

Outdoor & Community-based learning

Utopia Magazine



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EDITOR LETTER



Together, we explored engaging and meaningful learning experiences that transcend subject boundaries and connect with the community or take place in an outdoor setting.

My Dear Readers

Two years ago we started our own utopian story. An exciting journey in which we explored the challenges teachers face every day. Challenges such as how to meet the demands of our rapidly changing world, how to redefine the role of the teacher to meet the future. Utopia gave us ample time to share ideas, to try out new approaches and evaluate their impact, to reflect on professional development and to raise educational standards in all participating schools.

Needless to say, the COVID-19 pandemic hasn't made it easy! It caused widespread changes throughout Europe. Teachers experienced a significant shift in their normal routines, with classes moving online. While this change meant a new way of working for both the teaching staff and the children, it provided opportunities to go outside to learn and caused intense community involvement in the schools.

The downside of this 'new normal' in teaching was that we were not allowed to have visitors in the schools because children had to stay in their group bubble.

So it became almost impossible to experiment with cross-curricular education, invite people into the classroom and demonstrate good practices. This means that we had to be creative and look for alternative ways to present and discuss the good practices we have outlined in this journal.

This magazine does an excellent job of presenting different points of view, accompanied by multiple examples related to cross-curricular education in an outdoor and/or community-based environment in primary education. It arose from the Erasmus+ project Utopia, initiated by VLS Windekind, the Belgian coordinating school of this project.

Happy reading,

An Jacobs
VLS Windekind



Like Desiderius Erasmus, we embrace the belief in an individual's capacity for self-improvement.

MEET UTOPIA

PROJECT SCOPE

Providing insights in education

The last decade, primary schools in this partnership have been undergoing profound changes in their curriculum.

This is changing the role and tasks of teachers. Additionally, teachers are being confronted with the challenges of handling large class sizes, dealing with behavioural problems, attending to children with special needs, finding ways to improve the wellbeing of refugee children whilst dealing with their linguistic problems and providing inclusive education, and coping with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Addressing these issues demands for teaching strategies that have been shown to be effective, adapted to support pupils with special needs, or rather adapted to the pupils' abilities. However, teachers tend to maintain teaching methods in which they have been taught. They are used to teach knowledge and skills in certain contexts and they often find it rather challenging to broaden their application.

There are also growing competence requirements like, for instance, mastering cross-curricular, digital and 21st century skills as well as the competence to continually develop creative ways of teaching. Teachers need to upskill and regain trust in their capabilities of teaching all children.





Traditional ways of teaching can no longer live up to the expectations of society and to the demands of quality education for the 21st Century. Changes in curricula attempt to close the knowledge gap and change the role of teachers profoundly but fail to provide a solution for the growing disempowerment of teachers all over Europe.

We are faced with inescapable challenges concerning the future of our children. Pupil populations are becoming increasingly diverse, and accordingly the demand for flexible education is growing steadily. Addressing these issues demands for new forms of teaching and adequate tools, in line with the needs of a broad range of children. It also demands for the professional development of teachers, in line with individual needs and school objectives. Teachers need to upskill to meet growing competence requirements.

'Utopia' aims to improve the quality of learning experiences and enrich the learning environment to better meet the needs of children. We aim to do this by professionalising teachers in cross-curricular teaching and by providing them insights on outdoor education and community-based teaching. Our goal is to enhance their knowledge and skills and make them experience the benefits of connecting research to practice.

We believed that we could strengthen teachers and let them regain control and confidence in their profession. Our main objective is the professional development of primary school teachers. We want to support them in developing high-quality and innovative teaching methods, upgrade their existing skills and thereby help them to step out of their comfort zone to embrace the challenges of the future.

This journal is a result of a partnership of seven primary schools, a University of applied science, teacher training and an education and children's services department. We brought partners from seven different European countries together to learn and exchange practices. We hope to inspire teachers all over Europe to take action to improve their teaching strategies.





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Facilitators in charing
good practice

OUTDOOR LEARNING



Is implementing outdoor learning as easy as it sounds?

Implementing outdoor teaching has proven to be more difficult than we realised. Two years into the project, many teachers are still trying to find a way to consciously implement meaningful and relevant outdoor learning experiences. Outdoor learning is not simply applying instructional strategies that the teacher would normally use in the classroom. It involves experiences linked to various subjects and multiple contexts of teaching. Without understanding how to do it, teachers cannot be expected to link learning objectives with appropriate types of instruction in outdoor learning or to adapt learning principles to their particular outdoor contexts.

What is outdoor learning?

Meaningful outdoor learning involves school-based learning outside the classroom, with a cross-curricular approach. Within this perspective, the outdoor environment is used as a place for learning but also as a source of knowledge. It can be a valuable starting point for subsequent indoor learning or it can expand upon and strengthen indoor teaching. It has the potential to facilitate understanding of scientific and mathematical concepts, enable children to develop self-confidence, social skills and citizenship skills and it can support physical and mental health. But more importantly, outdoor learning can supplement indoor learning well. It should aim to cover the same learning outcomes that would be covered inside the classroom. It is not the content that changes, rather it is the context where learning occurs. Extending learning to the outdoor environment brings deeper insight, better understanding and more meaning to content knowledge which, would ordinarily merely be read and discussed but would seldom be experienced.

The implication of outdoor learning for teachers is that they must do more than merely organise activities like asking children to solve a problem or to conduct an experiment. Facilitating an outdoor activity is not the same as facilitating outdoor learning. We must not equate activity with learning.

Activities, as opposed to objectives, are often the basis of developing outdoor learning. These activities, however, often lack cognitive resonance or application across various situations, are often superficial imitations of indoor learning activities executed in overly controlled settings, exhibit little coherence and bear little resemblance to the conditions required for outdoor learning. So, organising outdoor activities for the sake of the activity, results in distorted understandings of the applications of outdoor learning.

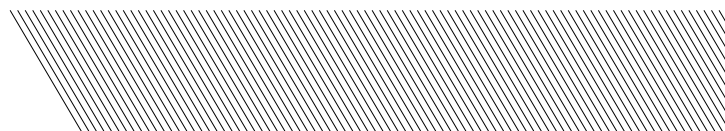
Stuck in 'safe mode'

In general, the easier-to-import practices (for example, the classic math exercises like jumping from tree to tree while counting) have become part of the teacher's repertoire, but the full understanding of what outdoor education means has not.

