



Outdoor Learning: pupils' experiences and teachers' interaction in one outdoor residential centre

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4 residential centre
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8 **Abstract**

9 This paper draws upon research undertaken for the Outdoor Pedagogies project and
10 explores the processes of teaching and learning at one outdoor residential education
11 centre with children and staff from 'Oliver' Primary school. Data were collected through
12 ethnographic research and include participant observation, interviews with teachers and
13 centre staff and group interviews with pupils. Whilst the interviewed children reflected
14 positively on the experience, we highlight the importance of the teachers' interaction with
15 the children in providing for democratic, shared positive learning. We raise the issue of
16 professional development for school teachers working with primary school children in
17 outdoor, residential situations.
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20 **Keywords:** outdoor learning; outdoor education; residential experience; pupils'
21 experiences; teaching; interaction
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23 **Introduction**

24 In a recent special edition of Education 3-13, Rea and Waite (2009) brought together a
25 number of papers from a variety of countries focusing upon socio-cultural perspectives
26 on outdoor and experiential learning evidencing the significance of outdoor contexts for
27 young children's learning. Whilst there is much commonality across outdoor learning as
28 presented in the papers, Rea and Waite drew attention to the tendency for the English
29 interpretation of outdoor teaching and learning to be, 'somewhat colonised by short term
30 measurement agendas related to Government –defined standards' (p. 2). Over the years,
31 they argue, access to the outdoors for primary children in England has become reduced
32 partly as a consequence of the rigid English curriculum, but also as a consequence of the
33 British risk aversion society¹. Outdoor experience in schooling in Scandinavian countries
34 has long time been recognised as important and even central to the physical, emotional
35 and intellectual development of children. It is well integrated into the educational system,
36 which acknowledges the need for 'risky' play in children (Sandseter 2009). Furthermore,
37 much literature concerned with well-being and primary children extols the virtue of the
38 outdoors as a play and learning space (see Munoz 2009) with further recommendation
39 that increasing the availability and accessibility to outdoor experiences for children may
40 provide for the greater creativity and encourage life-long learning (Waite, Davies and
41 Brown 2006).
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47 This paper argues that whilst the outdoors is purported to be significant and beneficial,
48 yet an under-utilised context for learning for primary children in UK, it is important to
49 examine and take account of diverse forms of teaching and control manifested in outdoor
50 and residential situations.
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52 **Methodological overview**

53 This paper is based on data collected during the pilot study for the Well-being and
54 Outdoor Pedagogies Project. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were
55 used as part of the ethnographic study. A fieldwork diary was also kept and relevant
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documents were collected. The main fieldwork for this study was undertaken in May 2008 at a small charity run residential outdoor centre in the countryside to the South-West of London. The fieldwork involved the centre staff, the visiting teachers from Oliver primary school and their pupils, aged 8 and 9 years. The research process and philosophical underpinnings were interpretative through adopting a broad ethnographic approach, which was considered to be sensitive and sufficiently complex in order to allow for an holistic understanding of the social phenomena explored (Davies 1984; Griffin 1985; Willis 1977, Fetterman 1989). A variety of data was collected from these different sources, enabling insight into the world of the children and teachers involved in the outdoor learning experience (Walford 2001).

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations are central to ethnographic research and particularly so when children are amongst the participants. Hence this research was conducted only after informed consent was obtained from all the participants, which meant that this was an overt study, avoiding deception. It was felt that to disrupt pupils' outdoor experiences through interviewing them during their stay at the centre was inappropriate and so observation only was undertaken with the permission of the school. Permission to interview the pupils in a group at their school was gained from their parents, who also agreed to a group interview. Gaining consent from the parents prior to conducting the group videoed interview with the children was essential.

All the participants were ensured anonymity, confidentiality and were given the right to withdraw from the project at any time, in accordance with the British Educational Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines. Thus all the names are pseudonyms, and not the real names of the participants or the institutions.

The primary school context

The research for this project was conducted between May and July 2008. In order to contextualise the research we include some information about the school, by referring to the most recent Ofsted Inspection Reports. Oliver Primary School is situated in the vicinity of London and it is a large community junior primary school, having a non-denominational religious character. The gender of the pupils is mixed and their age ranges from 7 to 11. According to the 2009 Ofsted Inspection Report, this is a larger than average school with a total number of pupils of around 400. The report also states that although the majority of pupils are from White British backgrounds, nevertheless the school community is diverse and includes about a quarter of pupils from other ethnic backgrounds such as Asian British Indian, Asian British Pakistani, Black African, Black British Caribbean and Chinese. Most of the pupils are competent in English, however approximately a fifth of these pupils are at the early stages of learning the language. The proportion of pupils entitled to free school meals is on the increase, but still remains slightly below average. There is a broadly average number of pupils with special educational needs and learning difficulties and/or disabilities. According to the report, the number of pupils entering or leaving the school at times other than the start or end of the school year is well above the national average, due to the mobility of the community.

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The school currently holds a Healthy School Silver Award, which shows a concern on the part of the school for the issues around healthy eating. This concern is also reflected in the findings of the 2009 Ofsted inspection report, which concluded that the pupils know how to eat healthily and keep fit. Inspectors observed healthy eating choices being made at lunchtime and saw pupils enthusiastically engaged in physical education. The report also states that the pupils enjoy school and their personal development is good, that they feel safe in school and have positive attitudes to learning. Moreover, statements from the pupils made during the inspection reveal that not only do they enjoy school, but that they have a strong sense of pride and identity with their local community. The attendance of the pupils is above average, according to the report, and the pupils display positive attitudes and respond well in lessons to the activities provided, having mostly trusting relationships with the staff. The report found the relationships in classrooms and on the playground almost always cordial, with pupils behaving well. There was no bullying or unfriendliness reported, and the pupils were confident that a member of staff would help them should this occur.

According to the 2009 report, the school offers a broad and balanced curriculum, which caters the needs and interests of pupils and contributes strongly to their overall achievement and enjoyment. The report found that the wide range of visits and visitors enhances learning, with many opportunities for pupils to deepen and extend their learning through themed weeks, projects, drama and musical performances. Also the extra-curricular programme of the school ensures opportunities for personal success, contributing to a great extent to the pupils' personal and social development. This was evident in the support given by the head teacher for pupils to attend the outdoor residential centre during their schooling.

