

REAL LIFE SKILLS

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In this article, Christopher considers the value of outdoor learning in geography for pupils with SEN, and how adaptations can have long-term benefits.

Bradstow School, in the small seaside town of Broadstairs, is a residential special school for young people who are on the autistic spectrum with severe learning difficulties. It is a unique school, providing individualised, 24-hour care for 5- to 19-year-olds, with access to full educational and therapeutic support in an environment that is safe, loving and predictable.

Prior to one older pupil leaving the school, he was taken on supervised visits to a neighbouring town. During the journey on public buses, we looked out for different symbols, including street signs, traffic markings and road signs. We discussed the meaning and how each sign would help him find his way while he was out in public. The route and final destination were changed every few trips, to incorporate different signs and symbols. Although this approach may not have appeared significant, it gave him a change in his usual routine. By getting on different buses, going to a different café and interacting with different people in different locations, he learnt how to cope in new (and to him) challenging situations. In this way he was encouraged to use his previous knowledge of the symbols in new surroundings.

Learning how to exist in the community by developing a knowledge of what different symbols mean and interacting with members of the community is imperative to the development and social integration of our young people. They acquire skills that will be immensely meaningful to them later in life. The more accustomed they are to change in their life, the better prepared and informed that young person is and (subsequently) the less anxious they are about social change in their life. This method of learning was so successful that we decided to implement a similar strategy with younger pupils. To develop their locational understanding and skills in the school grounds, we made use of Barnaby Bear.

Progressing with Barnaby

As we work with pupils with SEN, we decided to utilise the idea of gradual, small changes over a series of lessons, forming a Medium Term Plan (MTP) (see web panel). This involved progression in learning: pupils located Barnaby Bear at a different place in the school grounds in each lesson. It enabled them to explore the school surroundings, while recognising and responding to familiar photos/places, and develop an understanding of the different locations involved. 'Although they didn't know it, these children were learning the principles of geography. They were seeing how places relate to each other through the movement of things from one place to another' (Fromboluti, 1996).

The school grounds include a cycle track, a farm, an allotment, a football pitch, an adventure playground and an amphitheatre – together these provide an array of outdoor learning opportunities. We wanted to make the best use of this environment. With the familiarity and repetition of the task remaining constant, coupled with a change in hiding place for Barnaby, we were able to provide an activity that challenged the pupils sufficiently, without causing them unwanted anxiety of encountering the unknown.

There was a natural progression in the sites where pupils found Barnaby Bear. The classroom was the starting point in lesson 1, moving on to different locations around the school buildings, then the grounds. Depending on the pupils, this could be extended to the local area (therefore, our MTP could be adapted for any school or setting). In the second half of the MTP, pupils can look at the features of the different areas around their school, with which they have become more familiar.

The power of play

Once the pupils had found Barnaby Bear in different location, they were allowed time to play, which enabled pupils to improve their self-awareness, self-esteem and self-respect. It also allowed them to increase their confidence through developing social skills – all of which involved learning in their local environment. As 'social disconnection is the hallmark feature of autism and other ASD's' (Atwood, 2012), encouraging the young people to feel more comfortable working and playing together in new environments is hugely beneficial for their learning and development.

Valuing the outdoors

Learning outdoors is a multi-sensory experience that can help our young people to retain knowledge more effectively, because there is the opportunity for pupils to learn using their whole bodies on a much larger scale than in a classroom. They are able to become fully involved and embedded in the activity, and the nature and variety of the tasks will help maintain pupils' focus and attention. Being outdoors can be more relaxing for young people (some appear calmer and more settled in a natural environment), perhaps due to them experiencing a feeling of openness and of not being restricted by four walls (Figure 1). A particular benefit for those young people with learning difficulties or SEN can be the new, and sometimes therapeutic, visual and sensory stimulation they experience when learning in an outdoor environment. This can be liberating for pupils who struggle in a structured school atmosphere, and is often demonstrated through improvements in their social skills and behaviour. Allowing our young people to learn outside of the classroom provides them all with an opportunity to show their unique strengths, including ones which may not be immediately noticeable within the confines of a classroom.

Assessing geographical skills

As a result of the work we actively involved the young people in the assessment process 'which helps develop ownership of learning' (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010). They personally recorded their progress in their books, whether it involved sticking in a worksheet, drawing a map or printing a picture of themselves carrying out a task. Recording work can sometimes prove to be an issue, so we took the opportunity to film interactions for our assessment. Using the 'P' levels to assess our pupils' progress we were provided with a wider umbrella of assessment than the more rigid format of the mainstream curriculum.

After each lesson, a process of reflective practice was implemented: we collected, recorded and analysed our thoughts and observations as well as those of the young people. Issues were addressed and improvements were made. This ongoing process involves implementing changes, then starting the reflection and evaluation again. We constantly attempt to find new and exciting ways to progress the learning of our young people.

