulties for some staff to break free from a dependence on the national curriculum.

Well it’s beyond their experience and if you have always had a restricted diet and have only been taught how to cook a certain way and never been encouraged to experiment and have never experimented and perhaps haven’t got the confidence to experiment and when we looked at restructuring our curriculum we said right let’s imagine we can throw everything out. We’ve got to keep elements of the national curriculum, of course, and we did a big exercise in the hall and we set out six year groups and what we would want in and everybody was quite enthusiastic but when it came down to me saying look, you don’t have to do what it says, what we’ve always done. Let’s do our own thing, let’s be creative. People initially said yes that’ll be fantastic but when it came down to the practicalities of it, it was quite a scary thing for a lot of teachers who had known nothing
else other than national curriculum. At the time it surprised me, but it wasn’t until I reflected on it that I rationalised why that might be and why therefore we didn’t make the leap as I would have wanted to and some other members of staff wanted to because there was a reluctance to let go of the structure that they’d been used to and, as I said, had known nothing else. (Headteacher, School A)

Creative use of other contexts through ‘Children engaging in out-of-school and outdoor education, to study landscapes, settlements and habitat that bring together valuable insights into history, geography, science and technology, mathematics and environmental sustainability from common starting points’; (Rose, 2009: 47) is therefore by no means a straightforward modification in practice for many teachers to make. As Passy and Waite (2008) found in their research on the Excellence and Enjoyment continuing professional development materials, shifting to local determination brings different pressures for creativity in their teaching upon teachers, particularly for staff who have never known other than a very prescriptive curriculum model.

**Individual – Personalised responses**

There was an evident recognition that responses of individuals to the outdoors varied.

R: But I think just finding the expectation of where children need to be, they need to have so much structure in lessons or they’re not going to achieve, you have to balance that in the first term with the fact that actually they’re probably not quite ready for structure in that sitting and breaking it up, so that’s probably one of the hardest things to get used to. But they do adapt and I think some of them in suits them and they like that structure and some of them still need that play options. (Y1 Teacher, School A)

Furthermore the headteacher strongly supported this.

If within the school there are children with different preferred learning strategies whether it’s using environment, kinaesthetic, whatever, by keeping a broad spread of possibilities and choices and again encouraging independence like that and we’re heading more and more into independent learning and we’ve got a week coming up now and we’re calling it Independent Learning Week and children are planning their own learning and what they want to find out and giving them the responsibility to do that. If we can provide environments, and outdoors being one of many depending on the interpretation and definition, then we can reach all the children. Now some children would rather do their academic work outside, literally just being outside is enough stimulus but it’s about developing their interest and stimulating them and stimulating enjoyment in doing their work, enjoying what they do and getting something out of it no matter where is going to be a bonus. So it’s another… major string to our bow in helping children as well as they possibly can because that’s what we’re here for. (Headteacher, School A)

Freedom and a shift in the balance of power were seen as contributory to that.

**I: What is it that makes it different do you think?**

R: I just think the environment being out the in open, maybe not being in the four walls of the classroom, maybe some children find that easier to access or be able to .. maybe they find it easier to express themselves and they think there’s no-one there, the teacher isn’t .. it’s a different environment really. (FS Teacher 1, School A)

One child might make the TV role play thing into the TV, another child might make it something different. Whereas with teacher led they’re being told to look at specific things and they’re directed, so that’s the difference. When they’re doing free choice you
can take a step back as a teacher and observe them a little bit more because you’re not having to worry about your teaching and stepping back and observing. (FS Teacher 2, School A)

In foundation they have pretty much free choice to go outside all the time and they love it, it’s where they’d rather be and that’s their first choice. If you said to them, where would you like to be – ‘Outside’ straight away or the role play area, one or the other. (Y1 Teacher 1, School A)

Rose (2009: 90) reported that ‘in many schools, work in the autumn term of Year 1 showed more flexibility, including better use of outdoor activities, and more attention to pupils’ social development and to planning experiences to enable children to boost their speaking and listening skills and concentrate for longer’. The report particularly notes the need for awareness of children’s age as maintaining play-based learning helped summer-born children to settle and learn at school if ‘care taken to see that they had ample opportunities for active learning, such as outdoor play’. (Rose, 2009: 93) in developmentally appropriate groups.

