

Outdoor learning: Scottish primary teachers' perceptions of training and professional development

Leanne Mattu

Paper presented at the SERA Conference, 20th November 2014.

This document includes the slides prepared for this presentation, integrated with the outline of the content of the talk.

This morning I'm going to talk about some early findings from my PhD research. My project is called 'Farm visits and the Scottish primary school curriculum', and today I'm going to focus on what primary teachers in Scotland have said about their experiences of training and professional development around outdoor learning generally, as well as around farm visits specifically.



The slide content is enclosed in a blue border. At the top left, it features the University of Glasgow logo and the text 'University of Glasgow | School of Interdisciplinary Studies'. The main title is 'Outdoor learning: Scottish primary teachers' perceptions of training and professional development'. Below the title, it identifies the presenter as 'Leanne Mattu, PhD Researcher, University of Glasgow'. It lists supervisors: 'Supervised by: Dr Bethan Wood & Mr Carlo Rinaldi, University of Glasgow' and 'Dr Dave Roberts, SRUC'. At the bottom, there are logos for SRUC and RHET, along with funding information: 'Funded by the Mains of Loirston Charitable Trust (Registered Charity Number SC038006) www.mainsofloirston.org/'.

My starting point is a pretty uncontroversial statement, which is that outdoor learning is a big deal in Curriculum for Excellence. I think it's fair to say that using the outdoors in an education context has been important in Scottish education historically, but that it had seen a bit of a decline in the years leading up to the advent of Curriculum for Excellence, and that teachers are now being encouraged to incorporate the outdoors in their teaching in a way that wasn't perhaps so overt in the recent past.

Something that seems to have arisen from that is the idea that teachers feel they need more training, or opportunities for continuing professional development, on how they might make best use the outdoors in their teaching. There have been a few different pieces of research since Curriculum for Excellence first emerged which have reinforced that, and I've picked two examples of this from the literature to reflect specific time points.

The first is from a report published in 2007, which is actually a summary of various other research that had taken place in the 2005-2007 timeframe. So this is the very early days of CfE – the initial document had come out, talking about the values and design principles underpinning the new curriculum, and the development of the 4

capacities as purpose of the curriculum, but at this stage there wasn't a lot in the way of detail on what that might actually look like in the classroom. This quote in Nicol *et al.* (2007) highlights that teachers at that stage felt that there had been a lack of opportunity for them to learn about outdoor learning as part of their own training.

The need for further training

“Part of the problem for existing teachers appears to have been the lack of opportunities for them to learn about outdoor opportunities as part of their own training.”

(Nicol et al., 2007, p.13)

- Lesson ideas
- How to encourage and empower staff
- Sharing resources
- Practical skills
- How to access to funding / financial support (Primary)

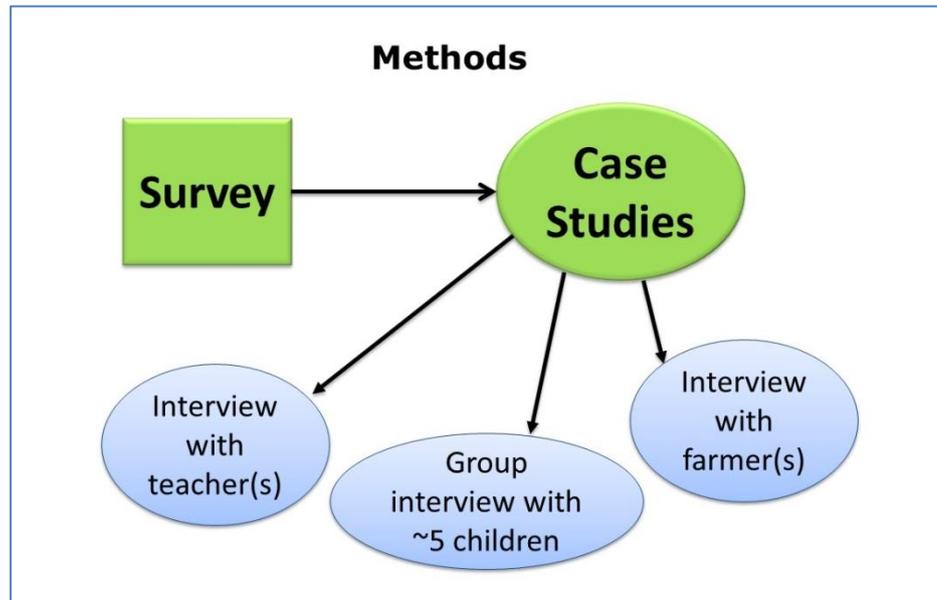
(from Christie et al., 2014, p.60)