The report recommended the school improve opportunities for pupils to develop and demonstrate their enterprise capability; identify the knowledge, skills and other attributes which pupils are expected to acquire in developing economic well-being and financial capability as they move through the school; ensure that opportunities for pupils to develop economic well-being and financial capability are identified in schemes of work across the school; ensure that staff engaged in promoting pupils' economic well-being and financial capability have adequate opportunities for professional development and planning.

When referring to the quality of the curriculum to promote pupils' economic well-being and financial capability, the 2008 report concluded economic well-being has recently been given a higher profile in the personal, social and health education programme (PSHE), offering good opportunities for pupils to debate ethical issues linked to economic development. Moreover the report noted that good links are made with healthy eating, and that after school clubs, residential visits and design technology projects ensure pupils have good additional opportunities for personal and social development, including the promotion of team skills. Finally the report indicates that the pupils' behaviour and relations between staff and pupils are very good. This description of the school, which was not based on the researchers' personal judgements, may help to situate the school in the larger social context and contribute toward understanding the perspectives of the teachers taking part in this research. It was decided not to source the reports used, and the information is meant to be general, so as to ensure that the anonymity of the schools is kept intact.

The context of the outdoor residential centre

For issues of anonymity, the real name of the centre will not be mentioned, however a brief description will be given based on the information taken from the centre's website, brochures, interviews with the staff and observations made in the field. This is in order to allow the reader to have some understanding of the ethos of the place. The centre, which we will call Greenfield House, is situated in an idyllic setting in the English countryside, not very far from London and Oliver Primary School, with which it has a long-standing relationship. It is owned and managed by a federation of youth clubs. The centre states it has over 60 years of expertise in providing and promoting social educational programmes for young people and adults. The centre has a self-financing policy, which makes it dependant on charitable donations and local fundraising initiatives undertaken by a team of volunteers. Funding also comes from primary and secondary school groups that occupy and utilise the house and its facilities during midweek periods and when federation members cannot normally attend.

It receives visitors from youth organisations and schools that use the centre to run their own personal development/educational programmes. According to its available documents, the staff at the centre understand that youth groups, primary and secondary schools have particular needs, and they try to work with teachers and group leaders in planning and delivering their programmes in order to ensure a productive and enjoyable event. The centre states that it offers a flexible approach, and comfortable and accessible surroundings in order to encourage the individuals to learn new skills, build confidence and share their time in an enjoyable way. The schools are very much involved in choosing the activities and putting together the programme. Some of the activities are facilitated by the visiting teachers, rather than the centre staff, and schools are aware of this fact before going to the centre.

Pupils' perspectives on the outdoor experience

The pupils visiting Greenfield House came in two separate groups within one week in May 2008. The first group came on Monday morning and left on Wednesday after breakfast, while the second group came on Wednesday morning and left on Friday at noon. The visiting school teachers stayed for the entire week. Although we would have liked to be able to interview children from both groups, we were only able to do so with those children whose parents volunteered and consented for their children to be interviewed. These children had attended the centre from Wednesday to Friday. Thus a group interview was conducted with six pupils from the second group in July 2008. The discussion lasted for one hour and the children had mainly positive comments about their outdoor experience. For most of the pupils, this was their first time away from their parents, siblings and friends, and even though this was a scary prospect for them in the beginning, they managed to overcome this with the support of their parents and siblings, as it is illustrated in the extract below:

Ann: I wasn't really sure if I should go or not, because, at first I wasn't going to go because I didn't really want to leave my mom and dad, but then I wanted to go 'cause I looked, and my mom told me what we were going to be doing, I thought it sounded really fun and I'm glad I went now.

Int: What about you Kelly, how did you feel?

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3 Kelly: I felt excited, because I knew that the activities were really good.

4 Int: Where did you know that the activities were good? Have you been to
5 Greenfield House before?

6 Pupils: No. (all together)

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8 Ann: No, because our moms and dads ... 'cause they ...

9 Chris: Our moms and dads told us what we were doing, and my big brother
10 told me about it, 'cause he went back when he was in year 4.

11 Int: Right.

12 Chris: I was so jealous. I was nervous, and I was nervous before I went, um,
13 and yet I was confused and excited so I looked like this, when I first got off
14 the bus. (He stands up and makes a funny face, they all laugh.)

15 Int: Brilliant. What about you Ken?

16 Ken: I was scared, excited and happy.

17 Charley: At first it was like: Cra-zy!

18 Int: Cra-zy, why was that?

19 Charley: 'Cause I didn't know ... 'Cause first, I didn't know if I could go or
20 not.

21 Int: So how did you make the decision to go?

22 Charley: 'Cause my mom told me all the things, everything.

23 Int: Ken, did your parents tell you about what it would be like.

24 Ken: It was my brother. 'Cause he'd been before, he said it was really good,
25 he went to another one. 'Cause there were two Greenfield Houses. He went to
26 the other one. And he said it was really really good, he said I should go.

27 Int: What about you Jenny?

28 Jenny: Um, well my mom told me all about it, because um, when the coach
29 came, I didn't feel scared or nothing, I just wanted to get on as quick as I
30 could.

31 (Interview with the pupils at Oliver Primary School, 15.07.2008)

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38 A number of children were prepared with regard to what to expect, so this took
39 away from their anxiety of being away from their home, of not being able to see
40 their friends and not being able to engage with their usual activities such as using
41 their phones and ipods or playing video games, as no electrical gadgets were
42 allowed on the trip.

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44 When the children were asked whether they thought that the residential visit to
45 Greenfield House helped them at all, some said that it helped them grow up and be
46 more independent, others mentioned that it helped them try new things, i.e. new
47 activities and new foods, as well as get a lot of exercise. For Chris, the visit was a
48 welcomed break from his 'annoying brother', highlighting a sense of independence
49 that most of the other children had experienced, as it can be seen from the
50 following quotes:
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53 Jenny: I felt really happy, because I'd never been in a house without my
54 mom. I'm so used to living with my mom.
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3 Chris: I felt pretty happy just to get away from my annoying brother.
4 Oooohooo!!! Freedoom! (Arms up in the air. Ann and Kelly nod in
5 approval.)
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7 Ken: Same as me. (He gives Chris a high five.)

8 [...]

9 Charley: I did like it 'cause you didn't get that much bossed around.

10 [...]

11 Ann: I think it helped me because, um, 'cause ... to grow up a bit, because
12 my mom said that I should go, then I would get used to going and when I get
13 older I can go on holidays with my friends.

