

Teaching in Nature

Rochsolloch Primary School

A curricular
led
programme
learning in
and about
nature



Introduction

I can identify and classify examples of living things, past and present, to help me appreciate their diversity. I can relate physical and behavioural characteristics to their survival or extinction. - SCN 2-01a

Class teacher Colin Flanigan of Rochsolloch Primary, North Lanarkshire planned a series of progressive outdoor learning experiences based around this CfE outcomes.

Session Outline

The first two lessons involved discussing animal habitats, introducing the vocabulary and challenging the pupils to organise their thoughts into categories. This was done in the classroom with picture sets, books and images on the whiteboard.

The teacher then facilitated a session taking the pupils through comparing habitats and identifying similarities in them all – food, water, shelter etc. The pupils then organised all their findings as a useable document for the next stage, which then had also been involved in planning.

The pupils had organised a short walk to local Brownsburn Park, where they surveyed for evidence of possible habitats, with the common themes, using their survey documents. This session

The first trip however became an exploration of the park, as many pupils wanted to explore this local, public space that only a few had visited before. It was surprising how few pupils, staff and parents had actually visited this local park. The session therefore quickly changed into an initial explores and observation of what they found. It also allowed the pupils to spend time getting engaged and excited about the space they were to study.

The pupils found a “den” that other park users had created, and this led to a conversation about why and how you might create such a space in the park. Pupils were able to relate their enjoyment and the shelter of a den to the animals need to find or build shelter.

The second visit returned to the plan, with pupils surveying for shelter, food, water, types of plant etc. The pupils now knew what to expect, and they were calmer and more focussed on task. As ever, the pupils need to be engaged and ready before quality learning can take place. This visit was also in late winter, and so pupils surveys seemed to show very little ‘living’ at the time.

Back at school, the next stage of lessons involved re-researching what animals were likely to live in the local habitats, particularly Brownsburn Park. Each group of pupils had a different habitat to research, via library and internet, but all had to research the local Park to compare. It was challenging to the pupils to be faced with pictures that looked so different from the late winter habitat they had actually experienced.

This comparing of local with national understanding helps pupils place their experiences in a larger context – and the fundamental differences in seasons was strongly brought home to the pupils through their research.

The final visit to the park was later in spring, the pupils having worked out that there was a lack of obvious habitats to see. The final survey was to gather evidence of the local animals the pupils had researched, comparing their research with observed animals. It was a dramatic change, and the pupils were able to see huge differences.

Learning outcomes

Pupils also discovered that the spaces they had were not as (obviously) wildlife rich as they had first imagined. This led to a discussion about the challenges of finding and observing animals or plants, but also about how you increase biodiversity and opportunity for nature. They discovered that much of what they found was very well adapted and ‘camouflaged’ or hidden from them, highlighting the need to survive.

Finally back at school, each group finalised their reports on their project and shared what they had learned.

Conclusion

This simple set of sessions outlines clearly how pupils can build learning around a theme, and how as a skilled educator you can allow pupils to take much of the lead in outdoor learning. There were unintended consequences, and learning that could not be predicted at the start, yet pupils were so motivated to go that the extra visits were organised to meet their motivation. The local nature of the trip meant it was free of cost and low on resource and time to plan and deliver – and therefore easy to re-visit the park.

Colin Flanigan took park in Clyde and Avon Valley Landscape Partnership and Grounds for Learnings ‘Teaching in Nature’ programme. This course, developed by Stirling University in 2010, equips teachers with the skills and confidence to use place-responsive and learner-responsive techniques in local greenspaces.