The second example is from a more recent report which was published earlier this year. This was a survey conducted in 2011, in which the idea that teachers wanted further training and support was taken a step further, and they were asked particularly what sorts of things would be useful to them.

The teachers who responded to that survey suggested that they would like lesson ideas, ways of encouraging and empowering staff, ways of sharing resources, practical skills like minibus driving, and particularly from primary teachers, more information on how to access funding to take their pupils outdoors. These two studies are just examples to illustrate the idea that there is ongoing demand amongst teachers for further input. It was reading these sorts of things which made me think that training and professional development was something I should ask about in my own study.

As I mentioned, my project is looking at educational farm visits, and particularly how they can link to Curriculum for Excellence in primary schools, so looking particularly at the First and Second curriculum levels.

This slide is a brief overview of how I went about my research. It was a mixed methods study, and I began with a survey of primary teachers in Scotland, which went out in May last year (2013). The idea behind the survey was to use it as a starting



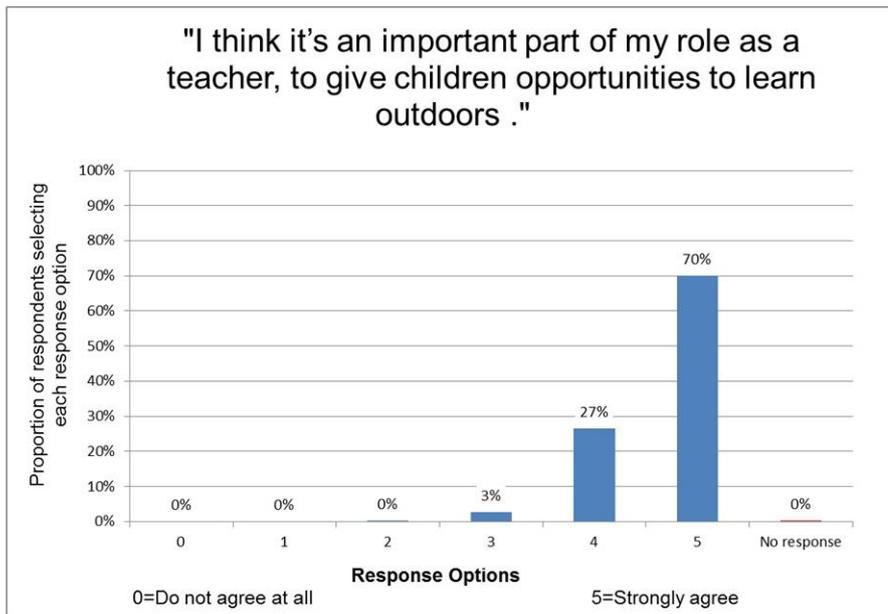
point, to try and get a snapshot of a broad range of teachers' experiences and opinions. I'm not from a farming background, and I'm not a qualified teacher, so I just wanted to get some sense of teachers' experiences, and some ideas of areas that I could explore a bit further in the case studies. The case studies took place in school year 2013-14, so just last school year, and I went along to the farm visit with the class, and then interviewed the teacher who has organised the visit, the farmer who hosted it, and some of the children who had been to the farm.