14 (Interview with the pupils at Oliver Primary School, 15.07.2008)
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17 For some of the pupils, this experience provided an opportunity to make new
18 friends, or get closer to their existing friends, and learn how to work with others as
19 a team, as some of the comments from the children illustrate:
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22 Kelly: I liked the low ropes because you had to work as a team.

23 Ann: I liked it 'cause I shared a room with my best friend.

24 Chris: Yeah, it helped us in our teamwork skills.

25 Ken: I made, um, when we were having like dinner or lunch and all that, I
26 made a lot more friends at my table while sitting next to and stuff.

27 Jenny: I thought it helped me in like, um, that I could be on my own and it
28 helped me learn about more teamwork, so I work with the group more.

29 Chris: [...] It helped me learn more about teamwork and how to interact with
30 your mates.
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32 (Interview with the pupils at Oliver Primary School, 15.07.2008)
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35 These children suggested to the interviewer that they have had an enjoyable and fun
36 experience at Greenfield House which helped them to grow and learn new things.
37 However some pupils from the first group who were not interviewed may have had
38 a very different experience. Below we will show by using data gathered through
39 participant observation how, at times, the outdoor and residential experience
40 appears to have a less than positive impact on the learning and well-being of the
41 children participating in the activities.
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45 **Forms of control and children's learning**

46 We offer this example through observations of pupils from the first group where it seems
47 that, on occasions, the teachers exercised particular forms of control over the pupils; in
48 ways which may have had a negative affect on the children's learning and well-being.
49 An example of such an instance was observed, when the two classroom teachers, Ms
50 Grey and Ms Kent, decided to reprimand pupils from the first group for leaving their
51 rooms untidy. This was the last day (Wednesday) of the pupils' residential visit at the
52 centre. The children were taking part in parachute games in the sports hall. Will, was the
53 facilitator conducting the activity, helped by Sam, a secondary school pupil aged 15, who
54 was at the centre for his work experience. Mr. Harris, the head teacher, was also
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3 accompanying the group, as a distant observer, with no involvement in the facilitation of
4 the activity.

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6 Approximately halfway through the activity, the two teachers entered the sports hall and
7 asked for the activity to be stopped and for the children to line up against one of the walls
8 of the hall. The atmosphere became very tense as neither the facilitator, Sam or Mr.
9 Harris appeared to be aware of the reason for this interruption. In the fieldwork diary, this
10 was described by the researcher observing as 'a firing squad situation with regard to
11 untidy rooms and naughtiness' (Fieldwork diary, 14.05.2008). The two teachers were
12 waving socks and underwear in the air, which they had found on the floor in the pupils
13 rooms, asking to whom they belonged. One by one, the pupils were asked to step forward
14 and were reprimanded for the state in which they had left their rooms and for their
15 behaviour throughout their whole stay, as it can be seen in the extract below:
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19 Ms Kent: Three of you were told not to take part in the activity. Who was it?
20 [The three boys are singled out]

21 Ms Grey: There, who exactly do you think you are? You three are in trouble.
22 Your attitude is not acceptable [...] You have let everybody down in this hall
23 [...] You have made me the crossiest I have been in four years.

24 They are sent outside by Ms Kent.

25 Ms Kent: Right, room 6, room 7, room 9, room 18.

26 The teachers empty the plastics bags.

27 Ms. Grey: I found this [a piece of clothing] with your name on it [to one of
28 the boys]. Your attitude leaves a lot to be desired as well. I have seen you in a
29 different light than the boy I knew in year 3. I suggest your bring that boy
30 back. He is sent out.

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32 (Fieldwork notes I, pp. 112-114, 14.05.2008)
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35 A number of pupils were not allowed to take part in the next activity, which was going to
36 be the last of the day, before leaving the centre. After the two teachers left, Mr. Harris
37 who had remained detached during the whole incident, talked to the pupils in a soft voice
38 about merits and their programme of the day. The activity was resumed, however Will
39 and Sam appeared to be struggling to motivate the children to take part in the activity and
40 enjoy themselves. For some time, there was no laughter, no cheering, no excited yelling,
41 which was not the case before the interruption. Even though the children did appear to
42 start enjoying the activity toward the end, it did not seem to be of the same intensity as it
43 was in the beginning, before Ms Grey and Ms Kent entered the scene. After the activity
44 ended, Mr. Harris had a quiet talk with the pupils, advising them to be careful about using
45 sunscreen during the next activity. His tone was very calm and soothing, the researcher
46 interpreted that this was probably in an attempt to comfort the pupils, as it was recorded
47 in the field notes:
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51 Mr. Harris: When we go back, make sure you don't leave anything behind.

52 [In a soft voice] Who has sun block in their bags? (Some pupils lift their hand
53 up). Put the sunscreen on, 'cause we will be outside? Right? (To Will)

54 Will: Yeah! (Nodding)
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3 Mr. Harris: Some of you don't have any. If someone else has the same as you,
4 you can borrow it.
5 (Fieldwork notes I, pp. 117-118, 14.05.2008)
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8 From the above, it becomes apparent that Mr. Harris did not share the same perspectives
9 on authority and control as the other two teachers, as he did not raise his voice at all and
10 appeared to be genuinely concerned with the pupils' well-being, both physical and
11 emotional.
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13 During the next activity, the two class teachers continued to exercise control over the
14 pupils, by singling pupils out, reprimanding them and making them sit out of the activity.
15 This seemed to happen for no apparent reason to either the researcher, Will or Sam, as it
16 was discussed after the activity. Paul, the director of the centre, expressed his lack of
17 understanding of the approach of the two teachers, when he asked the researcher who had
18 observed the incident whether this was a 'bad group' (Fieldwork diary, 15.05.2008),
19 stating that he was surprised at how the teachers dealt with the situation. Both Will and
20 Sam, showed their indignation:
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23 Sam: They all looked so scared. (Fieldwork diary, 14.05.2008)

