
EDUCATION OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM: AN ASSESSMENT OF ACTIVITY AND PRACTICE IN SCHOOLS AND LOCAL AUTHORITIES

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Introduction

Education Outside the Classroom (EOTC) has been defined, in its broadest sense, as any structured learning experience that takes place outside a classroom environment, during the school day, after school or during the holidays (DfES 2005). It can include, amongst other activities, cultural trips, science and geography fieldwork, environmental and countryside education, outdoor and adventurous group activities, learning through outdoor play, and visits to museums and heritage sites.

In 2006, the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), in collaboration with Natural England¹ and Farming and Countryside Education (FACE), commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake an assessment of the extent and nature of EOTC activity and practice in schools and local authorities in England. This summary presents the key findings from the research, carried out between March and September 2006.

Key findings

- Although commentators in recent years have expressed concerns that EOTC may have declined, there was little evidence of such a trend within this research study. There was a general perception, across both school and local authority respondents, that the extent of provision had either increased over the last five years, or had remained broadly the same. Nonetheless:

the activities that were most commonly reported were school-site activities or off-site day visits, primarily to man-made environments, while residential or day visits to natural environments were less frequently mentioned.

secondary school pupils seemed less likely to be offered opportunities for EOTC in schools with higher levels of deprivation, lower levels of achievement and higher proportions of pupils with special educational needs.

- Off-site visits, especially those to natural environments, appeared more prevalent in special schools (across all Key Stages) and at Key Stage 2 for pupils in mainstream schools. For all other Key Stages, visits to field studies centres, environmental centres and outdoor pursuit or adventure centres were relatively rare. In addition, at Key Stages 3 and 4, a pupil's access to EOTC appeared to be determined by the curriculum they followed, with pupils studying geography at Key Stages 3 or 4, for example, more likely than others (including those studying science) to have been offered visits to a range of different urban or natural environments.

¹ The research began through the Countryside Agency, which has since become part of Natural England.



- Teacher confidence appeared to be one of the key factors underpinning the extent of provision that was made available to pupils in schools. A combination of training (though this seemed to be primarily through continuous professional development (CPD) rather than through initial teacher training), experience and belief in senior management and local authority support appeared to support provision. In contrast, concerns about health and safety, risk management and costs appeared to be the main factors inhibiting current or future EOtC developments.

Methodology

A number of different and complementary data collection methods were adopted in order to obtain a representative overview of the extent of EOtC activity across all Key Stages and across school types and local authorities. These included:

- A questionnaire survey of headteachers, Key Stage and subject specialists in a representative sample of maintained primary, secondary and special schools in England. Approximately 3,500 questionnaires were returned from 214 primary schools, 261 secondary schools and 253 special schools.
- Detailed telephone interviews with a selected sub-sample of 50 teachers who responded to the questionnaire survey. These teachers included Key Stage coordinators and/or EOtC coordinators in primary and special schools and a range of different subject heads in secondary schools.
- An online survey of Outdoor Education Advisers, as well as Citizenship and Personal Social and Health Education (PSHE) Advisers, in all local authorities. A total of 110 advisers responded to the survey, from 100 different authorities.
- Collection and analysis of the quantitative data on EOtC activity provided by a sample of 31 local authorities in England.

Other findings

The detailed findings from the study have been broadly divided into those related to extent and nature of current EOtC provision and the extent to which this appears to have changed over recent years, the support available for such provision and the extent to which respondents believe activity may increase or decrease in the coming years. The majority of schools reported working in collaboration to deliver EOtC activities and this was particularly common in secondary schools. Both within-sector and cross-sector collaborative working was evident and schools had also worked with a range of other organisations, including further education colleges and higher education institutions.