Group – developing relationships

The outdoors was highly valued for social aspects supporting important learning, mentioned by all the teachers as a resource for getting the children to interact more appropriately. The head teacher described a nurture group with a difference:

we started thinking of gardening as an activity which bridged or bridges academic learning and the social, emotional aspect of learning, SEAL aspects. Now that works very well because we have nurture groups who work in small groups with a teaching assistant, gardening aspects, harvesting as well, we had first harvest last week of potatoes, peas and broad beans. It has a very beneficial affect and that we find gets brought back into school. Key times for children who find it difficult to manage their social interactions on the playground are at the end of play time and lunch time bringing the debris of the lunch time or play time into school and the teacher having to sort it out. So we had nurture groups or nurture TAs who could soften that re-integration into the learning environment from the informal learning environment of outside by taking out and sometimes it would be gardening, sometimes other activities, and to enable the child to come down from that friction, to cool down from the friction that might have occurred and it works very, very well. (Headteacher, School A)

Although both Rose and Alexander attest to the importance placed by teachers on the social and emotional aspects of learning, the Cambridge Report adds a note of caution

Some commentators warn of the commodification of ‘emotional intelligence’ (EI) as a newly constructed ‘competence’ to be traded by trainers and teachers. Moreover, it is not always clear that the positive relationship that is often assumed between self-esteem and academic attainment is always or inevitably justified. Indeed, others suggest that therapeutic approaches to tackle the self esteem deficit are little more than ‘snake oil’ remedies. (Alexander & Flutter, 2009: 37).

Facilitator – a different role for the adult?

The term facilitator is used advisedly as a different pedagogical role for adults in outdoor contexts is frequently described.
Adults in that respect need to be enablers to follow through and be in place to ask the right question at the right time and to lead from behind as it were and be guides rather than standing at the front of the class and directing. They (the children) have already got the interest and they want to learn and if they do want to learn then they can go behind and just by asking the questions about direction and what they want to do and what they need to do, then they can facilitate … Ideally! (Headteacher, School A)

We didn't really think about planning it, it was just a natural progression and coming from that background I just do that naturally; whereas if you trained not in early years and then come down, that element is so ingrained in lessons, … so many hours in literacy, that the literacy co-ordinator says I’ve got to do, you know, push that as well. Get those hours in there. (Y1 Teacher 1, School A)

While the curriculum imperative still reigns inside the classroom.

I kind of set my class so that they have their structured input and they have their activity but they have their free choice available. So once they’ve completed it and obviously differentiate it and they’re working at the right level, once they’ve completed their task you say go and choose a free choice job and they’ve always got that kind of option going on in the class room so it’s kind of ‘we need to do that first’. (Y1 Teacher 1, School A)

In the Foundation Stage, the outdoors is seen as an ideal observational opportunity to assess the children.

Well if you’re talking about the outdoor space that we use for them to go out and it’s timetabled, we don’t necessarily teach as such out there; we’re more observing. So for us it’s quite nice to see the children when they’re not being told to do that or they’re not directed, it’s nice to see how they interact without the adult being there, we can take a step back and observe them, so that’s really good. (FS Teacher 2, School A)

Yet, the spontaneity it offers is also valued and can reverse the usual flow of information from adult to child.

Sometimes things do happen when you are outside and they just want to find out about it. Or they might tell me things, I have a little boy in my class who is really, really intelligent with knowing lots and lots of different facts and sometimes he tells me things and I learn from him almost. It’s great, but it’s a great opportunity to be spontaneous with them and sometimes you do. (FS Teacher 2, School A)

In comparison with our observations inside the classroom, being outdoors seems to interrupt the usual power relationships to encourage less adult-directed activity. In the following instance of initially adult-directed science activity, the children divert it to imaginative exploration of qualities of playdoh. The adult starts with an attempt to get the children to make flattened shapes like boats to explore floating and sinking, but the children begin to discover other aspects of the material and convert it into an imaginative game of making soup. The adult does try to pick up on a contingent learning point but the children’s focus is paramount. Our commentary on the shifts in power are inserted in italics.