24 Will: Yeah, somebody left a sock in the shower and they screamed at them
25 for that. (Fieldwork diary, 15.05.2008)

26 Sam: Yeah, one of the teachers made one of them cry. (Fieldwork diary,
27 15.05.2008)

28 Will: Yeah, what could they have done. They were enjoying themselves.
29 (Fieldwork diary, 15.05.2008)
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33 During this discussion, Sam expressed his disapproval at how the situation was handled.
34 The other staff, including the director of the centre, Paul, also agreed with Sam, and
35 believed that the situation should have been dealt with differently, showing more care to
36 the pupils' feelings. This example highlights the two teachers adopting approaches which
37 were considered inappropriate by the other adults present. The children appeared scared
38 and some were seen to cry which interfered with their enjoyment of the activity. Since
39 enjoyment was proclaimed as a key aspect of well-being by Ms Kent, her actions seem
40 at odds with her practice. Moreover, in some other situations, the pupils were given very
41 little independence, they were not allowed to make choices or make their own decisions
42 during the activities. This happened mostly in the activities observed which were
43 conducted by Ms. Kent and Ms. Grey. At meal times this was also evident when, if some
44 pupils did not like the food, the two teachers tended to make them eat it. Mr. Harris later
45 advised the second group of children to be more open to try new foods, as it seemed to
46 the researcher that he did not want the children to be forced to clear their plates in this
47 way.
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52 These latter cases observed with group one, highlight rather oppressive interactions by
53 the classroom teachers which provided for a subduing effect on the children and appeared
54 to undermine their confidences. We do not have interview data from any of these
55 children. However, it is evident that their enjoyment of the situation was curtailed and
56 they potentially were learning more about teachers' anger than respect and team work.
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4 Whilst the children's actions warranted comment and correction, this might have more
5 productively been handled in a less aggressive and more sympathetic way. The head
6 teacher's intervention with the second group on their arrival may well have enabled the
7 children to understand what was expected and provided them with a more positive
8 learning experience which was highlighted through their comments in their group
9 interview.

11 **Concluding remarks**

12 We have presented different perspectives and observations of residential outdoor learning
13 experiences for primary children. On the one hand pupils express positive views of their
14 experiences, saying how they were dubious about going away from home but with
15 reassurance from their families found the event exciting and enjoyable. They said they
16 liked to share a room with a friend that they felt they had worked as a team and that they
17 had learnt how to interact positively with their friends and become independent. On the
18 other hand, there was observed a very different situation in which the children seemed, on
19 occasions, intimidated by the actions of two of their teachers. Here the situation was
20 clearly not conducive to positive learning and opportunities for teaching responsibility
21 were lost.
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26 Consequently, we would argue that not all outdoor learning experiences are beneficial,
27 that the informal and formal learning that takes place is highly dependant upon the ways
28 in which the teacher interacts with the pupils as in the indoor classroom or hall. We
29 suggest that there is a need for further critical examination of the outdoor learning
30 process; of teacher interaction and approaches; and how these impact on the learning and
31 well-being of children. Furthermore, socio-cultural factors may be influencing the actions
32 and interactions of teachers in the outdoors which may not be fully understood or
33 recognised and these require further exploration.
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37 Finally, this research suggests that classroom teachers may well benefit from professional
38 development in aspects of residential and outdoor learning so that all children have
39 greater possibilities for positive outdoor learning and residential experience.
40

41 **Acknowledgements**

42 We would like to thank the teachers, pupils and centre staff for their invaluable
43 contributions to this study.
44

45 **Note**

46
47 1. On 1st July 2009 at the countryside recreation conference David Ball from Middlesex
48 University talked on the actual and perceived risk to children in the outdoors.
49 'Taking a chance outdoors -Is fear of risk damaging our children?'
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8 **Abstract**

9 This paper draws upon research undertaken for the Outdoor Pedagogies project and
10 explores the processes of teaching and learning at one outdoor residential education
11 centre with children and staff from 'Oliver' Primary school. Data were collected through
12 ethnographic research and include participant observation, interviews with teachers and
13 centre staff and group interviews with pupils. Whilst the interviewed children reflected
14 positively on the experience, we highlight the importance of the teachers' interaction with
15 the children in providing for democratic, [shared positive learning through the](#)
16 [presentation of an extreme or 'critical' incident](#). We raise the issue of professional
17 development for school teachers working with primary school children in outdoor,
18 residential situations.
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22 **Keywords:** outdoor learning; outdoor education; residential experience; primary pupils'
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26 **Introduction**

27
28 [It has been argued that much research in outdoor learning has been undertaken and](#)
29 [represented in 'splendid isolation' without recourse to research and theorizing from the](#)
30 [major disciplines \(Humberstone 2009\). Wagner \(1993\) refers to the collective ignorance](#)
31 [in educational research making reference to 'blank' and 'blind' spots. Blank spots are](#)
32 [known areas such as theories and perspectives which are seen to require further](#)
33 [questioning, whilst blind spots are those which are not known or cared about and so are](#)
34 [ignored.](#)
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38 In a recent special edition of Education 3-13, Rea and Waite (2009) brought together a
39 number of papers from a variety of countries focusing upon socio-cultural perspectives
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Whilst Rickinson et al's (2004) meta-analysis of research into outdoor learning also highlights increasing evidence to suggest that learning outside the classroom provides many benefits for children, their analysis points to gaps or blank spots in research in this area. One major issue, they suggest needs to be addressed, is 'how to improve and deepen the research-based understandings of the outdoor learning *process*' (emphasis in the original p.56). In this paper, the research focus is upon participants' interactions in the outdoor 'classroom'; on the processes of teaching and learning through ethnographic research.

This paper draws upon participant observation and interviews to argue that whilst the outdoors is purported to be significant and beneficial, yet an under-utilised context for learning for primary children in UK, it is important to examine and take account of the pedagogic processes and the diverse forms of teaching and control manifested in interaction in outdoor and residential situations.

The paper begins with details of the research methodology adopted for this project. It then provides the contexts for the research, briefly describing the primary school from which the pupils and teachers in this study came and the outdoor centre where the observations were made. We then present short extracts from an interview with a group of pupils who attended the centre. We then go on to provide observational data concerning a particular 'critical' incident² in which the teachers' interaction was perceived as inappropriate by centre staff and the head teacher. This 'critical' incident not only sets into relief the 'usual' forms of teacher pupil interaction seen during the outdoor experiences, but also highlights the importance of exploring processes in all aspects of schooling including the outdoors.

Methodological overview

This paper is based on data collected during the pilot study for the Well-being and Outdoor Pedagogies Project. Participant observation and semi-structured interviews were used as part of the ethnographic study. A fieldwork diary was also kept and relevant documents were collected. The main fieldwork for this study was undertaken in May 2008 at a small charity run residential outdoor centre in the countryside to the South-West of London. The fieldwork involved the centre staff, the visiting teachers from Oliver primary school and their pupils, aged 8 and 9 years.