Extent and nature of EOtC provision

School-site activities and off-site day visits were, on the whole, the most common type of activity offered to pupils across all Key Stages. Teachers reported visiting a range of locations, most commonly urban or man-made environments. Although visits to natural environments were less common, they appeared to be more likely in special schools and at Key Stage 2 in primary schools. In addition to Key Stage, a range of variables appeared to influence the extent and nature of provision, and the locations visited by teachers, including:

- **Subject area.** Visits to urban built environments were more frequently reported in geography, modern foreign languages, citizenship (and in business studies at Key Stage 4), while visits to places of cultural interest were more common in English, music and art and design. Trips to forests or woodlands appeared to be more frequent in geography, science and PSHE, while visits to the general countryside were more prevalent in geography, PSHE, physical education (PE) and citizenship.
- **Teacher confidence.** Levels of confidence in providing EOtC activities varied among teachers. While most were confident in preparing pupils, and planning, running and following up activities, teachers were less confident in carrying out risk assessments, gauging the quality of EOtC activities and evaluating their impact. Teachers who had

higher levels of training, greater levels of confidence in their ability to undertake EOtC and who felt that they were supported appeared to be more involved in running EOtC activities. In addition, the level of school commitment to EOtC, and headteachers' views of such provision, seemed to have a positive influence on the extent and nature of activity undertaken by teachers.

- **School location.** Secondary school pupils seemed less likely to be offered opportunities for EOtC in schools with higher levels of deprivation, lower levels of achievement and higher proportions of pupils with special educational needs. Nonetheless, headteachers reported that they had a range of support strategies in place to enable equal access, including funding for pupils from lower income families, adapting tasks to make them more accessible to pupils with support needs and providing funding for extra staff to support pupils.

Changes in EOtC provision

Despite concerns from previous research that EOtC may have declined in recent years, there was little evidence of such a trend from the current research. There did not appear to be any geographical or key-stage related differences in perceptions of change in activity, suggesting that any changes in activity may be due to policies at individual school level, rather than at LA, phase or sector level.

- **Increases** in provision were most commonly reported for school-site activities, particularly in primary schools, and in study support activities (before and after school), which also tended to be within the school grounds. Respondents most commonly attributed increases in provision to:

- the increased priority being given to EOtC in the curriculum
- the wider availability of opportunities for EOtC
- the greater availability of staff to deliver to such activities
- improved teacher awareness of the benefits of provision.

- Activities where a decline in activity was most frequently reported were off-site day visits and residential experiences. The main reasons given for a decline were:

- the cost of EOtC, in particular transport costs
- health and safety and risk assessment issues.

Support and training in relation to EOtC

LA advisers identified a range of procedures that they had in place for monitoring EOtC activities in schools, and supporting schools in delivering such activities, including advice on health and safety and risk management, and ensuring that training was available for school staff. Both headteachers and teachers were generally positive about the support they had received in relation to EOtC, both from school staff and their local authority.

However, they had concerns about health and safety and risk management issues, and fears about litigation should accidents occur. While these concerns did not necessarily discourage teachers from undertaking EOtC, they undermined their confidence in delivering such provision, and teachers emphasised the importance of knowing that they have the support of their school and LA should any issues arise.

Future developments in provision

The majority of teachers felt that the level of provision over the next academic year would either increase or be maintained, although they noted some challenges (in relation to cost and concerns about health and safety and risk management issues).

- In primary and special schools, teachers most commonly planned to increase school-site activities, while in secondary schools, subject heads planned to increase the amount of off-site day visits and before/after school study support that they delivered.

- Teachers suggested that additional funding for EOtC, more time and flexibility in curriculum, and further support might enable them to develop their provision in the future. More specifically, teachers indicated that they would appreciate additional support from their local authority, guidance on risk management and support with curriculum integration.

Data on EOtC activity

- The majority of LA advisers who responded to the survey reported that their authority collected data on the EOtC activities undertaken by schools. The data provided by 31 of the LAs indicated that there is a great deal of variability in the nature and quality of the data collected by LAs on EOtC activity, as well as in the way in which such data was collected.
- LAs generally reported that they only used the data as part of their risk assessment and monitoring procedures, and were less likely to use the data to inform future policy and practice.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (RR803) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications,

PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ.

Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".

Copies of this Research Brief (RB803) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dfes.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Catherine Davie, 6D, DfES, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

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