We have noticed that teachers often rely on "safe activities" when organising outdoor learning experiences. Being stuck in this 'safe mode' hinders the development of conscious and relevant learning experiences. It is important to plan and to skilfully orchestrate outdoor lessons, and to follow-up in the classroom to ensure that outdoor learning contributes to and supports classroom learning. The most profound challenges for teachers are acquiring new skills and personally making sense of outdoor teaching as a basis for instruction. This may cause uncertainty in some teachers.

Many uncertainties exist as concerns or implicit questions posed by teachers who attempt outdoor learning instruction. Uncertainties about the concept of outdoor learning are rooted in teachers' attempts to understand the epistemological underpinnings of outdoor learning. Pedagogical uncertainties arise from the unpredictable fashioning of outdoor learning experiences and of the reorientation of roles and expectations of both learners and teachers. Paradoxically, developing purposeful and well-structured outdoor learning experiences, demands that teachers are able to think creatively, adapt flexibly to new circumstances, identify as well as solve problems, and create learning opportunities in collaboration with others, which are all supposed benefits for learners in outdoor learning environments.

Putting outdoor learning into practice requires many teacher skills such as being able to capitalise on differences in students, being able to incorporate students ideas into the body of the lesson, being critically conscious of the dynamics of the outdoor environment, being able to help students make their thinking explicit by means of different instructional strategies..., and to do all this in diverse outdoor settings. Teachers cannot conduct outdoor teaching if they do not know how to do that. If you have never had opportunities to observe effective models in action or to receive competent coaching by a mentor, outdoor learning becomes very hard to implement.



Outdoor learning is ensuring regular, purposeful opportunities for children and young people to actively engage with the world outside the classroom, promoting real and relevant learning experiences.

Forest school at St. Vincents - London

Before we venture into the forest, the children tell me to be careful because it can get quite muddy there. "Whatever you do, don't hold on to your friend because if you slip, your friend is coming with you! Oh, and watch out for those brambles too", says a six-year-old, "their thorns really sting." Yes, I was as surprised as you probably are. Children of six years old at St. Vincent Catholic Primary school manage their own safety by observing and evaluating hazards.

In St. Vincents, the distinction between outdoor and classroom learning has become blurred and both are seen as normal learning processes. The forest and the space outside the classroom is as much a part of the normal learning space as the classroom.

This school is blessed with a vast, beautiful natural space surrounding the school. The forest near the school offers plenty of opportunities for creative play and learning.

I observed children involved in an insect hunt, counting the number of insects they could find and others role-playing, mimicking birds and animals, some painting with mud or examining leaves, checking boxes on their nature checklists, and in a willow hut, children were reading storybooks. I was amazed at what I saw! Being outside really sparked these children's imaginations. And they all took the time to explain what they were doing and why they thought it was important to do it. I felt so welcomed by this class and all its wonderful individuals. I probably learned the most from everyone there!



Learning can be messy!

Especially with young children it is a challenge to connect learning with the outdoors. While visiting Bro Banw, a primary school in Wales, we saw children learning in their mud pie kitchens. They were nothing more than old kitchen units that parents donated to the school. They were filled with sand and water, pots and pans, spoons and forks, as well

as scales and measuring cups. Watching these kids at work made us realize that mud pie kitchens can provide a whole range of different learning opportunities, including sensory, imaginative, creative and exploratory play and even opportunities for early math and science activities. They offer so much more than just the chance to explore mud and get dirty.

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Framework for SUCCESSFUL TEACHING



It is not just about knowledge and ability (excellence and the question of what) but also about will (engagement and the question of how) and judgement (ethics and the question of why). These three aspects are interconnected.

What is the framework?

The Utopia Framework helps teachers model learning experiences, build horizontal connections across areas of knowledge and content domains, integrate 21st Century and transversal skills and use strategies that can reinforce each other.

The framework is an organizational chart, to be used alongside any method, that synthesizes every important topic to be considered in the process of developing learning experiences from idea to learning outcomes, assessment and reflection.

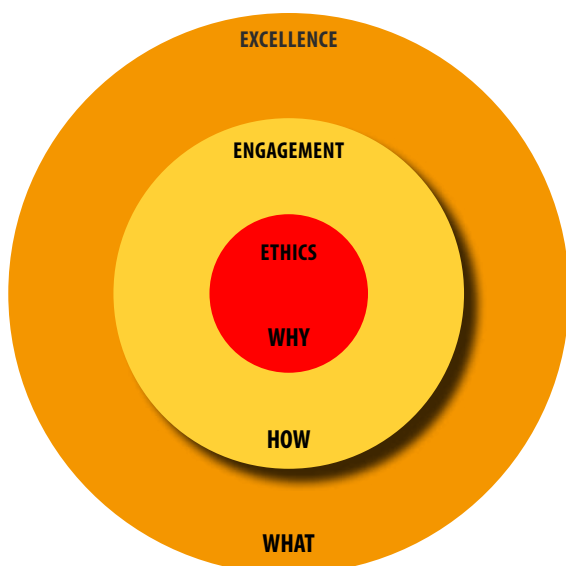
As a heuristic, the framework involves a number of critical questions all of which matter when preparing a lesson, that can prompt teachers to interrogate their own beliefs, question institutional

routines, and understand more deeply the forces that influence their classroom practice.

We need to look at each of these questions separately, and understand how they relate to one another.

The primary reason we want to understand the why the what and the how of teaching is so that we can continuously reflect on the quality of our teaching and explore how to improve it by building evidence and insights across your work.

The framework is intended for use by primary school teachers. The aim is to integrate this tool into your daily practice.



