Our proposition is that having Outdoor and Adventurous Activities as part of the Physical Education curriculum induces a belief that its main aim is to promote physical development, whereas, in fact, it makes a distinctive contribution to whole person development, including personal, interpersonal, spiritual and moral development. PE is primarily associated with sport and games; outdoor learning primarily with adventure and enterprise, which is in the realm of PSHE.

As the White Paper on Public Health says (page 66): 'Taking risks, experimenting and pushing boundaries is an important part of growing up. Young people need opportunities to learn about their world in ways that provide challenge and excitement through positive things to doâ€’. Outdoor learning provides just such an opportunity. Adolescents especially need to take risks to achieve their adult identity. In doing so, they have to master a set of skills for navigating uncertainty. The rest of the curriculum is relatively predetermined and structured; outdoor learning, by contrast, confronts students with novel situations in which they are challenged by choice, and have to live with the consequences of their choice. Hence they learn repeatedly to think through the consequences of their actions as they carry out the tasks and solve the problems built into outdoor programmes. The same habit is transferable to other risk situations, like drug-taking and conception.

They also learn the importance of mutual trust and dependence: if they let go of a rope, someone else will fall. Some tasks can only be accomplished if they work as a team. Teams need team spirit and team roles. Games also develop these, but only within a codified set of rules. Real life, however, for which outdoor learning is good preparation, does not always have such explicit rules, and is often a risky business. The sea does not shake hands with you after an adventurous sail. Mastering skills for life must involve real risks. Learning how to identify, assess and manage risks is a statutory aim of the school curriculum. Learning how to balance risks against benefits is an important life skill. Linking risk with responsibility is also an important outcome of outdoor learning, because responsible risk-taking is an essential ingredient of enterprise.

Outdoor learning is experiential: it is active; it is designed round doing things, sometimes doing them wrong and learning from mistakes. Fear of failure, a barrier to enterprise, is assuaged when people learn how to manage it. There is a powerful strand of learning how to learn from practical experience - and it is transferable to other settings. Cognitive learning in the classroom, by contrast, is more about receiving and assimilating knowledge, so that it can be reproduced in set exams and tests.

The school culture tends to be more controlling than empowering, whereas the outdoor learning culture empowers students to look after themselves. This is usually experienced as releasing and exciting; in some it releases qualities of leadership and in many a sense of belonging and a sense of purpose. The outdoors (especially if combined with a residential experience) is a setting conducive to the nurture of personal qualities - not least, self-esteem. It inspires and animates and cultivates relationships and social interaction in a way not often matched in the classroom.

The self-confidence that outdoor programmes generate encourages students to lead a more adventurous life - trying out new things in an enterprise way. Positive 'can-do' attitudes are developed, dispelling the disaffection, alienation and self-pity that all too often mar the mental and spiritual health of the adolescent age group, sapping their motivation and human spirit. Such attitudes underpin other forms of learning. Self-belief is often restored in an outdoor programme, and this has been shown to improve classroom achievement. In community terms, these attitudes are needed to offset the prevailing culture of fear, which is apt to stifle adventure, enterprise and creativity.

Conventional learning is generally incremental: knowledge is built up bit by bit. Outdoor learning, however, is often transformative: unforgettable 'magic moments' cause breakthroughs in self-understanding and self-regard. It is impressive how some young people seem to grow up almost overnight. Ask them what a well-designed outdoor programme did for them, and you will often be amazed at what they say. It is the testimony of young people themselves, rather than that of the learning providers, that is the most convincing argument for making outdoor learning an integral part of the whole school curriculum.

Bertie Everard 17.11.04