



## HELEN HAMLYN CENTRE FOR PEDAGOGY

0-11 YEARS

### Experiential Learning for Children Aged 4-14: Summary of a Rapid Evidence Assessment

The role of experience in learning has long been recognised. However, traditional modes of education have tended to focus on a top-down transfer of knowledge from teacher to student, rather than building from the learner's own experience. Experiential Learning (EL) is a teaching approach which supports learning that is child-centred and that involves engaging children with real-life contexts. We define EL as a semi-structured, child-centred process in which the child actively engages with a tangible and contextually situated experience as part of the learning process. The teacher's role is to facilitate rather than direct children's learning.

The purpose of the rapid evidence assessment (REA) described in this summary was to identify and analyse all existing research on EL to investigate its effects on the academic achievement, motivation, engagement, agency, and wellbeing of children aged 4-14, as well as their views and experiences of EL. The REA is part of the information-gathering phase of the long-term curriculum development project *Rethinking Curriculum*, a collaboration between the Chartered College of Teaching (CCT) and the Helen Hamlyn Centre for Pedagogy (0-11 Years) at UCL's Institute of Education (IOE).



In total, 88 research studies were identified that met the criteria for inclusion. Not all the studies explicitly used the term EL, despite all meeting the threshold for the definition of EL described above. Different ways of describing the EL interventions included experiential learning, hands-on learning, outdoor learning, play-based learning, inquiry-based learning, and the maker or makerspace approach.

**The evidence from the research studies in the REA points to EL having a strong positive effect on children's academic achievement, motivation, engagement, agency, and wellbeing, as well as on other outcomes including children's connections with nature, environmental and ecological awareness, and the development of practical skills.**

Research has shown that EL supports children's academic achievement. Many studies show positive outcomes of EL on children's achievement, particularly in terms of vocabulary development. This evidence has most frequently been seen in the context of teaching science and maths. There is evidence that the positive effects of experiential learning continue long-term: children were able to remember learning that they engaged in through experiential learning interventions for several months or years after the teaching.



Many studies showed that EL is highly engaging and motivating, especially when it is connected to contexts that are explicitly relevant to children's everyday lives. Furthermore, EL that comes in the form of embodied, multisensory, kinaesthetic experiences may be particularly engaging for children. There is longitudinal evidence for the persistence of these positive effects. However, some studies suggest that this increase in motivation and engagement could partially be explained due to the sense of novelty and a break from routine that were a characteristic of the EL interventions.

An important finding is the beneficial effect that EL seems to have on children who are at-risk, have special educational needs, have behavioural or emotional difficulties, or who are otherwise struggling in formal education. The evidence suggests that EL promotes motivation and engagement for these children.

EL promotes children's agency, giving them the opportunity to make independent decisions and take on leadership roles, as well as providing them with a sense of ownership over their learning. However, some studies noted that some younger children found the amount of agency afforded to them overwhelming. Adults therefore play a key role in scaffolding children's agency in EL: evidence indicates that adult guidance was crucial for children's outcomes in several studies.

Positive outcomes of EL can also be seen through its effect on children's wellbeing. Evidence suggests that participation in EL programmes can increase children's confidence, problem-solving skills, socio-emotional skills, empathy, emotion regulation, and in-class behaviour.

Children themselves have overwhelmingly positive views of EL, often displaying enthusiasm and the desire to engage in more, similar programmes of learning in the future. However, children frequently did not recognise EL as 'real' learning, and in some cases struggled to connect it to learning that they had engaged with in class.

A few studies noted negative or neutral outcomes for some children. Some struggled with the unstructured nature of EL and found it overwhelming and stressful to participate in learning that was significantly different from what they were used to. One study noted that children remembered the EL activity, but not the concept that it was designed to teach. Some

children had negative experiences of EL often in studies where the EL activity took place outdoors due to encountering wildlife and a natural environment that they were not used to interacting with.

Overall, the results of this REA indicate that EL can be a highly valuable tool for children's learning. As a result, several key implications for the Rethinking Curriculum project can be drawn. One of the aims of the Rethinking Curriculum project is to provide children with a curriculum that is expansive and inspiring. The evidence from this REA suggests that embedding EL in the curriculum can prove engaging and motivating for children, as well as providing benefits beyond traditional academic outcomes. However, children's EL should be adequately scaffolded by adults to support children to draw connections between EL activities and learning in other areas. Teachers often perceived a conflict between EL and the formal curriculum, including when their students must participate in high-stakes testing. Evidence suggests that EL should not be seen as a supplement to the curriculum that takes time away from academic learning, but as a complement to it, with teachers being provided with the time and resources to embed EL in a way that supports children's academic achievement. EL should therefore be embedded in the curriculum at all levels, from national level to classroom level.



Rethinking Curriculum also aims to connect children with their local communities. EL that is embedded in real-life, meaningful contexts for children lends itself to links being made with local organisations and community members who can work in partnership with schools to provide EL opportunities for children. Any initiatives developed through Rethinking Curriculum should aim to link children's learning in school with what is happening in the communities in which they live.

Another aim of Rethinking Curriculum is to enable children to lead healthy, fulfilled lives. Evidence from this REA suggests that EL can promote children's wellbeing in several areas, including increasing confidence and socio-emotional skills, decreasing absenteeism from school and even encouraging healthy eating habits. EL can therefore be seen as a key component of any programme designed to promote children's health and wellbeing.