Northern Ireland Committee for Education

Inquiry into Educational Underachievement

Written Evidence from the Field Studies Council

24th January 2017

Background

1. The Field Studies Council (FSC) is a pioneering education charity committed to bringing environmental understanding to all. FSC provides informative and enjoyable opportunities for people of all ages and abilities to discover, explore, be inspired by and understand the natural and built environment. We currently welcome 150,000 visitors every year on courses to our UK network of 20 Field Centres, including Derrygonnelly in Northern Ireland.

2. FSC welcomes the opportunity to submit information to this inquiry. Our submission will focus on the multiple benefits of outdoor learning across the curriculum and age ranges and how it can be used as a successful approach to improve educational underachievement.

3. This submission will demonstrate that outdoor learning can contribute to improving academic achievement. It will also show how it can be used to build the social and personal skills of school pupils – life skills which are needed in the workplace. FSC was a partner in the London Challenge Programme, which specifically aimed at breaking the cycle of underachievement and some of our evidence is drawn from our experience providing outdoor residential courses for London students.

Increased appetite for learning and improving behaviour

4. Learning outside the classroom bringing subjects to life in a way that cannot always be done in a classroom or by looking at a screen. Learning outdoors not only increases understanding but often engages or re-engage students with their subject in a new way.

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Teachers who took part in the City Challenge[1] residential courses saw significant impacts on the vast majority of students and a number of students appeared to be transformed by the experience. The findings suggested that moving away from the traditional school environment had a beneficial impact on student attitudes to work.[2]

5. Outdoor learning can improve motivation and attitude to learning by providing new and stimulating environments in which to learn. Learning from practical hands on activities in the real world means that students see the relevance of what they are studying. It provides opportunities for pupils to apply their skills across the curriculum an in a wide range of real life contexts, but also provides sufficient challenge. A teacher from the London Challenge project reported that

   > "The boys began to appreciate that knowledge, skills and learning can be accessed in the immediate environment. They saw the link between science and their own experience, they saw how poets are ordinary people talking about their 'ordinary' experiences… they saw that learning is for everyone"[3]

6. Outdoor learning can also engage pupils who struggle in the classroom environment, with some showing improvements in their behaviour. Many teachers from the London Challenge residential commented on the increased levels of motivation towards learning with some students who had issues around behaviour emerging as excellent leaders.

7. As part of the 2015 Inspiring Learning through Outdoor Science and Geography project, students experienced lessons outdoors in London's parks. Afterwards, feedback from the students themselves found that the percentage stating that they wanted more outdoor lessons increased from an already high figure of 71% to 77%.[4]

Numeracy and Literacy

8. Outdoor learning provides an ideal context for developing numeracy and literacy skills and presents many opportunities across the curriculum for pupils to apply or extend their knowledge, skills and understanding in a wide range of problem solving and real life contexts.

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[1] City Challenge 2008-2011 was an extension of the London Challenge programme which aimed to disrupt the cycle of underachievement of disadvantaged children in primary and secondary schools in London, The Black Country and Greater Manchester.
[2] City Challenge: An Evaluation Hava Contini and Justin Dillon
[3] New Views: Lessons learned from the London Challenge Residential courses, FSC
[4] London Schools Excellence Fund: Inspiring Learning through Outdoor Science and Geography Final Report

9. Ideas taught in the classroom can be applied to real life situations. Outdoor learning provides new experiences, wonder and creativity which fires imaginations and improves writing. Learning maths outdoors makes the subject come to life and helps explain and make abstract concepts real.

10. As part of City Challenge, FSC developed Key Stage 3[5] residential courses that offered a blend of environmental and outdoor activities integrated with Maths, English and science teaching. At the time, this was relatively new idea. As a result, students appeared to see the activities as 'walking', 'climbing' and 'shelter building' rather than 'numeracy', 'literacy' and 'science' despite the majority of the activity being curriculum focussed.

11. Outcomes reported by teachers found that students' learning had received a unique boost. Students learned from the practical hands on activities and recalled new ideas when they were back at school. Students could see the relevance of what they did and confidence in their subject-specific abilities improved.

12. A teacher on a City Challenge residential used digital images taking from the climbing session to explore corresponding, opposite and alternating angles made from the climbing apparatus. "Whilst you lot have been hanging from trees I've been thinking wow! Look at those angles and shapes."

Community Cohesion

13. Outdoor learning, particularly as part of a residential experience, has the potential to deliver team or group activities outside the normal classroom boundaries and creates a learning environment which is impossible to replicate in the classroom. Away from the normal home and school environment, there are opportunities for relationships and understanding to be built across ability, culture and previously established hierarchies.

14. Sharing activities, meals and rooms develops understanding of other cultures which can carry on after the school trip. Teachers reported that during the London Challenge residentials, individual and group issues that are not always apparent in day school would arise and could be dealt with. They reported that dominant students started learning from the quieter ones.

[5] Year 7, Year 8 and Year 9, when pupils are aged between 11 and 14 in England and Wales

15. Feedback from many of the schools taking part in the London Challenge courses reported that young people who had not previously stood out now emerged. Previously marginalised students made new friends and their qualities were recognised. Outdoor learning and residentials, by mixing students from different years and groups, meant that some lost their 'us and them' mentality"

Employability Skills

16. Communication, teamwork and problem solving skills are highly sought after by employers. Outdoor team building activities and spending time on a residential provides opportunities for team to build around a common purpose. A strong theme emerged from the London Challenge students themselves as they reported that they found that working in a team can be more productive than working in isolation.

17. All teachers involved in the City Challenge feedback remarked on the increased levels of confidence, team working and maturity. The most immediate effect was on personal development with improved social relations and learners pushing themselves with the support of peers. Outdoor learning provides challenges for learners to overcome and teachers reported on a change in most pupils' persistence in learning and that they had become more confident, willing to have a go, assess and take appropriate risks.

18. STEM skills are in increasing demand and will be needed for many career paths. Experiment design and adaption, data capture and analysis, the use of mobile technology and the higher order thinking skills associated with these activities can all be enhanced by doing these activities outside the classroom where learners have to deal with a changing, unpredictable environment.