

## Outdoor learning and language development –

a place-based approach to connect people and places promoting inclusion and diversity

### LEARNING OUTCOMES

*Children develop concepts, dispositions and skills in relation to:*

- Social language and awareness of others. (Oral Language)
- Acquisition and use of vocabulary (Oral Language)
- Categorisation (Oral Language)
- Comprehension (Reading)
- Engagement (Writing)

### Introduction

The following exemplar is adapted from a project that was initially developed and shared by Jan Ashbridge and Jo Josephidou in Lancaster, England (Ashbridge and Josephidou 2009). It is adapted here in the context of the Irish primary curricula and with a focus on outdoor learning. In the original project, *The Unknown Bear*, a bear is ‘found’ by the children dangling from a tree in the school garden.

A bear was chosen as the stimulus as it has universal familiarity which bridges the different life experiences of the children (Ashbridge, J. and Josephidou, J. (2009) p. 31). This and other features of the original project provide a rich stimulus for supporting outdoor learning and language development.

### What is outdoor learning?

Outdoor learning describes active and/or experiential inclusive approaches to learning that predominantly use activities and experiences in the outdoors facilitated by a teacher (IOL, 2021). Outdoor learning and play support children’s emotional and physical well-being as well as their social, affective and cognitive development. There are many reported benefits including:

- Being outdoors connects us to the places we live and the



environments we will want to protect.

- Being outdoors results in better learning outcomes, across the board.
- The benefits of outdoor learning and play last beyond early education.
- Outdoor learning and play promote healthy and active lifestyles.
- Time spent outdoors boosts mental health. (Prisk and Cusworth 2018)

For more on outdoor learning in the Irish primary school context, see the [NCCA’s webinars \(2020\)](#)

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Place-based pedagogies are teaching and learning approaches that are intertwined with place, bringing together the locality, the community and the learners. Such pedagogies support children’s learning and development across a range of domains with the outdoors providing the context, resources, setting and/or space for rich experiential and authentic learning.

Using the school grounds for place based learning offers a shared experience which is meaningful and relevant for all children. For many children in the class, the immediate locality of the school will be familiar to them, though to a deeper level for some more than others. However, this is not the case for all children (for example, for those children who have recently moved to the area, or for those

children whose lived experiences are cognitively, linguistically, culturally and/or socially different). When planned appropriately, experiences in these local places can support *all* children in exploring and thinking about their own world and that of others around them.

**Key point!** Outdoor learning promotes a change of location rather than a change of curriculum

(Lloyd 2018)

**The Bear exemplar is underpinned by the following:**

### **Inquiry-based learning**

In this exemplar, the stimulus of the Bear, whose origins are not obvious

and who may speak a language that no one else in the class does (including the teacher!), requires the children to come up with questions, to develop inquiries to find out more about this Bear and draw from their personal experiences and existing ideas to provide solutions e.g. how to communicate with the Bear, or how to make the Bear feel welcome.

### **Playful and child-led learning**

The type of outdoor learning advocated in this Support Material, brings changes to the typical social relationships within classrooms as the teacher’s role shifts to more of an observer and facilitator which enables more child-led learning and agency. In this exemplar, through playful interactions with the Bear, their teacher, their peers and their local place children develop their

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knowledge and understanding of people and places both local to them and wider places.

### **Inclusive education**

This exemplar promotes and celebrates inclusion and diversity, as the children are highly motivated to get to know and welcome the Bear to their class. The country where the bear is from is not important – except that it is not Ireland! Teachers might choose a country that is unfamiliar to all of the children or might choose a country that is familiar to some or all of the children. Either decision should support an inclusive environment where children develop appreciation and respect for diversity.

### **Global Citizenship Education**

By sharing their local place with the Bear and learning about where the Bear has come from, children develop

their capacity and motivation for active and meaningful participation in society. This fosters their ability to contribute positively and compassionately towards a more sustainable and just world.

