

Outdoor learning research

In 2020 the Welsh Government funded a collaborative research project to investigate the impact that the Covid-19 pandemic and associated lockdowns and school closures had on the health and well-being of children, young people and school staff, with a particular focus on outdoor learning. Many people working in schools will remember that in the guidance for returning to school after the first lockdown, there was specific mention on how outdoor spaces and outdoor learning could be used to support children and young people's health and well-being, and to mitigate the risk of transmission by being outdoors.

A team of researchers from Bangor University, Wrexham Glyndŵr University and the University of South Wales worked with a sample of schools from different sectors and different regions to find out how schools had adapted their teaching in light of this advice, and the perceived impact outdoor learning had on the health and well-being (both physical and mental) of school staff and the children and young people they were working with. A range of school staff were interviewed, including headteachers, classroom teachers, school chaplains, health and well-being leads and those working in a learning support capacity. The team also interviewed outdoor learning service staff from the local authority outdoor learning services and/or residential centres, along with national organisations that both support and deliver outdoor learning.

A praxis of the report and findings can be found on Hwb through the link below, but in summary the team found that there were overwhelmingly positive impacts on the health and well-being of all concerned reported by school staff, on the use of outdoor learning. The report identified that there were significant gaps in provision and that although in some areas school staff felt well supported by local authority and national organisations in providing training, resources and expertise, there were also many areas where this support was not easily available. The report made recommendations that further work needed to be carried out to better understand the range of provision and so that resources may be efficiently directed to support delivery and share effective practice so all the children and young people of Wales can benefit from the positive impact outdoor can have on their lives.

<https://hwb.gov.wales/professional-development/the-national-strategy-for-educational-research-and-enquiry-nserre/research-studies-on-the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-the-welsh-education-system/research-study-6/>

More recently, in autumn 2021, Welsh Government agreed to fund a further project which is investigating the range of provision of outdoor learning across Wales, and how schools engage with the outdoor environment in different ways. This work is being carried out by the same team of researchers and will involve surveying teachers over a period of 8 weeks in the spring term of 2022 to identify what they understand by the term 'outdoor learning' and what they do with their classes each week over that period.

The survey will be conducted online and will involve class teachers completing around 6 sections to collect data on what, why, when, where and how often that class/teacher have used the outdoors to support or as the main venue for learning sessions. The project will run until March when the team submits findings to the Welsh Government for publication

thereafter. It follows the pattern established by some similar survey work commissioned by the Scottish Government in 2015, and the report aims to provide a clearer picture of what types of outdoor learning are in use in schools in Wales, and how often outdoor learning is used. This should then help better inform policy makers and local authorities so that they can ensure equity in resources and opportunities for the children and young people of Wales.

If you'd like more information about the current research or would be interested in taking part, please contact Graham French at Bangor University g.k.french@bangor.ac.uk