The research process and philosophical underpinnings were interpretative through adopting a broad ethnographic approach, which was considered to be sensitive and sufficiently complex in order to allow for a holistic understanding of the social phenomena explored (Davies 1984; Fetterman 1989; Griffin 1985; Willis 1977). A variety of data was collected from these different sources, enabling insight into the world of the children and teachers involved in the outdoor learning experience (Walford 2001).

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4 The key strength of ethnography is that it highlights the importance of understanding the
5 perceptions of the people and cultures of groups and organisations studied (Walford
6 2002), which is an essential aspect of this study. Moreover, according to Griffin (1985)
7 the qualitative analyses made accessible through ethnographic research allows for an
8 insight into the experience of individuals in a group context. This was significant for this
9 research, as we were observing groups of children interacting with their teachers and
10 centre staff, while taking part in outdoor activities. Further, an ethnographic approach
11 provides one of the most effective methodology for capturing and understanding teacher
12 and pupil interaction during outdoor learning (Humberstone 1986). It can enable the
13 examination of the teaching and learning process in context. As Denscombe (1983)
14 points out, ethnography is not used to measure the efficiency of the teaching in instilling
15 knowledge, but rather it examines the customs and approaches of the participants
16 involved in the research, in an attempt to gain their perspective on the world in which
17 they operate. Therefore this research does not deal with numbers or graphs, it aims to
18 provide a description of the research setting in sufficient detail, so as to allow the reader
19 to visualise the cultural situation being described and it acknowledges that there are
20 multiple understandings of reality(Geertz 1973; Delamont 1992; Humberstone 2004).

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25 Pugsley (2002, 91) argues that ethnography does not have a neat template or a well
26 established protocol, instead 'it requires the researcher to make instant judgment calls and
27 to live with the consequences.' Consequently, this research assumed an emergent design
28 (Maykut and Morehouse 1994), adopting a broad focus of enquiry, which became
29 narrower as the research progressed. The researchers themselves became the human
30 instruments of this research (Lincoln and Guba 1985), which entails that we were the
31 research tool par excellence, as we were the only instruments flexible enough to be able
32 to capture the intricacy, subtlety, and ever-changing situation of the human experience
33 (Lincoln and Guba 1985; Fetterman 1989). This was of particular significance when
34 gathering the data, as the researcher conducting the fieldwork had to make judgements as
35 to what was significant and worth recording, since it was impossible to record everything
36 that was going on.

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40 Participant observation is something that every one of us has experienced at one stage or
41 another in our lives. Whenever we find ourselves in a new environment, with new people,
42 be it a new job, or a new school, we all have had to 'learn the ropes', as they say, in order
43 to be able to function in that new environment. Thus, the participant observer has to listen
44 carefully and observe keenly what goes on around him/her in order to acquire a deep
45 understanding of the people in the social situation, organisation or culture (Maykut and
46 Morehouse 1994). The difference between an ordinary participant and a participant
47 observer conducting fieldwork is that the latter is explicitly aware of the learning process
48 he/she is going through, whereas the former goes through this process unconsciously
49 (Hammersley and Atkinson 1995). The participant observer makes records of the
50 phenomena that he/she is the witness of or the situations he/she is part of, either in his/her
51 field notes or in the fieldwork diary. In this case the researcher was observing teacher
52 pupil interaction and the processes occurring in an outdoor education context.

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3 For this research, the observational data was recorded as it was going on, using a pen and
4 a notepad. These instruments did not seem at all intrusive, and were very practical,
5 inexpensive and easy to use. Using more sophisticated equipment, such as a video
6 camera, would have been rather cumbersome and impractical, but also, using images
7 would have had further implications on consent.
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10 Interviews were used as a data gathering method in order to gain a different perspective
11 on what was going on. Delamont (2002) and Walford (2001) warn researchers that data
12 from interviews should not replace data gathered from participant observation. Interviews
13 are seen as a 'quick fix' and should only provide further insight into a problem
14 (Delamont, 2002) rather than become the only type of data used. Moreover, talk is
15 produced in a context and researchers have to always be aware of the context (Delamont
16 2002). Having varied data was significant for this study, as it emerged from this research
17 that, at times, what some of the teacher were saying and what they were doing did not
18 always match (see Denzin 1997).
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23 **Ethical considerations**

24 Ethical considerations are central to ethnographic research and particularly so when
25 children are amongst the participants. Hence this research was conducted only after
26 informed consent was obtained from all the participants, which meant that this was an
27 overt study, avoiding deception. It was felt that to disrupt pupils' outdoor experiences
28 through interviewing them during their stay at the centre was inappropriate and so
29 observation only was undertaken with the permission of the school. Permission to
30 interview the pupils in a group at their school was gained from their parents, who also
31 agreed to a group interview. Gaining consent from the parents prior to conducting the
32 group videoed interview with the children was essential.
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36 All the participants were ensured anonymity, confidentiality and were given the right to
37 withdraw from the project at any time, in accordance with the British Educational
38 Research Association (BERA) ethical guidelines. Thus all the names are pseudonyms,
39 and not the real names of the participants or the institutions.
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42 **The primary school context**