Educational expertise is connected with the model proposed by Simon Sinek (The golden circle. Sinek, 2009) and Howard Gardner, Mihály Csikszentmihályi, and William Damon (Good work project, 2005)

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TEACHING WITH IMPACT

EVIDENCE OF WHAT WORKS

WHY
WHY DO I TEACH IT?
ETHICS - JUDGEMENT

COMMON SENSE

PASSION

21st C. SKILLS

DELIVERY

- What methods will I use?
- What are my little questions?
- How will I differentiate?
- What are the community links?
- How will I sustain it?
- What resources will I use?
- What are the timings/duration/ location?
- How do I keep it contemporary, engaging and meaningful?
- How do I incorporate the children's contextual factors?

REFLECTION

- What opportunities do the children have to reflect?
- How do I engage in self-reflection?

HOW
HOW DO I TEACH IT?
WILL - ENGAGEMENT

ASSESSMENT

- How will we assess our work/the project/ourselves?
- Who will we share it with?
- Do we provide formative evaluation?
- Do we provide feedback?

NEXT STEP

- How is it continued in the community?
- How does this project inform future practices?

21st C. SKILLS

How will I develop these skills?

OUTDOOR

COMMUNITY-BASED

CROSS-CURRICULAR

THEME

- What will the children be learning about?
- What is the driving question?

LEARNING GOALS

- What do the children want to find out, skills and/or experiences to develop?
- What do I want the children to learn?
- Why do I want them to learn this?

WHAT WHAT DO I TEACH?

EXCELLENCE -KNOWLEDGE -ABILITY

CONTEXT OF THE CHILDREN

- What do the children bring to the project: experiences, potentialities, cultural backgrounds, strengths and weaknesses...?
- What prior knowledge and skills do the children have?

CONTEXT OF THE SCHOOL

- Have I considered every learner?
- What are the age-related expectations?
- Have I considered environmental issues, facilities, overall duration?

21st C. SKILLS

What skills do I want the children to develop?

Teaching outdoor and community-based in Athens

Why do we teach the way we do?

I live and teach in a suburb of the Greek capital very close to the city centre. The adjective “outdoor” describes quite a wide range of aspects related to the way we live in Greece. Outdoor playing used to be the daily routine of my childhood. When I was a kid, I learnt a long list of meaningful things outside. I was raised to love my garden, respect all living creatures in it, observe and transfer the norms of the world outside to life indoors and life with others. Sadly, this is not the case with many children today. It’s all about opportunities which modern living has systematically been vanishing especially in urban settings. Spaces for play are few.

Another feeling I have is that children who live in 2022 are gradually losing, if have not already lost, contact with nature. And what about us, teachers? Do we always promote the most appropriate ways of learning? Think of the questions we ask, for instance -

- Did you bring your books in today? Could that suggest that you can’t really learn without them?
- Your teacher won’t be in for class. It might be another way of saying “I am really sorry. He is the only source of information so don’t expect to learn anything new today”
- We won’t spend much time outdoors. It will be a short break in the garden. Why is it that break time is outdoors and learning time indoors? Is the exact opposite a possibility? Still, children transfer the tension of their deprived-of-action-and-playground-joy-life into the classroom. A faster teaching pace is not the remedy for the frustration and feeling of resignation children and teachers are often faced with. Love for schooling and knowledge must be reinvigorated and restored.

Loss of interest needs to be found again. And, this is exactly what we want to offer to the pupils involved in this project.

Mathematical and scientific knowledge may be generated naturally through the children’s work in the garden. Historic and cultural heritage may be maintained more consistently during an exchange with the elderly of the Daily Care Home which is next door. Problem solving strategies may be consolidated and more easily transferred to real life situations in the future if regularly practised in a real life setting. And this is more likely to be evidenced outdoors and inside the community. Children are much happier at the end of a day in the garden.

Moreover, project outcomes are certainly more collaborative. New knowledge comes naturally and stays in the long term memory waiting for the next refreshing and boosting input. When I asked pupils what makes the difference in the new way we learn at school the answer I got was “Well, it’s like when I learnt how to ride my bike. My dad was close watching over me but I, myself found my way. I discovered the whole thing myself. Now I know how seeds grow into plants, I know how to take care of my plant and I am really proud of it!” Isn’t that autonomy what we are looking for?

How do we teach the way we do?

Teachers in our school plan together. We try to define the different possible entry points of our curriculum and think of ways to make this entrance more successful. We count on collaborative interaction between inside and outside. We also trust it can be driven by everybody, not just teachers. We engage people who can teach better than us through their own personal stories and expertise.

For instance, we harvest the olives in our school garden and we ask our pupils' grandparents to lead the way. We arrange for a preparatory meeting of children and their grandparents at school. We play games together and help them get close enough to be able to organize their joint activity of harvesting. It is a pleasure to see them work side by side, transferring knowledge and joy in equal portions both ways.

We want to teach World War II living conditions in occupied Greece and we welcome local community members to share stories that reveal the facts instead of only using books. History comes to life, human values are not abstract nouns anymore. We want to develop children's love for our natural heritage and we take them out for a carol singing tour in the neighbourhood, letting them feel the joy and pride of showing and sharing knowledge and skills with the local people. And then, we return to the classroom with a lot more to say and enough motivation to search in greater depth.

In addition, bread making at school is an experience all children in our school community have had at least once during their primary school years. Visiting the local bakery to find answers to their questions and then returning to school to prepare the yeast, watching it work wonders with dough, making rolls and baking them in the oven are part of an experience which brings smiles to their faces.

What do we teach?

It is actually a matter of merging areas and learning goals. Facts, skills and experiences, our pupils will utilize in their life away from school to mingle with our official curriculum; these are offered during sessions held away from a conventional classroom. For example, we allow children the time and space to learn how a seed grows into the salad on their lunch table through planting and observation time in the school garden. We encourage them to experiment with food production and preservation in the school kitchen or at a local grocer's. We trigger and praise their active involvement in issues of interest for the local and global community during expeditions and participation in campaigns. Last year, we celebrated the World Environment Day through our participation in a gathering organized by local groups to express support for the saving of trees in a park in our city and instead of a Christmas play children worked to prepare a food drive for the local pantry. Active citizenship is more efficiently developed in real settings and for a real cause.

by Julie Gyftoula
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Athens, Greece



Community-based Learning

Teachers should make better use of the environment in and outside their classroom.

The community lends itself well to building on the motivation of children and to connect teaching to other contexts.