The survey was sent out to 1643 Scottish primary schools. It was addressed to the head teacher, with a request that it should be passed on to one member of staff from each school complete and return it. In total I got 264 responses, which is 16%. That was a bit lower than I'd hoped, but I did get responses from all 24 of the local authorities that the survey went out to. I also looked at the six-fold urban/rural categorisation that the Scottish Government use, and got responses from teachers in schools in all six of those categories, and also from all 5 Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation quintiles. As I said, the purpose of the survey was not to get any sort of statistically representative sample, but just to get responses from as broad a range of teachers as possible, and so from that perspective I was pleased that there did seem to be respondents from a good variety of different contexts.

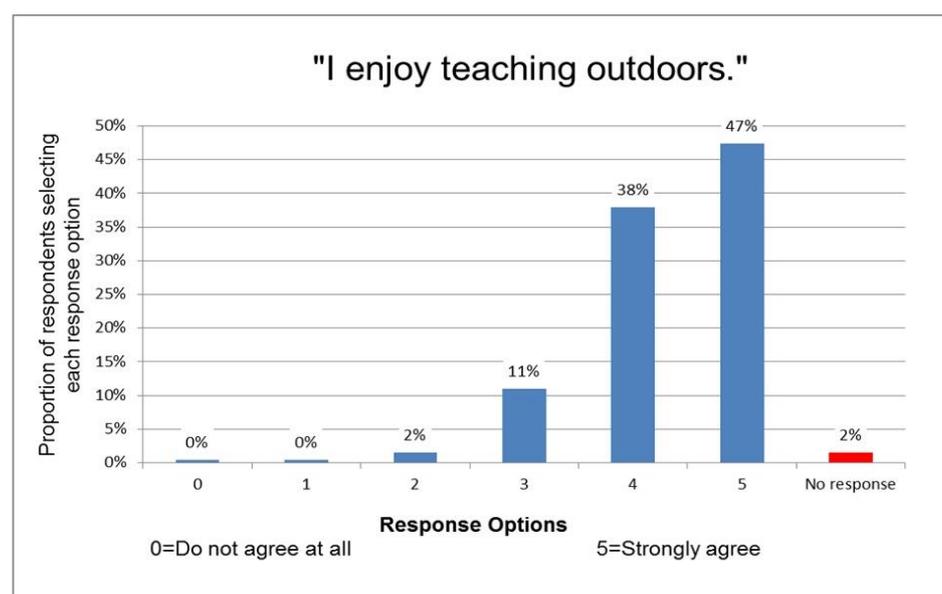
These next two slides just give a bit of an overview of the sort of teachers who were responding to the survey.

One of the things I did with the survey was to ask teachers to rate various statements on a scale of 0 to 5, where 0 meant that they didn't agree with the statement at all, and 5 meant that they strongly agreed. On the statement 'I think it's an important part of my role as a teacher, to give children opportunities to learn outdoors', the respondents were tending to agree with that statement, most of them quite strongly. Similarly for the statement 'I enjoy teaching outdoors', on the same rating scale again, the teachers who responded to the survey were mostly in agreement with that idea.

Survey respondents (1)



