

# The Rise of Teaching and Learning Outdoors in Irish Primary Schools



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This article sets out the context and rationale for teaching and learning outdoors in primary schools, and highlights various ways of incorporating its use by schools, including exemplars of practice. It also discusses system-wide supports that are needed. Ultimately, it argues that the best time to start using the outdoors for teaching and learning is now and that teachers should 'just do it'.

## Background

One of the unforeseen benefits of the Covid-19 pandemic for schools has been the increased educational value placed on the outdoors. Outdoor learning is conceptualised as learning that takes place not just outside the classroom but outside school buildings themselves, in the open air (Kelly, 2022). As virus transmission rates are greatly reduced in open spaces, the local outdoor school environment and beyond became a magnet for teaching and learning.

This article sets out the historical context for teaching and learning outdoors, both internationally and nationally. It highlights various methods for schools to incorporate outdoor teaching and learning, including exemplars of practice, and the rationale for doing so. It also advocates for system-wide supports to enhance this practice across the curriculum at primary level. Ultimately, it argues that the best time to start using the outdoors for teaching and learning is now.

The use of the outdoors as part of teaching and learning is deeply embedded in the philosophies of many great education thinkers, including Friedrich Froebel, Maria Montessori, John Dewey and Johann Pestalozzi. Indeed, the term *Kindergarten*, or 'child's garden', was coined by Froebel (1826) to represent the use of the outdoors for the purpose of learning actively through play and enquiry.

Outdoor education has a long tradition in Scandinavian countries. *Udeskole*, for example, is a Danish educational practice in which learning takes place outdoors, led by the class teacher, one day each week. It is now practised in one fifth of all primary schools in Denmark (Barfod and Daugbjerg, 2018). Nearer to home, the use of the outdoors for teaching and learning in the UK has influenced government policy, reports, and the school curriculum for the last 27 years, especially in Scotland and Wales (Delahunty, 2021). Its implementation in Irish primary schools, however, is relatively new.

While the Primary School Curriculum (PSC) does highlight the value of the local outdoor environment for subjects such as geography, history, and science (NCCA, 1999), this does not appear to have been replicated in practice. Instead, a long-standing culture of teacher-led instruction in classrooms aided by textbooks, resulting in pupil rote learning, has dominated Irish primary education up to the current day (Usher, 2021). Policy provision in this regard has done little to enhance the practice since the PSC was launched in 1999.

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The recent increased emphasis on education to sustain economic success is detailed in the *Action Plan for Education 2016–2022* (DES, 2016). In all of its 320 actions across 70 pages there is not a single reference to geography, history, nature, or the use of the outdoors more generally. One would imagine that, at the very least, primary pupils would be learning about the natural world itself while outdoors. Yet a recent study of 510 primary teachers found that 87% use digital technology or books as the predominant method of teaching pupils about nature (Madden, 2019). The lack of emphasis on using the outdoors for teaching and learning, in both policy and practice, appears to have stymied its implementation.

### The literature

Teaching and learning outdoors is a broad area. At its most basic level it involves teaching and learning simply taking place outdoors. At another level it encompasses first-hand pupil engagement outdoors to increase knowledge and skill development. At a deeper level again, it is a methodology with the outdoors supplying content, resources, and the location for cross-curricular learning experiences (Kelly, 2022).

The literature points to many cognitive, affective, and social benefits accruing from pupils learning outdoors (O'Donnell, forthcoming), offering a compelling rationale for its use. Enquiry-based, experiential engagement in the local outdoor environment gives pupils the opportunity to become active agents in their own learning, converting abstract concepts to concrete realities. The outdoor learning environment is also considered more inclusive for pupils, helping them to develop 21st-century skills such as collaboration, problem-solving, and critical thinking.

Noticing nature and becoming familiar with the local outdoor environment also promotes pupils' understanding of the rhythm of the seasons, strengthens their sense of place, develops pro-environmental attitudes, and improves their wellbeing. At a time of rapid globalisation, mounting environmental and social issues, and an increased threat posed by biohazard risks, such understanding and appreciation have never been more important. Expecting our next generation to grapple with these global challenges would be unfair without first empowering them to connect with the planet Earth, starting with outside, near their home and school.

The use of the outdoors also takes account of pupil voice as part of their learning. Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child provides for children to have the right to a say in matters that affect them and to have those views taken into account in line with their age and maturity (Children's Rights Alliance, 2010). Recent studies on pupils' opinions about their learning show their preference for more teaching and learning to take place outdoors (Kilkelly et al., 2015).