Why should we embrace community-based learning?

There are a number of reasons why we should embrace community-based learning.

- A lot of children today are nature deprived and community deprived. In his book about the divide between children and the outdoors, Richard Louv directly links the lack of nature in the lives of today's children to some of the most disturbing trends, such as the rises in childhood obesity, attention disorders, and even depression.
- Children become more engaged in learning when learning is connected to authentic, real-world experiences. Many of today's children do not really understand what or why they are learning. There is no relevance to the materials the children are expected to learn. Piaget, Gardner, Dewey and other specialists believe that the learner must be active to engage in real learning. Learning becomes active when children can connect new knowledge with their prior understanding. Constructivists take this notion a bit further stating that a meaningful context that interacts with the outside world is key to promoting learning.

- To develop and practice 21 st Century skills: community-based learning is a great way to develop and practice 21 st Century skills. Presented with projects requiring teamwork for instance, children become more collaborative and able to work effectively with their peers.
- To develop a sense of voice: given the opportunity to share their ideas with adults, children develop a sense of voice and gain self-confidence.
- To nurture a sense of pride about the community: attention to the local environment can nurture a sense of pride in the community and a deepening connection to the people there.





Connecting learning experiences with the local environment, with multiple opportunities to interact with citizens, architecture, culture, nature... can help children to better understand real life challenges and look at the world from multiple perspectives.

What is Community-based Learning?

Community-based learning has a lot in common with other old and contemporary efforts to link schools more firmly to their communities—efforts such as place-based education, service learning, environmental education, but also with other approaches like inquiry-based learning, project-based learning, authentic learning and experiential learning, and so on. They all point to the value of educational experiences situated beyond the classroom and that involve the application of concepts and skills in relevant, authentic “real-world” settings. They all place heavy emphasis on collaborative learning, reflecting on experiences and engaging in inquiry. What sets community-based education apart is the way that it strives to bring all these approaches together, into a common framework, aimed at deepening students’ connection to their communities in ways that make those communities better places to live.

Our definition

During the Utopia kick-off meeting in November 2019, we decided on a definition of community-based learning. This happened in the context of developing our framework.

We reached the following definition:

Community-based learning is a strategy that builds reciprocal and mutually beneficial connections between communities and the wider world to help children gain real world experiences and look at the world from multiple perspectives.

Community-based education:

- is a mindset about the school’s relationship to the local community and a way of thinking about the school’s role in society;
- brings together approaches like inquiry learning, outdoor learning, project based learning, and so on;
- engages students by using their own communities as the source and focus of learning;
- uses community members as both resources and partners;
- can be drawn upon to teach any subject area across disciplines;
- promotes citizenship;
- by its very nature cannot be a drag and drop approach because every community-based lesson or activity must reflect the unique circumstances encountered in specific schools and communities.

Six principles of community-based learning

According to the book 'The power of place' Authentic Learning through place-based education, the core of rich place based experiences are these six design principles:

1. community as classroom
2. Learner centered
3. Inquiry-based
4. Local to global
5. Interdisciplinary
6. Design thinking

Although not all experiences include a full manifestation of each one, the principles are often present to some degree when experiences are high quality and lead to meaningful student outcomes.

Teachers who want to connect learning to their communities might find them helpful in grounding the design and the implementation of place-based learning.

1 Community as classroom

The first principle, community as classroom, allows learning to happen anytime and anywhere, and it expands the traditional definition of school.

An important condition to place-based learning in schools is for teachers in the school to build a better understanding of the structure, challenges, and opportunities within the community. All communities have something worth exploring and to be proud of, even if at the surface level that does not seem to be the case. The more teachers understand their own place, the more possibilities will emerge. Also, tapping into community members who can facilitate learning about place is important.

2 Learner Centered

In 1907 John Dewey talked about 'The isolation of the school - its isolation from life'. He argues that the great waste in the schools comes from the inability of the child to use his or her experiences from outside the school in the school itself, while, on the other hand, the child is unable to apply in daily life what he or she is learning at school. So, as far back as Dewey, educators realised that students need to feel connected to what they were learning and that their voice and interests mattered.

On field trips or when we go outside to learn, we often ask all children to engage with a place in the same way. We must make the shift from delivering content to a cohort of pupils, with everyone engaging together and asking the same questions to providing opportunities for individual pupils to engage and apply what they learn in authentic scenarios and places.

With personalised learning, pupils have more control over the time, place, path, and pace of learning. So the learner-centered principle points out the importance of personalised and authentic learning.

3 Inquiry-based

A commitment to inquiry within place-based education allows for a true exploration of novel and complex problems which leads to far more student engagement and curiosity. Inquiry-based learning fits because it is grounded in observing, asking relevant questions, making predictions, and collecting relevant data to understand the economic, ecological, social-political, and cultural elements of a community. As the children become 'truth-seekers', asking their own questions, and collecting their own data, the learning becomes more and more authentic. Because their observations and questions vary based on their different backgrounds, environments, and cultures, students can better seek their own truth through inquiry.



4 Local to global

The fourth principle is about the transfer of thinking of or acting on local issues to global issues. Many global issues are also present in a local context. What makes something real and important is the local aspect of the problem. It is the local experience that grounds pupils in an understanding of why something is important or why they might want to care. Unless they can connect to a tangible local version of something, it is hard for them to feel motivated enough to care.

Another way to connect issues globally is by using tools like for instance the eTwinning platform. By involving children in eTwinning projects (and Erasmus projects) they can get a better understanding of the world and of the people and places in it.

Recently a class of 11 year old children conducted an experiment to discover which ecological straws are tastier than paper straws. Starting point of this experiment was a discussion between a few children about the new paper straws at Mc Donald's.

At Mc Donald's the plastic straws were replaced by paper ones. These new straws did not taste good and turned into pulp real fast. The children had no clue as to why Mc Donald's replaced the straws until I told them about the European ban on disposable plastics and the reason why plastic was being banned. It's very hard for them to see the connection between using plastic straws to drink a soda and the

problem of fish dying in the ocean because of the plastic they get tangled up in.