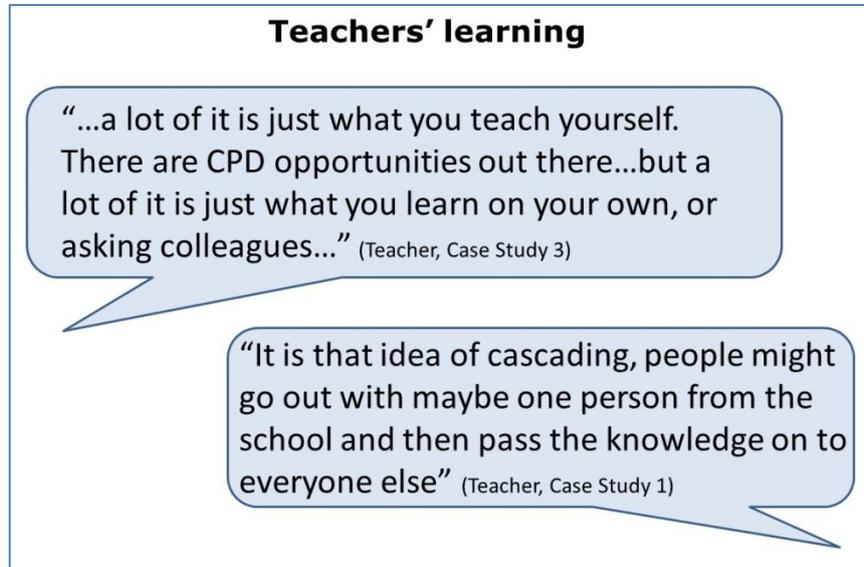
Survey respondents (2)



So the teachers who are responding to the survey seem to be those who are already quite keen on the outdoors, and are already quite engaged with outdoor learning.

It's probably not a huge surprise that a head teacher receiving a survey like this, with a request to pass it on to one member of staff, is going to pass it on to someone who is already known to be quite outdoorsy. I do think it's something that needs to be borne in mind though, when looking at the rest of the survey results.

outdoor learning, although there was a range of opinion on whether that should be something quite generic about using the outdoors, or whether it should be more specific to their local area, for example. I asked the teachers how they did learn about outdoor learning, if it hadn't been through formal training and CPD.



As you can see, the teacher in Case Study 3 spoke about learning by herself, there are CPD opportunities but a lot of the learning comes from her own reading and searching for information online, and from discussion with colleagues. The teacher in Case Study 1 also brought up the idea of learning from colleagues cascading what they had learned, so one member of staff might go to a training event and then come back and share what they learned with everyone else.

What I got from the way the case study teachers spoke about their learning was a sense of a continuum, with at one end, teachers' self-directed learning through reading, finding information online and so on, through to informal discussions with colleagues in the staffroom or socially with friends who are teachers, to more formal learning from colleagues through arrangements in school for teachers who had been on CPD to cascade their learning, through to attending formal CPD-type sessions in person. That's something that I found really interesting, and that I'm going to want to look into a bit more in the coming few months.

I also wanted to find out about where teachers had learned about farm visits – the idea that it was something they could do with their class, the ways that they could link a visit with Curriculum for Excellence, the existence of organisations to help them with the planning, and so on. That did seem to rely quite heavily on that more informal end of the spectrum, the chatting with colleagues and that sort of thing.

Learning about farm visits

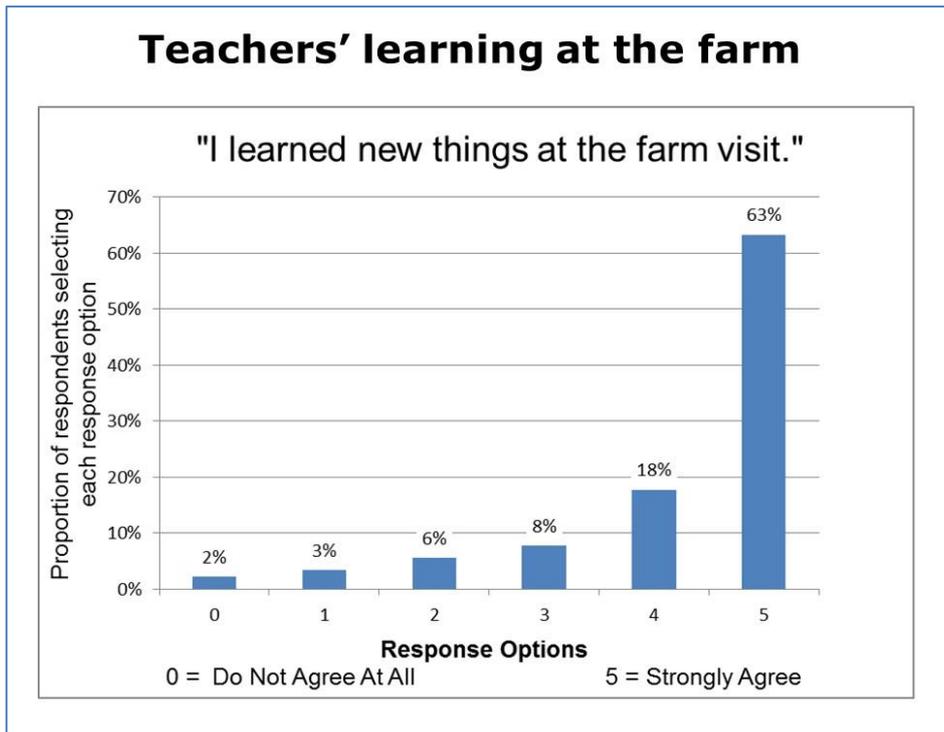
“...last year we went to [that farm] because it had been recommended by a member of staff who had been before” (Teacher, Case Study 8)

