

The whys and why nots of taking primary pupils on a farm visit

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In keeping with Scottish education historically, the importance of outdoor learning is emphasised in the *Curriculum for Excellence* (CfE) guidelines (Beames *et al.*, 2009). There had been an apparent decline in time spent outdoors by pupils (Ross *et al.*, 2007), and the guidelines seemed to offer an opportunity to address this.

The CfE curriculum design principles also emphasised *relevant* learning. Since around 80% of Scottish land is agricultural (Scottish Government, n.d.), and the food and drink industry makes a major contribution to the economy (FDFS, n.d.), learning about food and farming is clearly relevant. Furthermore, in Scotland as elsewhere, there have been concerns about children's understanding of where food comes from (e.g. Dillon *et al.*, 2003).

Farms are utilised as an educational resource in a range of ways internationally. The Mains of Loirston Charitable Trust funded research into the use of farm visits for primary school pupils, and how these related to CfE. The study included teacher questionnaires (n=264) and interviews (n=14), and focus groups with pupils (n=74).

We found that teachers and pupils valued the authenticity of visiting a genuine working farm. As well as the sensory experiences which could not be easily replicated in the classroom, pupils enjoyed the chance to ask questions of a 'real farmer', and to hear answers in a greater level of detail than most class teachers could provide.

The role of teachers was however vital in giving pupils the opportunity to visit a farm. Even pupils living in rural areas were unlikely to be familiar with the farm environment, and few would have any opportunity to visit a farm in an educational capacity.

Some teachers observed that food and farming topics could be undertaken wholly in class, without pupils ever visiting a farm. Three main themes emerged in this study as to why teachers might not take pupils to a farm:

1. Some teachers have clear ideas on the topics (food and farming) and age groups (6-8 year olds) for which a farm visit was appropriate, and may not consider different topics and age groups. However, we found examples of farm visits enabling interdisciplinary learning in several topics, across the primary school age range.
2. Teachers who aren't familiar with the farm environment may not feel comfortable taking pupils there. Teachers in this study were confident with risk management of outdoor learning and didn't see farms as riskier *per se*, but some felt that farms

presented a different type of risk, which they had less experience of assessing and managing.

3. Many teachers seem to be unaware of the organisations which exist to help them plan, risk assess, and conduct farm visits. The teachers in this study hugely valued this type of assistance.

Broadly, it seemed that teachers need more support to understand the potential educational benefits of a farm visit, and the support available to facilitate such visits.

The recently published CfE 'benchmarks' include 'The Journey of Food' at all levels (Education Scotland, 2017), implying that this is regarded as important in pupils' education. This study (Mattu, 2016) shows that farm visits offer a valuable opportunity for pupils to engage in relevant, interdisciplinary, outdoor learning, on this topic and more broadly; but that for a variety of reasons, pupils may not be offered this chance.

Opportunities for teachers to find out about farm visiting are likely to be accessed by those who already have some interest or experience in farming or outdoor learning. Similarly to Harris (2009), we recommend that visiting a farm becomes part of routine initial teacher education. In addition, we suggest an emphasis on the support available for planning, risk management, and carrying out of visits. This would help to ensure that all teachers have some familiarity with the farm environment and its educational potential, and can feel better prepared to offer such experiences to their future pupils.

References

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