5 Interdisciplinary

The world is interdisciplinary, but learning is traditionally isolated in subject areas. Math happens at this time, science next, and so on. Although the overlap of most core content areas is readily apparent to many educators, many are not encouraged to explore these intersections and teach in an interdisciplinary way. Yet, most lessons and projects require content and skills from various disciplines.

6 Design thinking

The design thinking process includes several steps which all focused on creative problem solving that is rooted in empathy for a cause, an issue, or a group of people.

The design thinking process begins with the design phase, defining the challenge or problem, followed by a phase of generating ideas or solutions. Then the process moves on to the creative phase in which children build prototypes and finally in the evaluation phase, Children reflect on how the potential user experiences the solution. So, place-based education prioritises design thinking as a systematic process to design innovative solutions to challenging opportunities. It is not enough to passively observe. Pupils must learn how to create and innovate around novel and complex challenges.



A different approach to learning

Pace-based learning requires a different approach to planning and teaching: teachers and pupils become coinvestigators of challenges and problems, teachers don't prepare all of the content but instead they assemble materials, human resources, and inside and outside of classroom experiences that serve as the foundation for learning.

We should always keep in mind the reciprocal and mutually beneficial aspect of community-based learning. While many schools reach out to community partners for resources, services, and support, far fewer take advantage of opportunities for pupils to actually learn outside the classroom walls or to actually contribute to the community. It involves using all the environments in which pupils live (the natural, social, cultural, economic) as starting points to teach subjects across the curriculum.

More than anything else, adopting this approach requires a change in perspective and the recognition that educational standards and requirements can be met in a variety of ways. It embraces a teaching approach based upon inquiry and action. By its very nature, it cannot be standardised or centralised; it must instead reflect the unique circumstances encountered in specific schools and communities.

Place-based and community-based education does not always have to be earth-shaking. "It is certainly about local places and the environment, but it's also about history, the arts, cultural diversity, social justice, and more. It's about literacy emerging from reading neigh-

bourhood street signs; it's about supermarket math; it's about learning history in the cemetery; it's about learning to sail as part of the science curriculum; it can be as simple and uneventful as giving pupils an hour each week to write poetry in the school garden."

Can we say that place-based learning is the same as outdoor learning?

To me, place-based learning moves the focus from viewing outdoor education as a set of activities to outdoor education as a way to view relationships; both with people and place(s). These are issues and questions we need to debate or think about further.



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The impact of HOW WE TEACH

In a recent review, Kirschner et al. (2006) explains why, according to evidence from empirical studies, constructivist, discovery, problem-based, experiential, and inquiry-based teaching do not work. Kirschner lumps different methods under the term 'constructivist' and states that constructivism is characterised by minimal guidance in instruction. He argues that minimally guided instruction is less effective and less efficient than instructional approaches that place a strong emphasis on guidance of the student learning process

Different approaches to teaching, changes in learning environments and demands on quality education are becoming more important every day. We can no longer ignore it, nor can we pretend it doesn't affect us. The growing dissatisfaction with our education system probably has something to do with that. We all make different assumptions about what learning is and we invoke different theory bases to justify how we teach.

But what is the best way to teach our students?

There is a lack of clarity about what effective pedagogy and good instructional design is. 'Look at what the evidence of research is telling you', they say, but different instructional theories tend to define instructional design in very different ways. These different theories often spring from different models of learning, different beliefs and different theory bases. Evidence-based teaching becomes very frustrating when there is a lot of controversy regarding the nature of ideal instruction and pedagogical confusion about what exactly influences learning.

We believe that a number of factors influence learning: the teachers, the context of the learner, the context of the school, the curriculum, class size.... But also the learning environment including a variety of out-of-the classroom learning experiences in nature, at museums and libraries, on-line, and in the community. In fact, the Utopia project facilitates cross-curricular outdoor- and community-based learning, which are constructivist-based and linked to authentic learning. So we believe that the environment in which learners are presented with learning tasks, and the way these tasks are presented, have a huge influence on learning. There is however a lot of controversy about what instruction should look like and some people strongly oppose the idea that learners benefit from constructivist teaching approaches.

Constructivist theory is mostly pitted against by proponents of a cognitive approach to learning. The reason why proponents of direct instruction oppose constructivist-based teaching is because they are convinced that constructivist approaches are inconsistent

with the learners' cognitive architecture. Because constructivist approaches withhold information that can be readily told or demonstrated, these strategies can create unessential cognitive processing at the cost of cognitive capacity needed to engage in actual learning. So, the constructivist approach differs from a cognitive approach to learning like direct instruction in the amount of guidance that is provided to learners during learning. But, minimal guidance does not necessarily follow from a constructivist view of learning. We believe that the amount of guidance a learner needs should be determined by the characteristics of the learner (context and prior knowledge of the learner) and the learning materials that are to be learned. It's a bit short-sighted to write off any lesson based on a constructivist view as being a 'minimally guided' lesson. Based on a lot of research, one could assume that our view on learning runs counter to the model of direct instruction and its theoretical underpinnings. Yet, our teachers apply both instructional strategies in daily practice.

CONSTRUCTIVISM	INSTRUCTIONISM
<p>Practice that is...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - learner-focused - meaning-based - process-oriented - active/interactive <p>- responsive to students personal context</p> <p>(Goodman, 1998; Hueban, 1996)</p>	<p>Practice that is...</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - teacher focused - skill-based <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - product -oriented - non interactive - highly prescribed <p>(Jonassen, 1996)</p>
<p>Different applications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discovery learning Inquiry learning Exploration Hands-on learning Outdoor learning ... 	<p>Different applications:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Systematic teaching Explicit teaching Direct teaching Direct instruction Active teaching ...
<p>Learning occurs in authentic contexts when it is functional for learners (Krasher, 1999)</p>	<p>Emphasis on well-developed and carefully planned lessons designed around small learning increments and clearly defined and prescribed teaching tasks (Swanson, 2001)</p>
<p>What do I teach? A broad vision of learning, it is not a prescription for instruction (Utopia Framework)</p>	<p>How do I teach it? It's a prescription for instruction (Utopia Framework)</p>



Approaches that fit both the purpose of learning and the learner

For a long time, the dominant approaches to teaching have been inspired by the theory of constructivism. This theory goes all the way back to the work of Dewey (1929), Piaget (1970), Bruner (1966) and Vygotsky (1978) and includes various applications like discovery, problem-based, inquiry, project-based, hands-on, or outdoor learning...