“... we came across the RHET website and then, ‘cause one of the teachers is a farmer’s wife...and they basically guided us to there and we just saw it on the website to organise visits” (Teacher, Case Study 4)

The teacher in Case Study 8 spoke about going to the farm because a colleague had been on a farm visit in the past, and in Case Study 4 the teacher became aware of the Royal Highland Education Trust, an organisation that arranges farm visits for schools, because another teacher in the school is a farmer’s wife. In the case studies there were other examples of learning about farm visits from colleagues, but also from parents who were involved with RHET, and adult volunteers in school who had farming connections. There wasn’t much at all about having received flyers or emails, or about hearing about farm visits in training or CPD situations, and I think that perhaps has implications for how organisations like RHET might seek to promote themselves and make more teachers aware of what’s available.

Teachers also spoke about their own levels of knowledge, and how much they learned about the topic from the farm visit, which they hadn’t necessarily got from their own reading and investigating in preparation for teaching the topic.

In the survey, 90 of the 264 teachers who responded had been on an educational farm visit in the past year (May 2012 – May 2013), and as you can see [below], most of them felt quite strongly that they’d learned from the visit too. Some of those who didn’t agree with that statement gave explanations in the free text box alongside this question, saying that they been on several farm visits previously, or that they were from a farming background themselves. Interestingly, two of the teachers in the case studies were from a farming background, and both said that they could learn new things from the farm visit with their class.



The idea that the teachers themselves would learn from the visits was actually brought up by some of the farmers and the children I spoke to in the case studies too.

Farming Expertise

"I have got teachers coming out and taken aback by how little they know"
(Farmer, Case Study 5)

"They need to have actual farm days for teachers only"
(Farmer, Case Study 3)

