



National Conference 7 February 2006 Summary

Bernard McLeary, Chief Executive, Learning and Teaching Scotland, set the tone for the day: 'We need to encourage this generation, perhaps more than any previous one, to acquire the environmental awareness and citizenship that is instilled through exploration of the natural environment in childhood.'

Robert Brown MSP, Deputy Minister for Education and Young People, talked of raising the profile of outdoor education and challenged those with responsibility for education to consider the educational potential of the outdoors: 'We must challenge people to think, "Why learn indoors?"' He made connections between learning and meeting the needs of future generations: 'Future education must find a way to place knowledge, understanding and information handling into an effective context that allows young people to experience and engage with the complexities in their culture, their society and their environment in a just and respectful way, and outdoor education can offer one way to do this.'

He saw outdoor learning as part of the future of Scottish education and challenged what people mean by outdoor education. 'We are moving away from the notion of outdoor education being viewed as a singular, discrete and expensive experience to the concept that outdoor learning for all young people should be an intrinsic, ongoing part of pupils' educational experience, which is essential for allowing children to become adults in the real world with the ability to make sound choices for the future.' He also acknowledged worries and concerns around health and safety and litigation.

He explained that the Outdoor Connections development programme intends to make connections across a range of current and emerging policies – A Curriculum for Excellence, health, citizenship and sustainable development. 'If sustainable development is about looking forward to a better future, it is essential that our young people are able to develop the skills, knowledge and values that can equip them to make informed decisions and to be active participants in a democratic society. Opportunities for learning in the natural environment are key to developing these values. It is right that outdoor education will play a part in those developments.'

He closed by saying more young people should be given the opportunity to learn outdoors throughout their educational career. 'We want to give all young people the opportunity to engage with the natural heritage of Scotland and develop the values and understanding of the land we live in and the world around them.'

Colin Brown, Programme Manager for A Curriculum for Excellence, brought delegates up to date with A Curriculum for Excellence. He challenged delegates to put the young person at the centre and to personalise learning opportunities to achieve the best outcomes for young people. He said the door was unlocked – a metaphor referring to both the place of outdoor learning in A Curriculum for Excellence and the opportunity for schools to be innovative and take learning outdoors.

Don Ledingham, Head of Education at East Lothian Council, showed how Dunbar Grammar School is taking learning outdoors. His examples included local and global

outdoor settings and the place of technology in engaging the whole community in these achievements. He challenged delegates to consider, 'What is the core?' He talked of building passion through achievement, a passion not only for pupils to learn but also for teachers to teach. He stressed the importance of leadership and wide staff support. He talked of timetable, staff and safety challenges, but emphasised the importance of local experiences and local support. There was no doubt that Don believed in the excellence that can be achieved through whole school approaches to learning outdoors.

Pupils from Collydean Primary School, Perth High School, Breadalbane Academy and Falla Hill Primary School shared their opinions of their outdoor learning experiences, clearly highlights of their educational career. They confidently and authentically articulated the multiple learning and dividends they achieved whilst also recognising the outdoors as both a significant learning context and part of a living community.

Dr Alistair Lavery, Chair of the Sustainable Development Education Liaison Group and Head of Education at RSPB Scotland, presented an evidence base that young people's connection to the natural world is changing, that this connection can be greatly enhanced by real experience of the natural world and that it is also essential for sustainable living. 'We can show that first-hand experience is one of the most effective learning tools available to us.' He challenged delegates to 'ensure that our schools can make use of it'.

Marcus Bailie, Head of Inspection Services at the Adventure Activities Licensing Authority, said that out of 10 million school excursions per year, there were on average three fatalities. He put this in the context of the other 1400 sudden deaths of young people each year, 100 of which are suicides. Then he compared the potential benefits of educational excursions with some other adult statistics: 30,000 obesity and inactivity deaths, and 6000 suicides. He suggested that in attempting to make what is already safe even safer, we may be depriving young people of vital experiences that they need for their future. He challenged delegates to keep saving lives by taking learning outdoors.

Dr Peter Higgins, Senior Lecturer in the Physical Education, Sport and Leisure Studies Department of the University of Edinburgh, presented thoughts from recent research on ways to better support teachers in using the outdoors. He suggested roles for school management, local authorities, the Scottish Executive, initial teacher education institutions, HMIE and Scottish Natural Heritage.

Donald MacLeod, HMIE, emphasised the positive outdoor learning in HMIE reports across nursery, primary and secondary. He illustrated the connections that had been made with high quality outdoor education examples from schools and looked at the common features of quality learning outdoors, emphasising the importance of process, people and relationships.

David Cameron, Director of Children's Services at Stirling Council, summarised the whole day in an inspiring and challenging way. 'Education doesn't belong to schools, it belongs to the community ... we all need to be engaged in the education and future of our children ... It's the experience that children have that counts for them. What is it that they want to tell you about? ... The case is made, the argument is here! We need to take the chance that is here for us now.'