Green Learning Environments

Identifying best practice in non-formal learning in the natural environment for children with special education needs.

Intellectual Output 1 – Gathering Best Practice

Summary

Tree and Bulb Planting at Bluebell Park

This report identifies the best practice in non-formal learning in the natural environment for children with special education needs (SEN), using case studies, and talking to experts from Belgium, Slovenia and the UK, three countries in which currently there is no standardised nature-based skills on the curriculum. This particular document focuses on one of three intellectual outputs- gathering best practice. OECD framework suggests that there are three forms of learning, formal, which is identified by clear structure, informal, which may be described as experience, and non-formal, which lies between the two, and is explorative, and directed by the engagement of children. Intellectual Output 1 (IO 1) aims to highlight good practise in Green Learning Environments (GLE) to support the development and recognition of non-formal learning.

In addition, the work involved in developing IO1, has initiated a network of those interested in sharing best practice and developing GLE.

Erasmus at Work – Three teachers, each from a different country work to develop common terms

At the start of the project the partners involved met and explored the variation in language and categorization of children's needs in order to reach a consensus on the categorization of conditions. The policy on delivering special needs education varies among countries, and sometimes within them. This assessment of best practice looks at whether this leads to variation in the way that non-formal learning in the natural environment is structured. In research conducted at the inception of the project six points were identified as important to the gathering of information to the formation of best practice examples. These were, activities meeting children's needs, the identification of appropriate GLE sites, thorough risk assessments, the delivery of the activity in the determination of what it involves, length of time, and the size of the group, an assessment of the benefits of the activity, and a follow up assessment, as a way to maximise activity value. In relation to these six points, fifteen experts have been identified, interviewed, and their thoughts summarised.

Whilst the interviews presented significant common themes, they also highlight that there is a variation in the way that non-formal learning techniques manifest into teaching in the natural environment. The common themes pulled out of the interviews will be identified in summary. Some experts agreed that children are children, and therefore SEN has no great impact on this, with GLE's providing no significant challenges to children with SEN. Further to this point seems to be the argument that human response to nature is instinctive. This innate link with the natural world is the key to all forms of learning in the natural world, and is not confined to children, or just to children with SEN. Another theme pulled from the interviews was that GLE can be so beneficial because the natural environment acts as a stimulant, stimulating senses and therefore children's learning. GLE activities can be adapted for children with particular SEN's. Further to this, GLE can be adapted to focus on particular sensations, providing opportunity for children with less tolerance to sensation. In these interviews experts repeatedly stressed that the adaptability of non-formal learning in the natural environment is one of its biggest benefits. Its fluidity between formal, informal, and non-formal learning means that the constraints are removed.

Although there is a limited academic evidence base, anecdotal evidence suggests that children achieve greater learning through GLE, than through classroom taught sessions. Experts tend to agree that learning in the natural environment is a completely different experience to classroom learning. The removal of the restriction of four walls allows children who may have additional needs in the classroom to thrive in the outdoor environment. GLE's have further benefit in the types of movement associated with being in the natural environment, which have been linked to increased brain development.