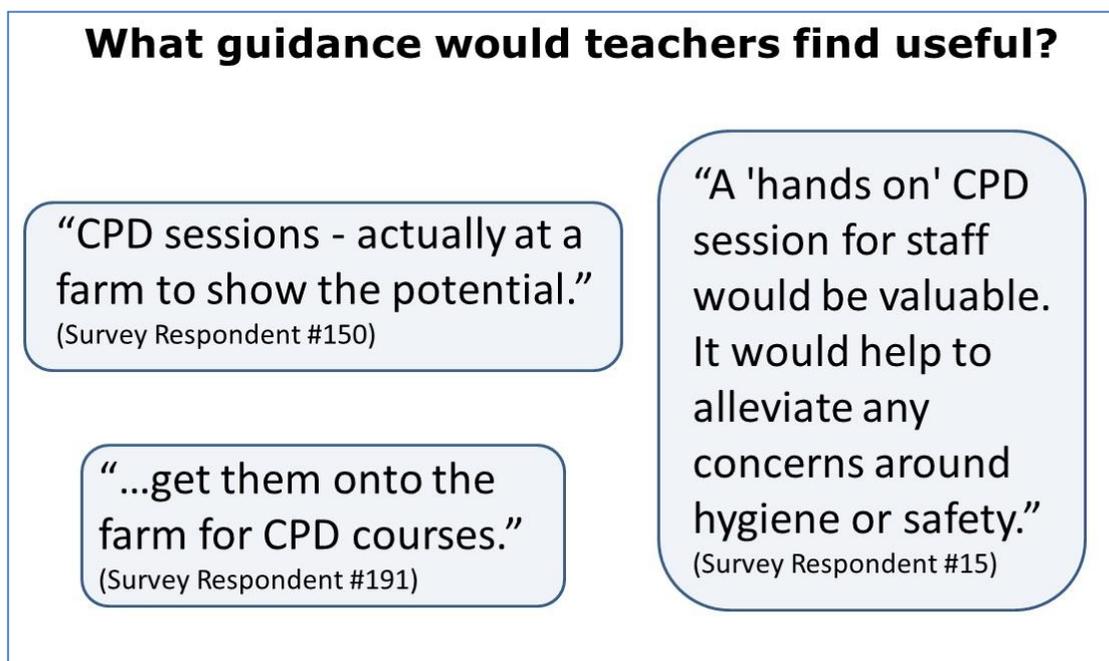
CA: She's not a farmer so she might not know everything, she's not maybe an expert of it so she wants...

CB: She wants to know some stuff as well

CA: Uh-uh, it's not just for us, she might want to know things
(P4 boys, 7-8 years old, Case Study 3)

Several of the farmers expressed some surprise at how little the teachers knew about farming, although the farmer in Case Study 5 went on to say that teachers are

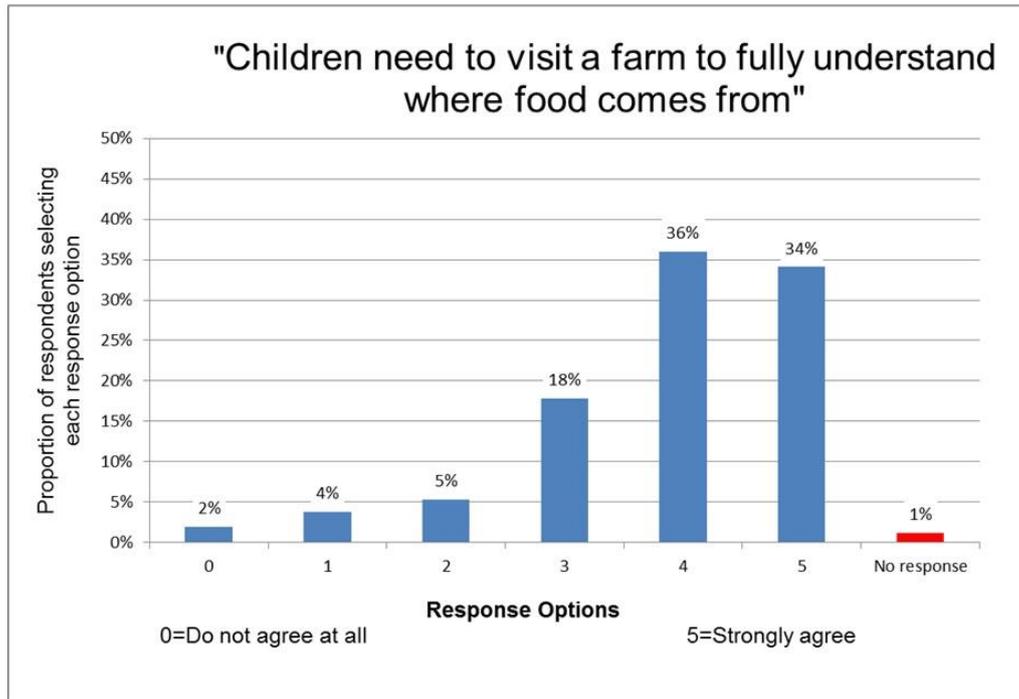
not superhuman, they have a lot to deal with in the curriculum, and there's no reason why they should know about farming unless it's an area of personal interest. That was one of the benefits of a farm visit, that the farmers could share their expertise. These P4 boys explained that their teacher had taken them to a farm so that they could learn things, but also recognised that their teacher wasn't necessarily a farming expert and that she would learn things from the visit too. The farmer in Case Study 3 felt that it would be useful to teachers to have CPD sessions that actually took place on farms, and that's something that came up in the survey too. I asked in a free text box towards the end of the survey what guidance teachers would find useful on farm visits, what sort of content they would like and also what format it should be in, so whether it was a booklet or a DVD or a training session.