43 The research for this project was conducted between May and July 2008. In order to
44 contextualise the research we include some information about the school, by referring to
45 the most recent Ofsted Inspection Reports. Oliver Primary School is situated in the
46 vicinity of London and it is a large community junior primary school, having a non-
47 denominational religious character. The gender of the pupils is mixed and their age
48 ranges from 7 to 11. According to the 2009 Ofsted Inspection Report, this is a larger than
49 average school with a total number of pupils of around 400. The report also states that
50 although the majority of pupils are from White British backgrounds, nevertheless the
51 school community is diverse and includes about a quarter of pupils from other ethnic
52 backgrounds such as Asian British Indian, Asian British Pakistani, Black African, Black
53 British Caribbean and Chinese.
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3 The school currently holds a Healthy School Silver Award, which shows a concern on the
4 part of the school for the issues around healthy eating. The 2009 Ofsted inspection report,
5 concluded that the pupils know how to eat healthily and keep fit. Inspectors observed
6 healthy eating choices being made at lunchtime and saw pupils enthusiastically engaged
7 in physical education. The report also states that the pupils enjoy school and their
8 personal development is good, that they feel safe in school and have positive attitudes to
9 learning. Moreover, statements from the pupils made during the inspection reveal that not
10 only do they enjoy school, but that they have a strong sense of pride and identity with
11 their local community.
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15 The pupils display positive attitudes and respond well in lessons to the activities
16 provided, having mostly trusting relationships with the staff. The report found the
17 relationships in classrooms and on the playground almost always cordial, with pupils
18 behaving well. There was no bullying or unfriendliness reported, and the pupils were
19 confident that a member of staff would help them should this occur.
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22 According to the 2009 report, the school offers a broad and balanced curriculum, which
23 caters the needs and interests of pupils and contributes strongly to their overall
24 achievement and enjoyment. The report found that the wide range of visits and visitors
25 enhances learning, with many opportunities for pupils to deepen and extend their learning
26 through themed weeks, projects, drama and musical performances. Also the extra-
27 curricular programme of the school ensures opportunities for personal success,
28 contributing to a great extent to the pupils' personal and social development. This was
29 evident in the support given by the head teacher for pupils to attend the outdoor
30 residential centre during their schooling.
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34 When referring to the quality of the curriculum to promote pupils' economic well-being
35 and financial capability, the 2008 report concluded economic well-being has recently
36 been given a higher profile in the personal, social and health education programme
37 (PSHE). Moreover the report noted that good links are made with healthy eating, and that
38 after school clubs, residential visits and design technology projects ensure pupils have
39 good additional opportunities for personal and social development, including the
40 promotion of team skills. Finally the report indicates that the pupils' behaviour and
41 relations between staff and pupils are very good.
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45 This description of the school is not based on the researchers' personal judgements due to
46 the limited time spent in the school setting. However, it situates the school in the larger
47 social context and contributes toward understanding the perspectives of the teachers
48 taking part in this research. The reports referred to are not sourced, and the information is
49 meant to be general, so as to ensure that the anonymity of the school is kept intact.
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52 **The context of the outdoor residential centre**

53 For issues of anonymity, the real name of the centre will not be mentioned, however a
54 brief description will be given based on the information taken from the centre's
55 documentation such as, brochures, from interviews with the staff and observations made
56 in the field. This is in order to allow the reader to have some understanding of the ethos
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3 of the place. The centre, which we call Greenfield House, is situated in an idyllic setting
4 in the English countryside, on the outskirts of a large city and Oliver Primary School,
5 with which it has a long-standing relationship. It is owned and managed by an
6 organisation made up of youth clubs. The centre states it has over 60 years of expertise
7 in providing and promoting social educational programmes for young people and adults.
8 The centre has a self-financing policy, which makes it dependant on charitable donations
9 and local fundraising initiatives undertaken by a team of volunteers. Funding also comes
10 from primary and secondary school groups that occupy and utilise the house and its
11 facilities during midweek periods and when members cannot normally attend.
12 Some visitors from youth organisations and schools use the centre to run their own
13 personal development/educational programmes. According to its documents, the centre
14 staff aims to work with teachers and group leaders in planning and delivering their
15 programmes in order to ensure a productive and enjoyable event that meets the needs of
16 the various groups. The centre states that it offers a flexible approach, and comfortable
17 and accessible surroundings in order to encourage the individuals to learn new skills,
18 build confidence and share their time in an enjoyable way. The schools that utilise the
19 centre are very much involved in choosing the activities and putting together their
20 programme. Some of the activities are facilitated by the visiting teachers, rather than the
21 centre staff, and schools are aware of this fact before going to the centre.
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27 Having described the centre and the school from where the participants came, we now go
28 on to present the findings from the research focusing specifically on the processes
29 occurring in teacher pupil interaction. We begin by presenting extracts from the group
30 interview with pupils who attended during the second half of the week of the research.
31 The interview was concerned to find out what the pupils felt about their experiences
32 while attending the outdoor centre and how it affected them. The next part focuses upon
33 an event or 'critical' incident which occurred during the first part of the week. This
34 incident would not have been uncovered without participant observation and highlights
35 forms of teacher pupil interaction which were deemed inappropriate, not only by the
36 researchers but also the centre staff and head teacher.
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40 **Pupils' perspectives on the outdoor experience**

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43 The pupils visiting Greenfield House came in two separate groups within one week in
44 May 2008. The first group came on Monday morning and left on Wednesday after
45 breakfast, while the second group came on Wednesday morning and left on Friday at
46 noon. The visiting school teachers stayed for the entire week. Although we would have
47 liked to be able to interview children from both groups, we were only able to do so with
48 those children whose parents volunteered and consented for their children to be
49 interviewed. These children had attended the centre from Wednesday to Friday.
50 However, both groups of children were observed during their stay at the outdoor centre,
51 and informal conversations were carried out with children from both groups. A group
52 interview was conducted with six pupils from the second group in July 2008³. The
53 discussion lasted for one hour and the children had mainly positive comments about their
54 outdoor experience. For most of the pupils, this was their first time away from their
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3 parents, siblings and friends, and even though this was a scary prospect for them in the
4 beginning, they managed to overcome this with the support of their parents and siblings,
5 as it is illustrated in the extract below:
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8 Ann: I wasn't really sure if I should go or not, because, at first I wasn't going
9 to go because I didn't really want to leave my mom and dad, but then I
10 wanted to go 'cause I looked, and my mom told me what we were going to be
11 doing, I thought it sounded really fun and I'm glad I went now.

12 Ina: What about you Kelly, how did you feel?

13 Kelly: I felt excited, because I knew that the activities were really good.

14 Ina: Where did you know that the activities were good? Have you been to
15 Greenfield House before?

16 Pupils: No. (all together)

17 Ann: No, because our moms and dads ... 'cause they ...

18 Chris: Our moms and dads told us what we were doing, and my big brother
19 told me about it, 'cause he went back when he was in year 4.

20 Ina: Right.

21 Chris: I was so jealous. I was nervous, and I was nervous before I went, um,
22 and yet I was confused and excited so I looked like this, when I first got off
23 the bus. (He stands up and makes a funny face, they all laugh.)