In a nutshell, constructivism is based on the idea that learners actively construct their own knowledge, bringing their own unique experiences, backgrounds and prior knowledge to the classroom to build on. Learners have to engage in discussions and activities to become actively involved in their own learning. So, knowledge is the product of that activity and of the context and culture in which the activities occur.

A constructivist lesson is a

lesson that is prepared and implemented in a way that creates the best opportunities for learners to learn, regardless of the techniques used. The focus is on finding the best approach to solving problems or mastering skills in real-world environments in which learning is relevant. The teacher facilitates the learning by creating a suitable learning environment, providing relevant content and resources and acting as a guide posing relevant questions and linking these to the learners' prior knowledge to build upon. Constructivism emphasises on the processes of learning rather than on products of learning.

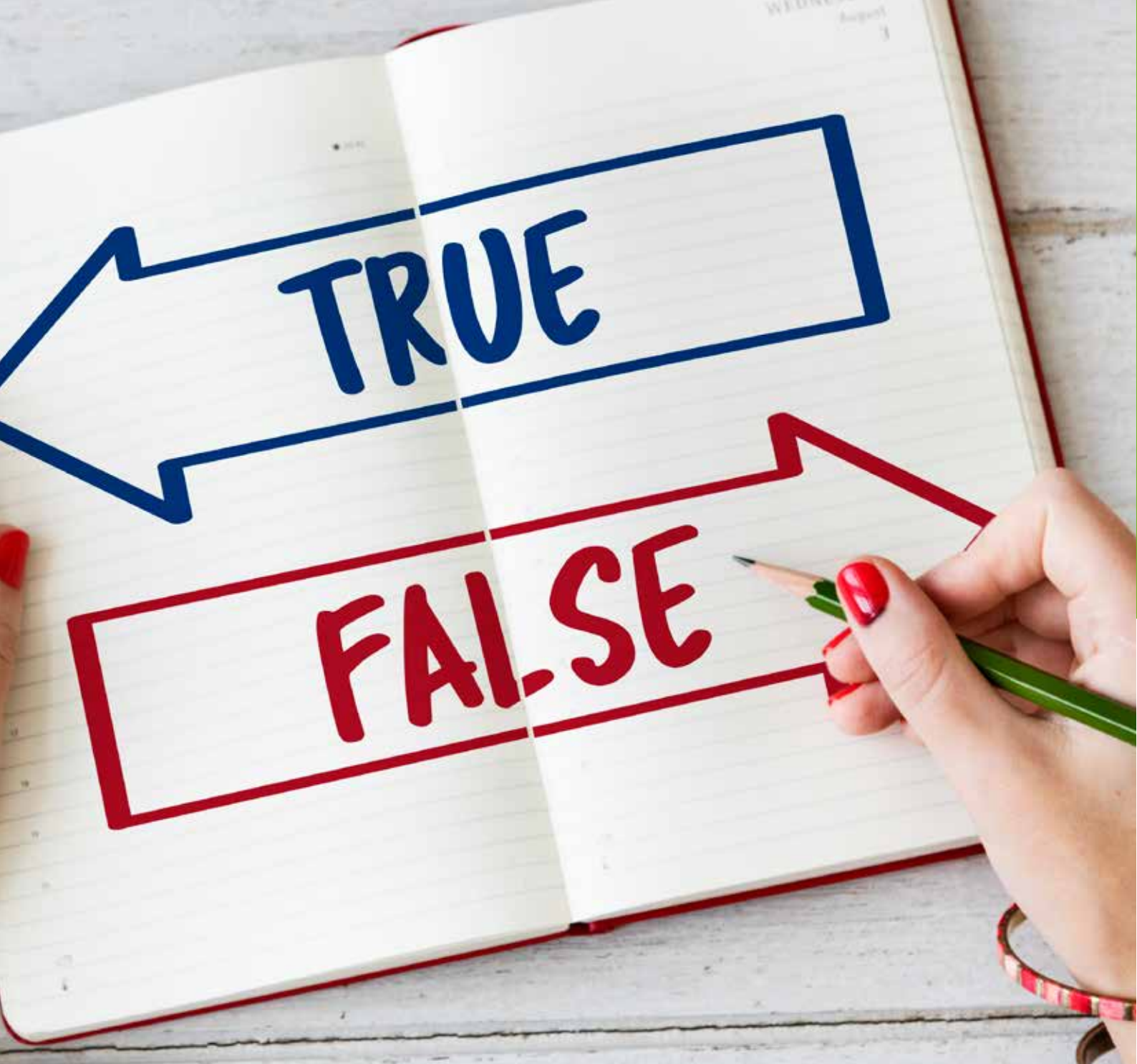
The theory-base opposite to constructivism is instructionism or direct instruction. Proponents of direct instruction (for example Rosenshine, Sweller, Kirschner, Clark) argue that if nothing has changed in long-term memory, nothing has been learned. They state that instruction should be explicit and clear and that teach-

ers should use a basic set of research-based instructional strategies to explain, model, and demonstrate concepts to learners, incorporating strategies for student engagement and for checking for understanding. All new concepts and skills should be broken into sub skills or small blocks of learning content that are taught and re-taught in isolation until the learner achieves a high level of mastery. They feel that there is no purpose to withholding information from learners in order to discover it themselves.

We believe there is legitimate instructional value in both approaches. All of the above said, learning research does not make our job easier! I guess we've all experienced that one style of instruction does not fit all learners, teachers and outcomes. We completely understand if some teachers are a bit lost in the jungle of models and frameworks and all the different approaches that are presented as holy grails.