### **Curriculum integration**

Through this exemplar, children develop attitudes, dispositions, skills and knowledge across a range of curricular areas. The pedagogy embedded here allows for meaningful integration. Where learning activities connect strongly with curricular areas these are noted in bold below, though it is recognised there is more scope to connect with other curricular areas too.

### ***Pedagogy in action***

#### **Exemplar Stimulus**

The children go on a walk in their school grounds or immediate local area, come across a bear with a small

backpack, wearing a parachute, dangling from a tree. The teacher needs to decide in advance where the Bear will be from and what the Bear will have in their backpack.

### **Sample backpack contents:**

- Passport from the relevant country (various templates available online)
- Some food (could be from the Bear's home country or something 'Irish')
- A drink (reusable bottle or juice/soft drink from their home country if available)
- A range of artefacts e.g. photos of the Bear in different places they have visited, postcards, information leaflets for local tourist attractions, maps, travel tickets, receipts etc. If you can get some artefacts in the Bear's home language, then even better!
- A small teddy or toy

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**Top tip!** To further engage children's curiosity the drink could be empty or the food nearly eaten. This will prompt children to think about whether the bear might be hungry.

### Child-initiated playful experiences –

**Each of these provide an opportunity for language development**

#### 1. Meeting the Bear

- Immediately the children are curious and ask to take the bear down from the tree.

*Possible questions:* Should the teacher take the Bear down? Does the Bear look hurt? Will we ask the Bear if

we can lift him/her down? After discussion, the class can decide with the teacher's help to take the Bear down from the tree.

- The teacher in role should know nothing about the Bear. The children want to find out more about the Bear.  
*Possible questions:* Where did the Bear come from? Where was the Bear going? Can we keep the Bear? The teacher should encourage the children's questions and respond to support further inquiry. At this stage, the class can either sit in a circle near where the Bear was found or go back to the classroom.
- The children, possibly with teacher prompting, might try to talk to the Bear but the Bear doesn't respond to English and/or Irish. Through discussion, the children might suggest that the Bear speaks another language and so children can then



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try to say hi to the Bear in all the different languages they know. If the focus is a home language of a child (children) in the class, then it is a great opportunity for them to share and take a lead with their peers in talking with the bear.

- The children may also notice the backpack and suggest opening it. If at this stage, the children can communicate with the Bear, then they can ask the Bear. If not, the teacher can prompt how they might communicate with the Bear?
- On opening the bag, this will reveal more about the Bear. The passport can be explored to see if it can help resolve where the Bear is from or give details such as a name. Any other artefacts found in the bag can be investigated at this stage.

### 2. Welcoming the Bear

- The teacher can explore children's ideas for making the Bear feel welcome. Make this as child-led as possible, allowing their ideas to inform the learning activities where feasible.

*Possible questions:* What makes you feel welcome each day in school? Do you remember your first day in school? How did you feel? What helped you feel welcome in the class? **(Wellbeing)**

- The children might suggest to introduce themselves to the Bear; each child might say hello in their home language and/or say hello in the Bear's language. The teacher can help find this out if needed! All children and the Bear might learn to sign hello.
- The children might show some of the games they like to play or books they like to read. If the Bear has a



- toy or book, they could share this too. The children might decide to act out scenes from one of the Irish traditional folk tales or play some traditional Irish street games. **(SEE)**
- The children might want to show the Bear around the school, both inside and outside. In groups they might share their favourite thing about the school or class. They

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might suggest, or following some teacher prompting, draw a map of the school for the Bear, highlighting their favourite places for play for example. **(SEE)**

- The children can explore with the Bear some of the trees, plants and minibeasts in the school grounds. They could learn together key vocabulary in Irish, English and other languages. **(SEE)**
- The children might decide to do a **teddy bear picnic** to welcome the Bear. This should be done outdoors where possible. If the Bear had some food from their country in their bag, this could be a stimulus for a shared discussion about food the children like to eat, celebrating foods from different cultures as appropriate. **(Wellbeing)**
- The children might decide to take turns to take the Bear home for one

night to make the Bear feel welcome and more part of the class. They could capture something they did with the Bear in a simple class diary through drawing and/or writing.

