



A masterclass at the IOL National Conference will further explore this research, its findings and the implications for outdoor learning practice with schools.



# Getting Naturally Connected: Outdoor Learning and School Priorities

by Sue Waite

## Why Learn Outside?

The message is clear – getting children outdoors is fantastic for their health, wellbeing and learning and can set them on a pathway to happy, healthy and environmentally sustainable lifestyles. It can cost schools very little and help them achieve their goals in a way that engages children with learning and improves the wellbeing of both pupils and teachers. A recent large scale project called Natural Connections has added significant weight to existing evidence and shown that the necessary changes in school culture needed to make outdoor learning most effective and sustainable require direct, high quality, local support.

*'I feel it has had a massive impact on our school improvement. We have recently redeveloped our school values and have used whole school outside learning days in the woods to promote ... these' (teacher)*

## What is Natural Connections?

Natural Connections, a 4 year demonstration project funded by Defra, Natural England and Historic England and delivered by Plymouth University, was developed in response to insight research into the barriers and benefits of outdoor learning in schools. It tested and evaluated new ways of providing local, independent support to schools and teachers to stimulate schools' use of outdoor learning for curriculum subjects. It also provided responsive training and support networks that built teacher confidence and skills. The project worked with over 125 schools, 40,000 pupils and 2,000 teachers across Southwest England, including collecting lots of data to test the project aims and capture evidence of its impact. This meant that we could adapt the offer to schools appropriately within the project and make recommendations to inform future practice. For more information on the project and many aspects of outdoor learning, please see <https://naturalconnectionsblog.wordpress.com/about-natural-connections/>

## A Grounded Model

Rather than delivering a standard blueprint, the Natural Connections project was designed to offer a tailored response to schools' needs. There were five regional hubs in areas of disadvantage, where "hub leaders" were appointed with educational or outdoor learning expertise to create local networks of schools. These schools supported each other in overcoming challenges to learning in natural environments, sharing ideas and inspiring experiences with each other.

*'There is nothing more powerful [for a teacher] than having another teacher say ... This is how I did it! ... And understanding how that teacher overcame different barriers'. (hub leader)*

The hubs were located in Plymouth, Torbay, Bristol and areas within Cornwall and Somerset, working in both urban and rural schools with varying school grounds and levels of local greenspace. The Project was grounded in schools' needs and interests and worked with teachers and local service providers to embed outdoor learning into everyday school activity. This offered a sustainable way of connecting the natural environment with the priorities of the school curriculum and embedding it into the values and culture of the school.

Staff in Natural Connections schools consistently reported that outdoor learning was useful for curriculum delivery. Both primary and secondary schools used outdoor learning to support almost every curriculum subject, but most significantly they frequently used this approach for the core subjects, English, Maths and Science. This is an indication of teachers' confidence that outdoor learning can deliver curriculum objectives in these high stakes subjects. Some of the ways outdoor learning was used to enliven the curriculum included:

- historical re-enactment of events to test the accuracy of reports - did the protesters really chant and shout **all day**?
- use of the natural world to inspire creative writing 'I don't know if we would have got that [quality] if I'd just...shown them a picture in a classroom' (teacher)
- supporting the teaching of maths 'we have found that, that particular group... it has helped self-esteem because children that find it difficult to access the curriculum generally, it's [outdoor learning] often their forte' (teacher).



## What is in it for teachers?

The teaching profession has been under pressure for some time and increased levels of stress and reduced job satisfaction are often noted in the press. We found evidence that taking lessons outside had positive impacts on teachers. Teachers reported increased confidence in taking learning outside through the project's training and peer to peer support networks, and experienced a greater sense of personal wellbeing, as shown in the figure on the next page.