24 Ina: Brilliant. What about you Ken?

25 Ken: I was scared, excited and happy.

26 Charley: At first it was like: Cra-zy!

27 Ina: Cra-zy, why was that?

28 Charley: 'Cause I didn't know ... 'Cause first, I didn't know if I could go or
29 not.

30 Ina: So how did you make the decision to go?

31 Charley: 'Cause my mom told me all the things, everything.

32 Ina: Ken, did your parents tell you about what it would be like.

33 Ken: It was my brother. 'Cause he'd been before, he said it was really good,
34 he went to another one. 'Cause there were two Greenfield Houses. He went to
35 the other one. And he said it was really really good, he said I should go.

36 Ina: What about you Jenny?

37 Jenny: Um, well my mom told me all about it, because um, when the coach
38 came, I didn't feel scared or nothing, I just wanted to get on as quick as I
39 could.

40 (Interview with the pupils at Oliver Primary School, 15.07.2008)

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48 A number of children were prepared with regard to what to expect, so this took
49 away from their anxiety of being away from their home, of not being able to see
50 their friends and not being able to engage with their usual activities such as using
51 their phones and ipods or playing video games, as no electrical gadgets were
52 allowed on the trip.

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54 When the children were asked whether they thought that the residential visit to
55 Greenfield House helped them at all, some said that it helped them grow up and be
56 more independent, others mentioned that it helped them try new things, i.e. new
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activities and new foods, as well as get a lot of exercise. For Chris, the visit was a welcomed break from his ‘annoying brother’, highlighting a sense of independence that most of the other children had experienced, as it can be seen from the following quotes:

Jenny: I felt really happy, because I’d never been in a house without my mom. I’m so used to living with my mom.

Chris: I felt pretty happy just to get away from my annoying brother. Oooohooo!!! Freedoom! (Arms up in the air. Ann and Kelly nod in approval.)

Ken: Same as me. (He gives Chris a high five.)

[...]

Charley: I did like it ‘cause you didn’t get that much bossed around.

[...]

Ann: I think it helped me because, um, ‘cause ... to grow up a bit, because my mom said that I should go, then I would get used to going and when I get older I can go on holidays with my friends.

(Interview with the pupils at Oliver Primary School, 15.07.2008)

For some of the pupils, this experience provided an opportunity to make new friends, or get closer to their existing friends, and learn how to work with others as a team, as some of the comments from the children illustrate:

Kelly: I liked the low ropes because you had to work as a team.

Ann: I liked it ‘cause I shared a room with my best friend.

Chris: Yeah, it helped us in our teamwork skills.

Ken: I made, um, when we were having like dinner or lunch and all that, I made a lot more friends at my table while sitting next to and stuff.

Jenny: I thought it helped me in like, um, that I could be on my own and it helped me learn about more teamwork, so I work with the group more.

Chris: [...] It helped me learn more about teamwork and how to interact with your mates.

(Interview with the pupils at Oliver Primary School, 15.07.2008)

These children suggested to the interviewer that they have had an enjoyable and fun experience at Greenfield House which helped them to grow and learn new things. However some pupils from the first group who were not interviewed may have had a very different experience⁴. Below we show a ‘critical incident’ by using data gathered through participant observation how, at times, the outdoor and residential experience appears to have a less than positive impact on the learning and well-being of the children participating in the activities [at that time](#).

Forms of control and children’s learning: a ‘critical incident’

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3 We offer this example through observations of pupils from the first group where it seems
4 that, on occasions, the teachers exercised particular forms of control over the pupils,
5 **through their interaction**, in ways which may have had a negative affect on the children's
6 learning and **well-being and which was not the form of teacher pupil interaction**
7 **normally observed. This is presented as a 'critical ' incident or extreme interaction which**
8 **sets into relief the usual forms of teacher interaction.**
9

10 An example of such an instance was observed, when the two classroom teachers, Ms
11 Grey and Ms Kent, decided to reprimand pupils from the first group for leaving their
12 rooms untidy. This was the last day (Wednesday) of the pupils' residential visit at the
13 centre. The children were taking part in parachute games in the sports hall. Will, was the
14 facilitator conducting the activity, helped by Sam, a secondary school pupil aged 15, who
15 was at the centre for his work experience. Mr. Harris, the head teacher, was also
16 accompanying the group, as a distant observer, with no involvement in the facilitation of
17 the activity.
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20 Approximately halfway through the activity, the two teachers entered the sports hall and
21 asked for the activity to be stopped and for the children to line up against one of the walls
22 of the hall. The atmosphere became very tense as neither the facilitator, Sam or Mr.
23 Harris appeared to be aware of the reason for this interruption. In the fieldwork diary, this
24 was described by the researcher observing as 'a firing squad situation with regard to
25 untidy rooms and naughtiness' (Fieldwork diary, 14.05.2008). The two teachers were
26 waving socks and underwear in the air, which they had found on the floor in the pupils
27 rooms, asking to whom they belonged. One by one, the pupils were asked to step forward
28 and were reprimanded for the state in which they had left their rooms and for their
29 behaviour throughout their whole stay, as it can be seen in the extract below:
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33 Ms Kent: Three of you were told not to take part in the activity. Who was it?

34 [The three boys are singled out]

35 Ms Grey: There, who exactly do you think you are? You three are in trouble.
36 Your attitude is not acceptable [...] You have let everybody down in this hall
37 [...] You have made me the crossiest I have been in four years.

38 They are sent outside by Ms Kent.

39 Ms Kent: Right, room 6, room 7, room 9, room 18.

40 The teachers empty the plastics bags.

41 Ms. Grey: I found this [a piece of clothing] with your name on it [to one of
42 the boys]. Your attitude leaves a lot to be desired as well. I have seen you in a
43 different light than the boy I knew in year 3. I suggest your bring that boy
44 back. [He is sent out].
45

46 (Fieldwork notes I, pp. 112-114, 14.05.2008)
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50 A number of pupils were not allowed to take part in the next activity, which was going to
51 be the last of the day, before leaving the centre. After the two teachers left, Mr. Harris
52 who had remained detached during the whole incident, talked to the pupils in a soft voice
53 about merits and their programme of the day. The activity was resumed, however Will
54 and Sam appeared to be struggling to motivate the children to take part in the activity and
55 enjoy themselves. For some time, there was no laughter, no cheering, no excited yelling,
56 which was not the case before the interruption. Even though the children did appear to
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3 start enjoying the activity toward the end, it did not seem to be of the same intensity as it
4 was in the beginning, before Ms Grey and Ms Kent entered the scene. After the activity
5 ended, Mr. Harris had a quiet talk with the pupils, advising them to be careful about using
6 sunscreen during the next activity. His tone was very calm and soothing, the researcher
7 interpreted that this was probably in an attempt to comfort the pupils, as it was recorded
8 in the field notes:
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11 Mr. Harris: When we go back, make sure you don't leave anything behind.
12 [In a soft voice] Who has sun block in their bags? (Some pupils lift their hand
13 up). Put the sunscreen on, 'cause we will be outside? Right? (To Will)

14 Will: Yeah! (Nodding)

15
16 Mr. Harris: Some of you don't have any. If someone else has the same as you,
17 you can borrow it.