T: Well done, you’re getting so excited.

At first their engagement is wholly welcomed

C: We’re getting so excited to put water in.
But the excitement is to do exactly opposite of the set task, which was to keep the water out of the shape to enable it to float.

T: Laurie, Lolly, I mean.

There is an attempt to rein in the excitement

C: Look, if the water filled to there it makes the colour of the playdoh.

The child observes how the dye transfers to the water.

T: When you go home tonight Lolly, you can tell mummy that you make a ….

The adult again tries to reinforce the intended learning about making a boat to float.

…

The children cooperate

C: We need some more playdoh, Kayleigh.

C: Get more playdoh.

C: Uh oh.

C: In here Bob.

C: No. John, in there.

T: Why do you need so much water?

The adult tries to understand their thinking

C: Because we’re doing something great.

The activity is highly valued by the children

T: What are you making with it?

C: Soup.

C: Yes, soup.

T: I don’t think I want any of your soup.

Is this an attempt to enter their imaginative world or distance herself?

(Overspill of water and children shrieking and laughing)

T: That’s a bit too much, isn’t it Laurie?

Adult concern seems to be about losing control?

C: That’s too much.

But their point is taken as valid.
T: Kayleigh, now I want you to pick all that plasticine up and put it back in the plasticine pots.

_The adult sees an opportunity to regain control of the activity._

C: In here.
C: In here.
C: In here, uh oh.
T: We need to roll it in a ball.

_But although some children comply, others are still lost in their fantasy._

C: We’re making soup; we’re making soup, yeah, yeah, yeah.
C: Uh oh. That’s good.
C: Liquid.

_This sophisticated term for the manufactured soup is passed by – while the children continue to sing with delight about their first-hand science discoveries._

(Lots of made up singing)

_Their creative exploration with water spills into song._

C: Kayleigh, woohooohooohoo!!
C: Uh oh, no don’t get some more water yet.
C: Put the playdoh in there and then it goes down there and then put the water there and the playdoh.
C: Don’t do it.
C: Now!!
C: No don’t, not yet. We need to put more playdoh in.

Children: Whee! Whee!
C: And it’s here! Now get some water, now get some water.
C: Get some more funnel. Some oil.

_The children direct, self-regulate and cooperate in seeing their task through._

C: Look the water’s turned into orange.
C: Orange!
C: Look. It’s orange!

_The children involve the adult in their discovery._

T: It’s orange.
C: Come and see if it floats.

The child seems aware of the adult’s other interests and tries to engage them in a strange reversal of roles.

C: Orange of playdoh. Get some more water and turn water orange!!!!

…

C: Woohoo. We made soup, we made orange soup.

T: Orange soup.

The adult simply repeats the child’s observations.

C: Orange.

T: Oh no where’s all my playdoh gone?

C: Is the water in here?

T: Well the water’s going to come out of the bottom, isn’t it? Why is the water going to come out of the bottom Casey?

The adult spots a possible learning opportunity.

C: Because it is.

C: It has got a hole in the bottom.

The shared experience allows scaffolded learning about how playdoh can retain water. The first child was apparently ready for the experience of exploration but working with others allowed another child to point out why something had happened. How might the adult have built creatively upon this emergent interest?

Optimum Education’s argument is that:

The curriculum offers up strange knowledge, not knowledge that would extend or interact with children’s everyday experience. Indeed, if school knowledge drifts towards children’s everyday understandings then children’s power is increased, [which is] not something organisations interested in control and induction are looking for (Alexander, 2009a: 20)

Activity – Horses for courses

Creating opportunities for different ways of learning is seen as a major contribution of outdoor experiences but they are considered more suitable for creative pursuits.

I: Are there things that you feel you can’t do either in one context or the other. Which things don’t work?