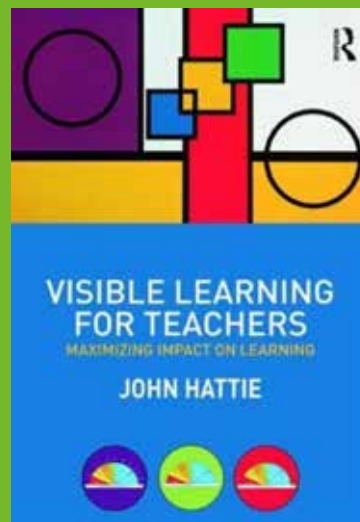
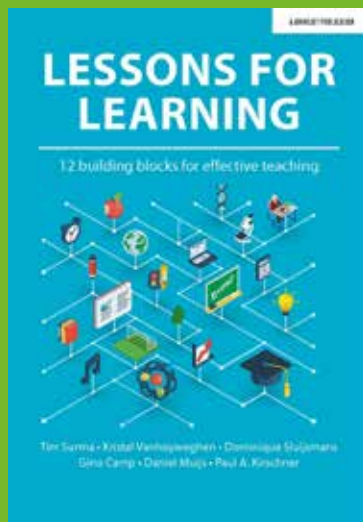
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What does the **EVIDENCE** say?

Make informed decisions about your teaching approach based on empirically derived scientific insights and evidence about how people learn, understand and remember so that children can receive quality education.



Evidence-Informed Teaching

In the UTOPIA project, one of the key elements is working with evidence-informed research, which means not just doing something, but doing things in your classroom that have been proven to promote learning in children. At the start of the UTOPIA project, I gave a workshop to all partners about evidence-informed teaching. It became a key concept in the project.

Making teachers work in an evidence-informed way requires a mind-shift. Firstly, teachers need to know what is evidence-informed teaching. All partners discussed the key concepts in their teams, including evidence-informed teaching. Good sources were also provided to them, in the hope that this would be effectively accepted in teaching practice.

Next, teachers must dare to use new (proven) strategies and discard old unproven ones! To do this, they need to be sufficiently convinced that this is the best strategy and be reminded of this regularly.

New teachers have learned this during their training. Students are effectively trained in this within our teacher training course. They are challenged to take a closer look at problems they encounter. So rather than acting on gut feeling, trainees should consult the “scientific” literature to find out what is already known about this problem and what has been proven to work. The trainees should try this out effectively in their school or classroom practice. In this way, we hope that it will become a habit to always do this. And the great thing is that educational research is now also accessible to everyone. We are happy to provide sources that have inspired us. Get started and see what it can bring to your classroom!

Lieveke Hellemans
Teacher Traing Thomas More
Vorselaar

Project Based Learning and the Outside Environment

Curriculum Design as a term has been given the appeal of a fashion opportunity and is serious business! As with the latest colour trends on the catwalk, the latest of what is exposed on social media needs attention to detail in designing a curriculum fit for purpose. That purpose does not change; however engaging the audience will - and constantly we must. As educators we will be aware that children arrive into school with experiences beyond what is possible to imagine and we are in danger of closing down their 'capacity' to really think, create, dream and achieve if we do not offer something to enable each to be at one with their senses and sensibilities in the school environment.

The National Curriculum is a statutory guide as to what should be offered as a bespoke, context-driven personalised School Curriculum, so measuring an interpretation of what a school has on offer is irrelevant. All schools will be expected to at least meet national standards in Reading, Writing, Maths and Science and how the learning of those subjects is disseminated is down to how well teachers know their pupils and plan for their 'education'. And therein we find ourselves asking what is an education? What is its purpose? Is it any different today to what it was 10 years ago... 20 or 50 years ago? And how exactly does curriculum design serve the education of our children?

As a school we are constantly changing our curriculum and our delivery approaches. Three years ago we knew exactly what we wanted to share with our children; today we are in a very different world, with more uncertainty and greater pressures on family-life - never forget that without an understanding and empathy for family life, we have no business in education.



We have a long established leadership team, each one with their own unique perspective on what and how to teach across the primary school age range and each with a drive to research what will improve all children's life chances - and that will mean something different for each child, so has to be made possible by the approaches and strategies within our scope. Whilst each of us has our own and very different ideas about what we want to forge ahead with, we are at one and undivided in our core beliefs and values which all lead to a common understanding that a Vincentian education should be a platform from which children soar into a life of personal fulfilment.

In order to best effect our Vincentian education we have chosen to follow a "Project Based Learning" approach to delivering it because it will enable us to foster meaningful connections in the children's learning journey towards an ultimate goal. Without meaning, learning is invalidated and has no purpose. This approach differs from topic based learning or other styles of creative curriculum which have been further explored and referred to by An Jacobs, our lead partner in VLS Windekind in Vorselaar.

Our school motto 'Caritas urget nos' - to strive for excellence in everything we do, is taken on by every member of the school community and reaching out to other schools plays an important part in our school development. What we as adults learn, continue to learn, is important in keeping our curriculum relevant. We work collaboratively with local schools on moderating children's work and sharing resources; we work with schools in London and outside of London in professionally and personally developing staff. We have an established teacher training record with The Cardinal Vaughan Memorial School and we have branched out across Europe in search of finding solutions to shared challenges in providing the best educational opportunities for staff which will best impact children, hence our part in the 'Utopia' Erasmus project which our Humanities Lead brought to our attention, suggesting that this was 'just what our school is looking for'!

As a group of educationalists, traditionalists with a shared understanding that our children's paths will cross and soon and in ways that we will not be able to support them, unless we make concerted efforts to understand the communities in which they are growing up, we have focused on the one area that can and will unite them in their encounters as individuals with personal interests and ways of being - the space away from their designated rooms, outside of 'their' cyberspace and free from the pressures of expectation to be a type to fit in - from their first encounters at home with media exploitation of childhood to our traditional encounters of school - perhaps sitting in rows again post Covid19!





That space we are focusing on is simply 'outdoors'!

As a school, many of us have visited or taught in schools with limited or restricted access to the outdoors and recognise the good fortune of 15 acres of unspoilt landscape in a London school! And yet, it is difficult for staff to sacrifice time to the greater benefits of learning outside because we all revert to form when under stress - we continue doing the same things over and over because we 'know what we are doing' and to make changes disturbs us; it incites fear ... and so history will repeat itself until we begin at initial teacher training level to free teachers up to use what they are passionate about most to deliver their best lessons. As this is not yet considered a priority in our ITT system, it is imperative that we accept that many of those working in our schools who are not trained teachers are in fact often passionate about children's education too and we fall foul of providing maximum opportunity for our children to thrive if we do not expend our energies in training our support staff too. They are less fearful of making 'mistakes' because they have chosen not to place themselves with teacher responsibility. But, having supported many of them to be the best they can be we have enjoyed a significant respect for outdoor learning, most notably in the forest.

