

# THE NATURAL SCHOOLING PROJECT



Deborah Lambert is the Erasmus+ Natural Schooling project lead and co-author of Bloomsbury's award-winning National Curriculum Outdoors series of books. Deborah is a former primary and special educational needs teacher, lecturer for the Learning Institute and Outdoor Learning consultant, delivering tailored outdoor curriculum training for schools as well as continuing to work with classes, delivering curriculum linked outdoor learning. She is currently chair of the Natural Schooling Research Interest Group (RIG), which meets online to discuss outdoor learning and provide an international networking opportunity.

## Findings from the Erasmus+ Natural Schooling project

A 3-year Erasmus+ project, entitled 'Natural Schooling; using curriculum innovation to improve student outcomes wellbeing and health' led by the Learning Institute (an outreach arm of Westcountry Schools Trust) has recently successfully concluded. The findings of the project evaluation provide more evidence that an outdoor learning approach to curriculum delivery improves not just student outcomes, wellbeing and health, but the wellbeing and health of the teachers too.

## What is natural schooling?

The broad term 'outdoor learning' is commonly interpreted as a wide range of learning and activities that take place outdoors. For the purposes of this research project, the term 'outdoor learning' was narrowed down and the title 'natural schooling' chosen to better reflect the focus of the project; learning in nature, about nature and through the natural environment. In the natural schooling project, although the outdoors is the place and medium for learning, it also uses the natural world to apply the curriculum. The term 'natural schooling' was originally proposed by Malone and Waite (1), who called for more evidence to show that by adopting a natural schooling approach, learning in nature, about nature and through the natural environment, children and young people can achieve 5 key outcomes needed for 21st century learners:

1. To achieve a healthy and happy body and mind.
2. To become a sociable and confident person.
3. To become a self-directed and creative learner.
4. To be an effective contributor.
5. To be an active global citizen.

The aim of the natural schooling project was to provide more evidence to support Malone and Waite's hypothesis, with the outcomes listed above underpinning the project and its evaluation.

## The project

The Erasmus+ funded project studied the impact of innovating curriculum delivery by using a natural schooling approach. The project partners included schools from the UK, Sweden, Spain and Italy, ranging from mainstream primary and secondary ages to post-16 and special education alternative provision schools – all of whom had varying levels of experience of using the outdoors to support learning, within their settings. Thus, the project provides data of varying approaches to natural schooling delivered in diverse cultural contexts and settings.

Each of the project partner schools planned and monitored the impact of a wide variety of natural schooling curriculum innovations which utilised outdoors settings, school grounds or nearby green spaces to learn in nature, about nature and through the natural environment. These included:

- A 3-year building and construction programme to build an outdoor classroom and taking science lessons outdoors all year round (Sweden).
- A study of flora and fauna along a local river running through the centre of the city and taking part in a citizen science project aligned with the local university (Italy).
- Creating a school garden and greenhouse to study how plants grow, using the produce in school meals to promote healthy eating. Litter picking, recycling and making art from natural objects (Spain).
- Building a weather station, using motion sensor cameras to monitor local fauna, editing videos and undertaking species research, and using 360-degree camera apps linking to Google Earth to provide photographs of local species (Spain).
- From nature to the plate, using foraged ingredients to cook soups, sauces, make tea and dried herbs, and using foraged plants and berries for artwork (UK).

The natural schooling project evaluation (2) reported on the five key objectives of the project. These were:

- The presence of natural schooling in curricula of participating schools and raised awareness of barriers to its representation in the curriculum.
- The impact on teachers' practice and wellbeing.
- The extent to which natural schooling innovations demonstrated enhanced learning and/or wellbeing outcomes for the learners involved and developed competencies for 21st century living.
- Any enhanced engagement with the school curriculum and learning by the wider community.
- Evaluation of the use of the cross-European sharing of information and data about natural environments between learners and teachers involved in the natural schooling project.

Evidence was gathered using a mixture of quantitative and qualitative methods. Partners in the project used observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers and school management, and students' work to evaluate the impact of natural schooling interventions on student outcomes. Skilled in such professional assessment, teacher report was deemed an appropriate method of evaluating outcomes. Teachers'

personal perspectives were also used to inform responses to the post-project questionnaire. This highly detailed questionnaire, completed by each partner, alongside other information gathering activities, at the final transnational event in Parma, yielded most of the data for the evaluation report. The pre-project questionnaire was used as a benchmark to evaluate the extent to which the originally intended objectives and outcomes had been met.

