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Enriching student learning

Last summer **Russell Walker** took a group of students with SEN on a residential field-trip in the New Forest. Here, Russell shares their experiences and calls on all special schools to embrace outdoor learning

Pitching tents, catching Jelly fish, cycling five miles, swimming in the sea and singing songs around a camp fire and are not activities that many students from special schools routinely get to experience. Yet these are just a few of the things that a group of ten intrepid students from Linden Lodge, a school for children and young people with visual impairments and multiple disabilities, got up to when they visited the New Forest on a field trip in June last year.

Despite being away from their normal lives and out of their comfort zones, the students rose to the challenge and flourished in the outdoor environment. By the end of the week their confidence had increased markedly, they showed a greater understanding of nature and had a keener awareness of their surroundings. And what's more, they'd had a lot of fun in the process.

While the use of field studies has been widespread amongst mainstream schools for many years, it appears that this has not been the case with many of our special schools. The Council for Learning Outside the Classroom, though, has been keen to stress the benefits of outdoor activities for all students, "whatever their age, ability or circumstances". So, it would seem that there has never been a better time to realise the potential benefits of life beyond the classroom for all our pupils, and to explore the great outdoors.

With this in mind, our group journeyed to Brockenhurst, Hampshire where we spent the afternoon pitching our tents and



settling into camp for the week ahead. After dinner, which included strawberries hand-picked en route, the group huddled around the camp fire singing songs and keeping the other campers awake.

Throughout the week, two teams were in competition to find and identify

you could see their self-confidence growing with each new task undertaken

as many different types of flora and fauna as possible. For Tuesday's River Study Day, we travelled along the Beaulieu River in Canadian canoes, and team members won points if they were brave enough to catch the moon jellyfish in their hands.

Whilst away, group leader Tim Richmond, an advanced skills teacher & school sport co-ordinator, observed

that "The students were staying focussed for longer compared to being in the classroom". Moreover, you could see their self-confidence growing with each new task undertaken.

During the Forest Study Day, the group cycled a five mile loop, stopping frequently to study what was around them. Photos were taken and samples were collected, where appropriate, to study back in the laboratory during the evening's journal time. Other team challenges included climbing a tree as a group so that each team member was off ground.

Getting students with disabilities and SEN participating in regular outdoor learning is not without its difficulties. For this trip, a foldaway hoist enabled us to safely transfer one student, Sarah, from her wheelchair into her tent, into the canoe, onto a bike and into the sea. This allowed Sarah to access all aspects of the trip. "I must admit, I felt nervous about the hoisting for Sarah, but once I had seen it, it was no different to being back at school", said Anne, one of the support staff.

However, canoeing presented us with a huge challenge. How could we make Sarah as comfortable as possible, yet ensure that she was in the best position to fully participate? In the end, we rigged a trampoline between two rafted canoes and Sarah was positioned on a bean bag on the trampoline. This allowed her to stretch out comfortably in various positions and fully experience the

environment she was travelling through, rather than being wedged, low down in a canoe.

The Shoreline Study Day at Lepe Country Park involved a close up examination of life found on the beach at low tide, and plants found higher up on the cliff. Team Beaulieu were relentless in their commitment to the competition, and all of their team members earned points for fully submerging in the sea whilst collecting different species of seaweed.

Our final day was all about completing journals, breaking camp, celebration time and, begrudgingly, heading back to school.

On departure the students were asked what they had enjoyed most about the week. Here are a few of their responses:

- "Finding things in the woods" (Mark, aged 15)
- "Marshmallows" (Dave, aged 13)
- "Touching the jellyfish" (Kate, aged 13)
- "Food" (Doug, aged 14)
- "Swimming in the sea" (Paul, aged 13)
- "Climbing the tree" (Francesca, aged 14).

Our week away demonstrated that the outdoors can provide a fantastic learning



environment for groups with diverse ranges of special needs. The types of activities we undertook work so effectively because they offer more opportunities to learn in a tactile, kinaesthetic way,

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which can suit our learners better than a more traditional, classroom-based approach. The opportunities for students to move, and the stimuli associated with movement, are also important, and this

approach can lead to learning experiences that really engage students and, crucially, can help them to display less challenging behaviour. Learning becomes innately enjoyable, not something merely to be endured, as can often be the case in the classroom.

There are many ways of utilising the outdoors for learning. The most simple way is to take indoor lessons outdoors; what better place could there be to teach and to learn than in a field or a forest. The other option is to design a cross curricular activity, such as a forest study day. A simple three-wheeled bike ride through a forest, studying plants and animals on the way, could involve students in the following National Curriculum subjects: PE, science, English, mathematics and art and design.

The use of cross-curricula study can be particularly effective for students with SEN, and outdoor learning offers unique opportunities for sensory, movement and skills-based learning. Perhaps it is time for the outdoor classroom to become a regular feature at all special schools. SEN



Further information

Russell Walker is the Director of Senmove:
www.senmove.org