R: Things like certain numeracy activities. Numeracy and literacy are probably the most restrictive. You can always take the work outside. I’ve done lots of guided write sessions previously, not so much now but before, when we did writing sessions and I actually found the children worked better in the classroom. I think that just because they’ve obviously got the prompts around them but they just know they should be working. Whereas when they’re outside although it’s lovely and they’re enjoying it I would say the quality of the work probably isn’t quite to where they normally are. But saying that when
we do art or music or even role play outside, they still achieve to the same standard so probably would say the creative elements are probably equally weighted classroom and outside. (Y1 Teacher 1, School A)

Rose reports that, in creative development, 30.4% of children in 2008 were able to ‘express and communicate their ideas, thoughts and feelings by using a widening range of materials, suitable tools, imaginative and role-play, movement, designing and making, and a variety of songs and musical instruments’. (Rose, 2009: 64) As we have seen in the extract of the playdoh experiment, many creative aspects may be incorporated in a single activity, where the children were ‘doing’ science but sang and adapted the task to one of their own devising.

**Culture – whose cultural context?**

The ‘school environment’ (Rose, 2009:89) to which children must learn to adapt is a complex place. The task in the early years appears to be about getting children to learn how to ‘do’ school and less about the particulars of what they learn. Some would argue that the later switch to subjects is when they learn how to ‘do’ maths or English, so the child is acculturated in different disciplines within the school but is this what education should be about? It implies a view of education as integration where the child makes the adaptation rather than inclusion where the environment or culture adapts to accommodate the child. Alexander argues tinkering with the curriculum is insufficient and a radical overhaul is needed of what the aims and values of education are. One teacher saw her role as developing positive attitudes to learning.

We’re going to do science outside and they enjoy it and don’t see it as learning so you’ve got to make the most of the opportunity because that’s when they learn the most when they’re relaxed and not actually trying to learn. So I think that’s probably the main difference, when they’re in class they think they’re working, when they’re outside it’s not work, it’s play. (Y1 Teacher 1, School A)

Rose also found that parents had similar desires for broader aims for education.

‘Primary school should give children a thorough grounding in the basics (reading, writing, maths) and good exposure to a wide range of science, arts, culture, environment, history, languages… they should have lots of outdoor time and exercise… they should have fun and like being there… and they should learn how to be tolerant, share, take turns, help each other, be confident and know how and when to ask for help.’ (Rose, 2009: 131)

Providing smoother transitions and progression and continuity within the school is a worthwhile aim but Fisher (2009) has found that children are anxious a anticipation of Year 1 about relationships and unfamiliar spaces more than the work. However, since early indications from our research are that place affects the relationships and pedagogies for children, the following ideas for improved continuity are worth exploration.

If we could get Forest school as part of our curriculum and embed it earlier with the younger children, that then … follows on quite nicely so there’s a continuity whereas at the moment, it’s in blocks that don’t flow through as well. (Headteacher, School A)

it’s something curriculum, teaching and learning group are working on so .. we’re built into groups here, I don’t know. We’ve got no senior management as such, we’ve got management groups and every teacher is included in a group. (Y1 Teacher 1, School A)

**Environment –Not all places are equal**
‘Place’ as a concept has fine distinctions – it is not just all ‘outside’. There are different affordances in different areas. In our observations and interviews, we perceived a distinction between the outdoor areas close to the class which are largely for extension of activities that could equally be carried out indoors, at least if space allowed. The playground is more often regarded as an area for children to play and learn independently although some ‘positive play’ sessions directed by junior pupils were being introduced to increase the social learning opportunities and it also allowed more space for bigger activities sometimes.

R: And not necessarily just in the outdoor area but in other areas like in the playground, we could do numeracy out there and all sorts of things. I’ve taken them out to playground, we’ve got a big 100 square out there and I’ve taken them out a few times and I’ve done circle time outside quite a bit when we’ve stood up and played games and sang songs and particularly because we’ve open plan it’s nicer because you’ve got a bit more room, you haven’t got tables in the way you can all stand there in the circle playing Lucy Locket or whatever you’re playing and it just makes it easier. You’ve got a bit more room really. (FS Teacher 1, School A)

Special locations such as the pond or woods local to the school tended to be planned adult-directed activities, while school trips to more distant places seemed to be rather more loosely linked to planning and principally seen as an opportunity for social bonding between the children and adults – seeing each other in different light. The following remarks illustrate the planned nature of a local trip that wove in and out of the classroom in developing the children’s learning.