## The evaluation

The project evaluation confirmed the results of larger contemporaneous studies on nature-based learning approaches, finding that: a 'whole school' approach is best to support pupils' mental health and their learning ability; building the skills and confidence of teachers is necessary in delivering activities successfully; and easier access to natural spaces, whether in school or nearby, is required.

The project evaluation found that, although training by experts was found to be desirable and desired, circumstances meant that many of the teachers and project leaders in each setting also became self-directed learners, undertaking their own research around learning in, about and through nature. Influential circumstances included the covid-19 pandemic, which limited travel and face-to-face training, and staff changes over the course of the 3-year project. Although a delivery-training approach was initially envisaged for the project, with key theoretical training inputs made throughout, the creativity of partners led to a more co-constructive form of training, with monthly management meetings enabling regular sharing of practice and ideas, which also met the needs of staff that joined the project part-way through.

The perceived positive effect of the natural schooling curriculum innovations on teachers' practice and wellbeing was reflected in all of the data gathered from the international partners in the project. There were no negative responses recorded on the questionnaire in relation to this objective. Responding on a scale from -3 to +3 (from extremely negative to extremely positive impact) in response to the question 'where would you place the impact of this project on staff wellbeing, professional development and staff effectiveness?' the responses averaged +2 - a 'very positive impact'.

The most detailed responses from partners across all data collection activities related to the value and impact of transnational collaboration and the way it facilitated the sharing of different pedagogies and teaching techniques as well as broadening understanding of the value of natural schooling.

A comment from the Italian partners is particularly notable:

*"In Italy, a slightly rainy day is considered bad weather and low temperatures cause teachers to stay indoors, with the whole pupil group, even during recess; on the other hand, too hot weather is also a reason to seek shelter indoors. Therefore, for Italians it is always very inspiring to watch teachers and learners gear up and perform outdoor educational activities in this project. Partnering with countries where 'good' weather is seldom there has surely helped Italians put many fears in perspective."* (Italy)

Project partners reported greater collaboration between staff working on the projects, with an increase in the number of staff willing to adopt a natural schooling approach and increased sharing of good practice.

*"Natural schooling has helped teachers consider going 'out' as more 'natural', i.e. normal. More teachers organise outdoor activities than before."* (Italy)

*"Staff collaboration has increased and the interest in outdoor*

*teaching has increased among staff at the school that have not been involved in the project."* (Sweden)

*"The natural schooling approach also contributed to use of different teaching approaches, improved knowledge of local resources, more time spent outdoors, confidence in taking pupils off-site, planning different outdoor sessions etc."* (UK)

The project evaluation has recommendations for schools wishing to adopt a natural schooling approach. These are that schools should: look for opportunities to enhance curriculum subjects through learning in, about, for and through nature in their local environment; work collaboratively across the whole school with the support of senior leaders to ensure that innovations are recognised, valued, and embedded within the school culture; share their ideas and practice within their school and across other schools, both within their country and internationally - being part of a bigger project appears to support commitment and ambition; and monitor and evaluate their innovations in natural schooling approaches not only to refine and enhance their effectiveness to work across a wide range of abilities and ages to meet their students' needs appropriately, but also to demonstrate and celebrate success with the wider community.



The value and impact of the natural schooling project is evident in the data gathered and evaluated in the report. Although all the projects faced challenges to varying degrees, the partners remained positive, active and continually looked for ways to meet and overcome challenges. Cross-national sharing was a central and vital element of the project, facilitated through regular monthly online meetings and transnational events hosted by the different partners, fostering positive, collaborative professional relationships and friendships. The value of transnational collaboration that underpinned the overall success of the project cannot be underestimated and is encapsulated by this observation from the Spanish partner:

*"Globalisation' is usually linked to negative issues – but this kind of globalisation is what is worth all our efforts."* (Spain)

The full evaluation report is now available to view from the [project website](#), which forms one of the project outputs for resource dissemination. Here, you will also be able to access the [project handbook](#), [evaluation report](#) and [training programme](#). For further details about the project or to find out more please contact the project lead [debbie.lambert@learninginstitute.co.uk](mailto:debbie.lambert@learninginstitute.co.uk) ▲

## References

1. Malone, K., & Waite, S. (2016). Student Outcomes and Natural Schooling: Pathways from Evidence to Impact Report. Available online at: <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/news/report-identifies-ways-to-boost-childrens-quality-of-life-through-outdoor-learning>
2. Cuffe, J., Waite, S., Lambert, D. (2023) Project evaluation report: Erasmus+ Natural Schooling: Using curriculum innovation projects to improve student outcomes. Available online at: <https://naturalschooling.eu/erasmus-natural-schooling-evaluation-report-2023/>