*'The spaces that outdoor learning activities engage all in allow stress/anxieties to be more manageable for both staff and children' (teacher)*

Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activity around outdoor learning increased significantly during the project, including fundraising for outdoor learning, teaching in particular environments (e.g. teach on the beach) and subject specific sessions such as *Maths outside: Meaningful, contextual, purposeful*. School staff accessed and appreciated informal networking and sharing that hub leaders facilitated: *The Natural Connections project has enabled me to connect with other like-minded teachers who have a vision of what education should be like but also have the very real pressures of the rest of life in a busy school which hinder what can be done about it' (teacher).*

## What do children gain?

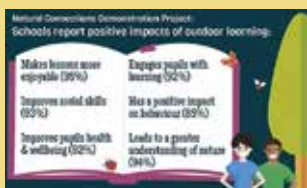
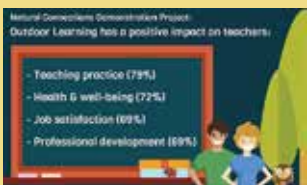
We found strong evidence, for the first time on this scale, that increased time spent learning in local natural environments has multiple benefits for children. 92% of teachers reported that being outdoors engages pupils with learning. In turn this was associated with increases in pupil confidence to apply that learning, and to increased success and attainment. This pathway to raising attainment is a powerful argument for many schools considering whether to embark on teaching more outside. However, this sort of impact is a difficult thing for teachers to attribute to any one teaching intervention; nevertheless 57% of schools surveyed confidently reported that outdoor learning had a positive impact on attainment, with no school reporting a negative impact. Pupils' health and wellbeing were also noticeably improved, along with their social skills. Worries about behaviour can sometimes deter novices of teaching outdoors but 85% of teachers reported that taking lessons outside the classroom had had a positive impact on behaviour.

One teacher stated: *'outdoor learning has definitely played a massive part in improving*



*their behaviour.' and another that 'I feel I can let them go I don't have to have them within my sight every moment 'cos I think they are learning to be responsible in their own right.'*

Another teacher commented: *'The children love it! It's fun, it's exciting and allows them to take control of their learning'* (teacher), and children seem to agree! Ninety-two percent of pupils reported that outdoor learning makes lessons more enjoyable.



## What does this mean for future practice?

What contributed enormously to Natural Connections success was its recognition that outdoor experiences don't have to be an extra-curricular add-on or something that is nice to do when teachers have time. It became a valued way of helping children learn curriculum subjects. In addition, keeping things local reduced paperwork, costs and time, enabling schools to use the outdoors more frequently.

The best practice guide for practitioners Natural

Connections Demonstration Project: *'Transforming Schools through Outdoor Learning'*: published by Plymouth University is available at <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/research/oelres-net>. It uses the valuable findings and learning from the Natural Connections project to summarise for practitioners how to implement curricular outdoor learning in their own settings. It also gives organisations practical advice and information on how best to support schools with outdoor learning. Key themes include making support services sustainable by evidencing impact and changing teaching practice and culture, and how to incorporate outdoor spaces for learning across the curriculum, advising teachers on ways to increase outdoor activities and access peer support. The guidance draws on a report

*Student Outcomes and Natural Schooling*<sup>1</sup> and the findings of a recent review to leverage clarity of purposes for outdoor learning<sup>2</sup>, echoing the call for collaboration in the recent Horizons article by Healey and Robinson (Volume 74).

## What next?

The hub leaders involved in the project have enabled schools to develop their own sustainable networks, and most have been able to continue to work with schools offering them further training and support. All the partners involved would now like to see this model that has been such a success in Southwest England rolled out nationally so that children in every school can have the opportunity to benefit from learning in natural environments. Our focus is now on securing funding and building partnerships to achieve this ambition. If you are interested in the detail behind this article please see the Natural Connections Demonstration Project Final Report NECR215 <http://publications.naturalengland.org.uk/>. ■

## REFERENCES

1. Malone, K. & Waite, S. (2016) *Student Outcomes and Natural Schooling*. Plymouth: Plymouth University. Available at: <https://www.plymouth.ac.uk/research/oelres-net>
2. Fiennes, C. Oliver, E. Dickson, K. Escobar, D. Romans, A. Oliver, S. (2015) *The Existing Evidence-Base about the Effectiveness of Outdoor Learning*. Available at <http://www.blagravetrust.org/outdoor-learning-study/>

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Sue Waite is Associate Professor (Reader) in the Plymouth Institute of Education. Her research into outdoor learning includes studies of Forest School, decline of provision of outdoor learning in schools and issues

of transition, health and wellbeing outcomes from woodland activities and place-based learning. She currently leads the Natural Connections Demonstration Project and convenes Plymouth University's outdoor and experiential learning research network. She is author of many published articles in this field and an edited book *Children Learning Outside the Classroom: from birth to eleven*.

**Photos:** from the author