Quite a few said that CPD on a farm would be useful, and even in those who didn't explicitly say so, there were lots of mentions of 'practical' and 'hands on' training and CD, which to me implies that it would be best done on the farm rather than in, say, a lecture theatre.

So why is any of this important? I'm sure you've all seen headlines in the media about children thinking that milk comes from the fridge and how lots of children don't ever see food being cooked from scratch any more. Amongst the Curriculum for Excellence 'Experiences and Outcomes' there are also mentions of knowing about food journeys, what foods are produced locally and how they're produced, and so on, in areas such as Health and Wellbeing, Social Studies, and Sciences. This is one final graph from the survey, using that same rating scale as before, which shows that most of the teachers who responded felt that visiting a farm was important in helping children understand how food is produced.

The importance of farm visits



So just to sum up, I've spoken about the importance of learning outdoors in Curriculum for Excellence, and that there is an ongoing demand from teachers for further opportunities to learn about how they can use the outdoors in their teaching.

Conclusion

- The 'outdoors' in *Curriculum for Excellence*
- Teachers' perceptions of their training and professional development needs - still more to do
- The importance of farm visits
- 'Hit and miss' in teacher learning about farm visits



Student teachers should have an opportunity to visit a farm as part of ITE/ initial training.

I've mentioned why I think it's important for children to be able to visit a farm as part of their school experience, but that the way teachers learn about the possibilities of

farm visits are quite 'hit-and-miss' – they tend to rely on informal sorts of information-sharing, from the teacher in the next classroom having been on a farm visit in the past, and that sort of thing.

I'm aware that some of the teacher education institutions in Scotland are trying to include more content on outdoor learning in their courses, so that their graduates are prepared and confident to use the outdoors in their future teaching. I want to conclude by suggesting that all student teachers should have an opportunity to visit a farm as part of their training, for an afternoon or even just an hour or two. This would allow them to become a little bit more familiar with the farm environment, especially for those who have never been on a farm before. They would have the opportunity to learn about the wide range of curriculum areas, and Es and Os [experiences and outcomes], that can be linked with a farm visit, given some guidance on the risks and how to manage them, and importantly, be made aware of the organisations that exist to help them plan the visit, carry out risk assessments, and signpost to sources of funding, so that in future they can confidently take their classes out on a farm visit.



Thank you.

References:

Christie, B., Beames, S., Higgins, P., Nicol, R., & Ross, H. (2014) 'Outdoor learning provisions in Scottish schools.' *Scottish Educational Review*, 46(1), pp. 48-64.

Nicol, R., Higgins, P., Ross, H., Mannion, G. (2007) *Outdoor education in Scotland: A summary of recent research*. Perth: Scottish Natural Heritage.

Project website: www.farmvisitsstudy.co.uk

Or email: l.mattu.1@research.gla.ac.uk



Funded by the Mains of Loirston Charitable Trust
(Registered Charity Number SC038006)
www.mainsfloirston.org/