R: Like I say all our planning is topic based, theme based….This term is History based so it doesn’t naturally link so much but basically, the topic was based on looking at your local area and it was actually based around parking and how children could see parking being a problem and what we could do to solve the problem. So we did a bit of a walk around the area, where you get dropped for school, how you come to school, where you park, why do you think it’s better to walk, what could happen, the dangers and we did a bit of a survey. Then we did some map work, colouring in the areas where cars park and where we come to school and they really enjoyed that. Then we felt there wasn’t quite enough to keep that going so we decided to link it to the woods as it’s the local area, we did a bit on how we’d look after the woods. We did some posters about not dropping litter and water safety, not picking the flowers.

I: There’s some of those pinned up.

R: Yes, all those kind of things and they loved doing those and then we planned the trip and we linked it to our Art as well. They did collage and using natural materials and we also did some sculptures. We collected some materials from the woods and we brought them back and we made sculptures as groups in the classroom so we tried to link everything as much as possible. Then we linked it with the Literacy with a recount and they did their recount on going to the woods…

I: You noticed actually a difference in the quality of the writing?...

R: I think so, well we’ve not done recount … before we’ve done recount on stories etc .. so recount that they wanted to write because they had experienced going to the woods, they wanted to tell us about it. Lots of talking, lots of pictures and ordering and when they came to writing them they had so much that they wanted to write, they’d learnt all the connectors and the time connectors, they wanted to put them into practice and they sat and they just wanted to tell what had happened. I said that Miss Murray didn’t come down with us, that’s our student, you need to tell her everything.
I: They’d got a purpose.

R: Yes, got a purpose and they really enjoyed it and I think it just means more to them. If we hadn’t have gone to the woods they wouldn’t have known what we would have done first it’s very hard to imagine doing something; whereas actually physically doing it, which only took a morning, was brilliant and it tied up the whole unit really. So, I don’t think you can do enough of if it, if it’s not raining. (Y1 Teacher 1, School A)

Rose also notes how many schools have ‘transformed their grounds, sometimes from very unpromising conditions, into excellent areas for cross-curricular studies, offering exciting opportunities for children to learn out of doors about horticulture, energy conservation and recycling technology from first-hand experience’. (Rose, 2009: 49)

Conclusions

The early signs from our research are that, despite personal and school level support for its benefits, currently the potential for outdoor learning is being underutilised both in Foundation Stage and Year 1 and that this stems partly from national level pressures but also from systemic lack of confidence in creative pedagogies because many teachers have only known a prescriptive professional training. Alexander (2009) suggests that one condition for success is the building of professional capacity. Research on grouping for the Cambridge report suggests that research at the earliest primary transitions has longer term implications for pupils’ successful negotiation of transition at later points (Blatchford et al., 2008) and therefore research about what is actually happening in schools at these key early transition points is vital. Furthermore, evidence on the built school environment (Wall, Dockrell and Peacey, 2008) highlights identifiable effects on pupils and staff and on the quality of pupil learning. For example, poor ventilation may raise carbon dioxide levels consequently reducing pupils’ capacity for concentration. Furthermore, more exposure to natural light is positively associated with enhanced pupil performance. Both these facts offer compelling evidence to reinforce a commonly expressed belief that fresh air and the outdoors are beneficial for learning. It follows that research would also be helpful in monitoring how exposure to fresh air and natural light might affect learning within and outside the classroom. But we have also found worrying signs of a reluctance to let go of the strataures or straitjackets of nationally imposed systems and agree that:

Without a combination of reform … allied to rigorous professional capacity building in schools, local authorities and teacher training, the primary curriculum will continue more or less as it is, with its labels cosmetically adjusted but its most fundamental problems unresolved. (Alexander, 2009: 59)

References


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Based on the following data available at time of writing paper

**Interviews:**
School A, Headteacher, two Foundation Stage Teachers, one Year 1 teacher (4)

**Observations:**
School B, Audio recordings of children and summer term observations, pre-screened to extract selections (3)

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