A new study into using very good fieldwork as part of primary geography teaching concurs (O'Donnell, forthcoming). Pupils say they enjoy learning outdoors and wish that it happened more regularly. This comes at a time when children's contact time in the outdoors has severely diminished. A UK study concluded that three quarters of children surveyed spent less time outdoors on a daily basis than prison inmates (Carrington, 2016). This is a particularly stark and depressing statistic.

When considering how to increase the use of the local outdoor environment for teaching and learning, a two-year study of 75 primary school teachers in the Netherlands is a useful reference point (van Dijk-Wesselius et al., 2019). It identifies four broad barriers to outdoor learning, which may be familiar to many: outdoor learning not having formal status in teachers' practice, a perceived lack of teacher confidence, difficulties getting started, and physical environmental constraints. A solution to each barrier was found by following a process: engaging in real-life experiences, adopting a positive mindset, and getting educated. Ultimately, the study concludes that to realise outdoor learning, participants simply starting to take their classes outside to learn is all-important. To borrow a slogan: 'Just do it'.

**Barriers to outdoor learning include: not having formal status in teachers' practice; a perceived lack of teacher confidence; difficulties getting started; physical environmental constraints.**

In the absence of formal guidance or support, this is exactly what many teachers in Irish schools have done. In my own case, after trialling a number of methods, I started to teach one lesson outdoors per week for the whole school year. It began by simply moving the lesson outside. Over time, the local outdoor environment become a resource and an inspiration for a range of cross-curricular learning experiences. By keeping a weekly diary or journal on what they learned each week, pupils hugely increased their content acquisition, skill levels, sense of local place, and collaborative practice from the beginning of the school year. In addition, it became the highlight of their week. Just doing it really does work.

## Schools gardens and other projects

School gardens have become a focal point for teaching and learning outdoors in many Irish schools. Austin (2017) found that gardens are used to integrate teaching and learning across subject areas and are highly valued by their schools for a range of reasons. With the help of parents, the board of management, and the local community, our school in Slane, Co. Meath, constructed such a garden, incorporating an outdoor classroom seated

area for this purpose. The project expanded to greening the wider school grounds by constructing a pond, nest boxes, wildflower patches, and a mini-woodland, all with little money but lots of goodwill.

The projects have not only provided new teaching and learning opportunities but have also increased biodiversity in the school grounds. The pupils now have a company selling eggs from the school's hens. Participation in wider schemes provides a useful focal point for action. We engage in an innovative annual school gardening scheme coordinated by Meath County Council and An Taisce's Green Schools programme. We have been fortunate to become involved in an Erasmus+ programme with Dublin City University on play and learning outdoors, partnering with schools across the European Union. Many oaks from little acorns grow, so to speak.

**“ Forest School offers learners regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or a natural environment with trees.**

Other schools have taken inspiration from the Irish Forest School movement. Forest School offers learners regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or a natural environment with trees. Teachers have availed of Forest School training or have partnered with local Forest Schools to increase their pupils' enriching outdoor learning experiences. Schools have also drawn inspiration from the growing provision of outdoor preschools in early childhood education by increasing their Aistear provision outdoors in infant classes.

In our own setting, we have created a sandpit, mud kitchen, and loose-parts play area for this purpose. Needless to say, persuading pupils to return indoors is now proving more challenging than getting them out in the first place.

### Next steps

To progress schools' interest in outdoor teaching and learning, two areas require attention. First of all, due to the lack of data on provision, nationwide research is required to identify the prevalence, scope, and frequency of teaching and learning outdoors. Such an inventory would paint a picture of the current reality and provide a starting point for future planning and prioritisation.

The second, larger body of work is coherent, targeted, and sustained policy provision and practical support from the Department of Education to implement and embed these practices. In this regard there is reason for hope. The Draft Primary Curriculum Framework (NCCA, 2020) sees teachers as 'curriculum makers' and highlights the importance of the outdoor environment to stimulate pupil learning.

With appropriate consultation, professional development, funding, and resourcing, this new curriculum may provide a framework for teaching and learning outdoors to thrive. In the meantime, the largest classroom of them

all, with the blue ceiling and green floor, awaits to facilitate innovative and exciting teaching and learning opportunities. The best time to start is now.

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