### 3. *Getting to know the Bear*

- The teacher should explore with the children what they would like to know about the bear. Having this discussion where the Bear was found outside will provide a great stimulus.

*Possible questions from children:*

Where is the bear from? How did they get here? What have they been doing here? Where were they trying to get to? Depending on the artefacts in the bag, these might provide some clues. In groups, the children could be given an artefact each and asked to

explore the artefact and come up with questions.

- If there are photos of the bear in the locality or other artefacts in the locality e.g. photo of the bear at the bus stop or a receipt from the local shop or a post card from the post office, then the class could go on a trip to visit the places the Bear has been. They could map the journey the Bear might have taken or find out more about the places the Bear visited through direct engagement with the places. **(SEE)**
- If there are photos of the bear in the Bear's home locality or artefacts from there, then this an opportunity to learn more about where the Bear comes from. *Possible questions from children:* What's the country flag like? What do they like to eat there? Is it far

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away? Is it a big country? What's the bear's favourite thing about living there? Does the Bear go to school? **(SEE)**

- Back in the classroom, the children could explore maps to see if they can locate where the Bear is from. They might count the number of countries the Bear has passed through **(Maths)** or notice countries they have been to that the Bear also passed through or that are near where the Bear is from. They might suggest how the Bear travelled. If there is a large wall map in the school which captures the country of birth for all the children, the children can add a 'pin' to the Bear's country.

#### 4. *Sharing and celebrating our places*

- The teacher should explore with the children what they would like

to share with the Bear about their local place. For this, the teacher can prompt the children to think about the natural and built places as well as the people they engage with day to day.

*Possible questions:* What do you like to do after school? Where are your favourite woods? Or beach (as appropriate)? Where is your favourite playground? Where do you like to play football? Where does your family do the shopping? Where do you get the bus or train? Where do you go to post a card?

- To prompt the children further, the teacher could provide stimulus photos of children's places in the locality. This could be done outside by hanging the photos outside and inviting the children to stand by a photo if they have been there or recognise it. Following discussion,

the children can identify 3-4 places that they think are most important to share with the bear. Try to encourage a visit to a range of places. **(SEE)**

- Once the class have decided the places, the teacher might plan to take the class to each of the places the Bear suggests. The children might suggest an activity to do at each place when planning the trip. Fundamentally, the children should share orally with the bear at each place what they like about it and why it is important to them. They might capture this through writing and/or drawing as well. The children might suggest a class photo with the Bear at each place. If trips are not feasible, the photographs used earlier may be used and children could create a presentation on each place for The

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Bear, outlining what they like about the place and why it is important to them.

- A sensory walk either in the school ground or beyond could be included as part of the field trip or in addition to it. The teacher can explore with the children and the Bear their 5 senses and encourage them to identify different sensory aspects. By focussing on senses it is more inclusive as children touch, smell, listen, look and taste (as appropriate) different natural and man-made features in their local place.
- Following the class trip, the children might suggest a celebration day for the Bear. The teacher should prompt them to think about what the celebration day might include; suggestions from the children might include music, games and food

outdoors or creating a display of all the artefacts from the time with the Bear and sharing it with other classes.

### Outdoor learning and Language development

As the children experience sharing their place and learning about the place where the bear is from through a series of stimuli and activities, they will use social conventions of language in order to initiate, sustain and engage readily in conversations with the bear and their class about their local place and its related curriculum-based topics. They will use language to work collaboratively with others, for example in map making, menu designing and through games and share this with their peers. Through their experiences sharing

their local place with the Bear, they will name, describe and categorise people (e.g. the postman), objects (e.g. the bus stop), and experiences (e.g. the playground) showing increasing depth of knowledge and improved understanding. As they explore the artefacts (e.g. maps, ticket, flyer, postcard) in the Bear's backpack, they will use a range of comprehension strategies to engage with and create meaning when working collaboratively. As they participate in the various activities and through their responses, they will have fun and enjoy mark-making, drawing and writing to communicate about their local place and experiences with the Bear.



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#### References

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