18 (Fieldwork notes I, pp. 117-118, 14.05.2008)
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21 From the above, it appeared that Mr. Harris did not share the same perspectives on
22 authority and control as the other two teachers, as he did not raise his voice at all and
23 appeared to be genuinely concerned with the pupils' well-being, both physical and
24 emotional. During the next activity, the two class teachers continued to exercise control
25 over the pupils using authoritarian interactions, by singling pupils out, reprimanding them
26 and making them sit out of the activity. This seemed to happen for no apparent reason to
27 either the researcher, Will or Sam, as it was discussed after the activity. Paul, the director
28 of the centre, expressed his lack of understanding of the approach of the two teachers,
29 when he asked the researcher who had observed the incident whether this was a 'bad
30 group' (Fieldwork diary, 15.05.2008), stating that he was surprised at how the teachers
31 dealt with the situation. Both Will and Sam, showed their indignation:
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35 Sam: They all looked so scared. (Fieldwork diary, 14.05.2008)

36 Will: Yeah, somebody left a sock in the shower and they screamed at them
37 for that. (Fieldwork diary, 15.05.2008)

38 Sam: Yeah, one of the teachers made one of them cry. (Fieldwork diary,
39 15.05.2008)

40 Will: Yeah, what could they have done. They were enjoying themselves.
41 (Fieldwork diary, 15.05.2008)
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45 During this discussion, Sam expressed his disapproval at how the situation was handled.
46 The other staff, including the director of the centre, Paul, also agreed with Sam, and
47 believed that the situation should have been dealt with differently, showing more care to
48 the pupils' feelings. This example highlights the two teachers adopting teaching
49 approaches which were considered inappropriate by the other adults present. The children
50 appeared scared and some were seen to cry which interfered with their enjoyment of the
51 activity. Since enjoyment was proclaimed as a key aspect of well-being by Ms Kent, her
52 actions seem at odds with her practice. Moreover, in some other situations, the pupils
53 were given very little independence, they were not allowed to make choices or make their
54 own decisions during the activities. This happened mostly in the activities observed
55 which were conducted by Ms. Kent and Ms. Grey. At meal times this was also evident
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3 when, if some pupils did not like the food, the two teachers tended to make them eat it.
4 [When the second group arrived](#) Mr. Harris later advised [this](#) group of children to be more
5 open to try new foods, as it seemed to the researcher that he did not want the children to
6 be forced to clear their plates in this way.
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10 These latter cases observed with group one, highlight rather oppressive interactions by
11 the classroom teachers which provided for a subduing effect on the children and appeared
12 to undermine their confidences. We do not have interview data from any of these
13 children. However, it is evident that their enjoyment of the situation was curtailed and
14 they potentially were learning more about teachers' anger than respect and team work.
15 Whilst the children's actions warranted comment and correction, this might have more
16 productively been handled in a less aggressive and more sympathetic way. The head
17 teacher's intervention with the second group on their arrival may well have enabled the
18 children to understand what was expected and provided them with a more positive
19 learning experience which was highlighted through their comments in their group
20 interview. [This 'critical' incident has provided valuable data regarding forms of](#)
21 [interaction which are considered to be inappropriate and not conducive to learning in this](#)
22 [outdoor learning context.](#)
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25 26 **Concluding remarks**

27 We have presented different perspectives and observations of residential outdoor learning
28 experiences for primary children. On the one hand pupils express positive views of their
29 experiences, saying how they were dubious about going away from home but with
30 reassurance from their families found the event exciting and enjoyable. They said they
31 liked to share a room with a friend that they felt they had worked as a team and that they
32 had learnt how to interact positively with their friends and become independent. [These](#)
33 [findings support evidence from other research that suggests that outdoor learning is](#)
34 [beneficial for children. However, on the other hand, there was observed a 'critical'](#)
35 [incident or](#) situation in which the children seemed, on occasions, intimidated by the
36 actions of two of their teachers. Here the situation was clearly not conducive to positive
37 learning and opportunities for teaching responsibility were lost. [It also marked an](#)
38 [extreme form of teacher behaviour which was seen to be at odds with that usually](#)
39 [expected of teachers in the outdoor learning situation.](#)
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44 Consequently, we would argue that not all outdoor learning experiences are beneficial,
45 that the informal and formal learning that takes place is highly dependant upon the ways
46 in which the teacher interacts with the pupils as in the indoor classroom or hall. We
47 suggest that there is a need for further critical examination of the outdoor learning
48 process; of teacher interaction and approaches; and how these impact on the learning and
49 well-being of children. Furthermore, socio-cultural factors may be influencing the actions
50 and interactions of teachers in the outdoors which may not be fully understood or
51 recognised and these require further exploration.
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55 Finally, this research suggests that classroom teachers may well benefit from professional
56 development in aspects of residential and outdoor learning so that all children have
57 greater possibilities for positive outdoor learning and residential experience.
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Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the teachers, pupils and centre staff for their invaluable contributions to this study.

Notes

1. On 1st July 2009 at the countryside recreation conference David Ball from Middlesex University talked on the actual and perceived risk to children in the outdoors. "Taking a chance outdoors -Is fear of risk damaging our children?"
2. A critical incident/case or extreme example highlights the taken-for-granted ideas and implicit understandings which might otherwise pass unnoticed as obvious. An examination of such cases helps to gain a deeper understanding of what are accepted and normal forms of interaction (Atkinson 1979).
3. The parents of these pupils had agreed to their being interviewed. Whilst it would have been interesting to interview pupils from the group who attended the centre in the early part of the week, we were not given this option.
4. These extracts are from pupils who attended the centre in the second part of the week and the only group we were able to interview. They may well have benefited from the experiences of the first group described below, since the head teacher clearly tried to prevent anything similar happening (ie the critical incident) with this second group.

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