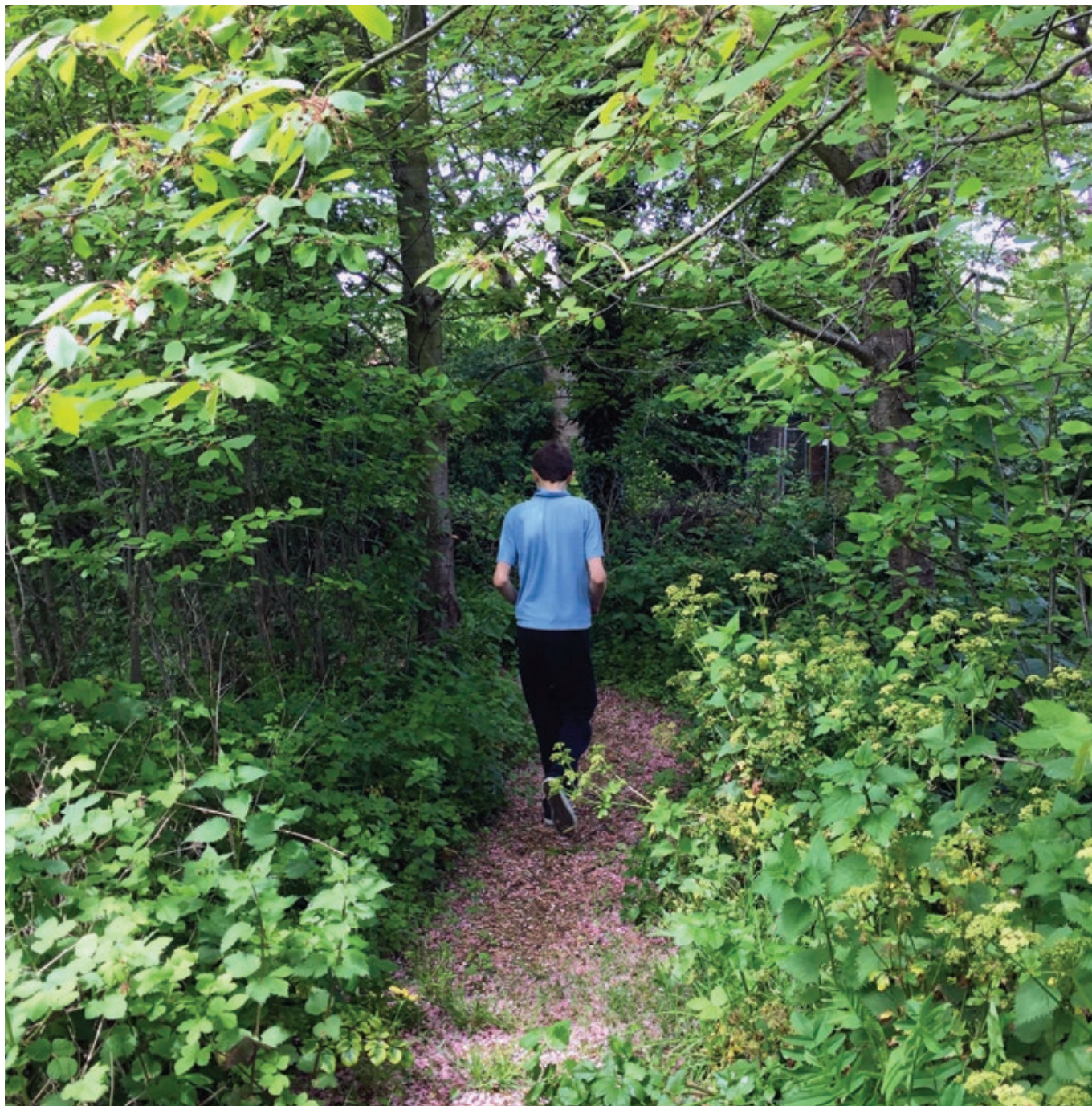


Figure 1: A particular benefit for those young people with learning difficulties or SEN can be the new, and sometimes therapeutic, visual and sensory stimulation they experience when learning in an outdoor environment. Photo © Christopher Kinlan.

A sense of place for all

After ‘evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of geography in schools, and assessing the challenges it faces’, Ofsted (2011) called for an increase in fieldwork opportunities to improve pupils’ learning. As a result, I focused my entire Medium-Term Plan on outdoor learning to provide interesting and appropriate opportunities for fieldwork – particularly the activities to locate and map where pupils had found Barnaby Bear. Ofsted (2011) also noted that it was particularly important to develop the pupil’s sense of place. Having knowledge of where they are in their world is essential to our pupils, and my Plan aims to set them on their way to developing their own sense of place.

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WEB RESOURCES

Download a copy of Chris’s Medium Term Plan: www.geography.org.uk/pg

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