Seasoned Early Years practitioners completely understand the value of independent, exploratory, curious, accidental learning both inside and outside of the conventional classroom; the value of noticing a child's interest and facilitating their move to increased engagement with that interest; they understand the questioning that will scaffold learning and lead a child on a path of wild discovery. And that was what prompted us to go down the route of Project Based Learning across the school.

PBL is theatrically staged around a driving question which leads children to produce a range of ideas, through personal and collective research; through input from various sources - people and artifacts; placing their endeavours into a final 'production' to exemplify what they have learned along their journey. That we have seen in the form a Design and Technology piece (a wooden bird table), a dance, chocolate gifts etc. One project was set around finding a way to celebrate the school's 125 years and a prayer garden was designed by the children and created by a

professional landscape gardener. The space is now used for children to take themselves out for 'time out' when they want to be alone or with a friend to resolve an upset for example. Each journey through a project is different, but each provides evidence of belonging to a respected group giving thought to answering the one thought-provoking question and the end product is a celebration of the learning process and that all the answers will be communicated uniquely, yet understood.

Covid19 did get in the way of what was beginning to feel a successful attempt at changing how our curriculum was delivered and we are back to the starting block, but as it should be, the curriculum is a work in progress. The mental well-being of staff is important in order to provide the best for children and so, we have reverted to form - for now - and timetabled Forest School for half a day for all children in EYFS and Key Stage 1. The rest of the school use outside of the classroom courtyards as a matter of course at all times - children can be found working in the rain, under the canopies - they simply love being outside - is it because it is not what they deem to be the norm? The older children get into the forest when they can and they are ever excited by the experiences. As educators we are entertainers, to be fulfilled we need to be 'entertained' by what we enjoy and what what we have been taught to enjoy more passionately.

For me, when I see children in the outside environment, I see no boundaries around where they take themselves with physical risk, with social risk in relationships, in expressing themselves; or in spiritual and emotional risk where they can laugh and cry. There are no mistakes, no embarrassments - those are all carried away in the wind so it is easier to make use of all the senses fired up in action to keep moving forward, to keep living life to the full. Where greater to take children through their education of the world and one another than wading through the mud to get over that bridge and into the woodland ahead... where greater to take the adults, than into the worlds of children across the Europe right now on collaborative projects to seek out the cultures and diversities that will one day make Utopia.

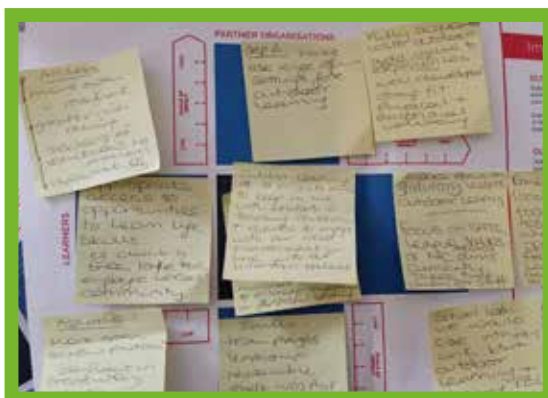
by Marie Tuohy
Headteacher
St. Vincent Catholic Primary School
London



The **IMPACT** of outdoor learning

Established school subjects such as mathematics or literacy are seldom required to justify their place in the curriculum, but outdoor learning can appear, to the people that never experienced it, to function outside the usual norms of the educational setting. Since the start of Utopia we have searched for a working definition, an answer to the question 'What is outdoor learning?' and we found an answer we were all happy with.

A much more pressing and important question that needs our attention is 'Why' we should go outside, beyond the classroom, beyond the school even, to teach? How do we justify outdoor education practice to children, parents and all people involved in education? How does outdoor learning impact learners and schools in different parts of Europe?



on learners

on project
staff

on policy

on partner
organisations

More concern,
respect and
caring for the
human and
natural world

Change of
mindset

impact on the
content of educa-
tional material
designers and
providers

Better use of
school grounds

More self-esteem,
confidence,
persistence,
teamwork,
resourcefulness

Upskilling staff to
confidently teach
outdoors

changes to
the content of
pedagogical
development in
universities

More purposefull
connections to
the community

Better
self-expression
critical thinking,
self-organization
skills, collabora-
tion skills

Adopting new
methodologies
and tools

more supportive
look on teachers
work

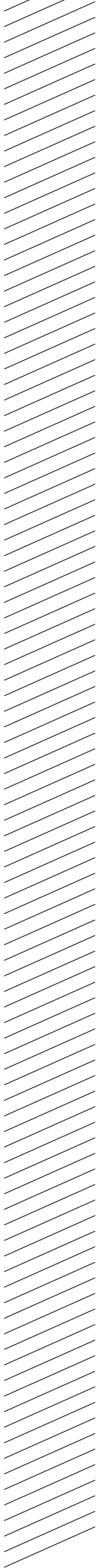
Reallocation
of funds (more
funds to outdoor
material, less to
workbooks)

A strong sense of
belonging,
of being part of
the community

Further resources
provided to staff

more funding

networks of good
practices



We used The Impact+ tool to help us think about what the impact of outdoor learning is on students, teachers, parents and schools as a whole. We also discussed how we could measure it and how we could collect data to evidence it. The Impact+ Exercise became the starting point for a long discussion about outdoor learning in all our partner schools.

We all sat around the table and talked about outdoor learning and what it meant to us in all the different countries. We started by writing down what we wanted to achieve with outdoor learning. Subsequently, all participants were given the blank version of the tool to reflect on the impact of outdoor learning on students, project staff, policy and partner organisations.

There is a considerable diversity of forms of outdoor education practice but they all seem to have a positive impact on learners.

The Impact+ Tool

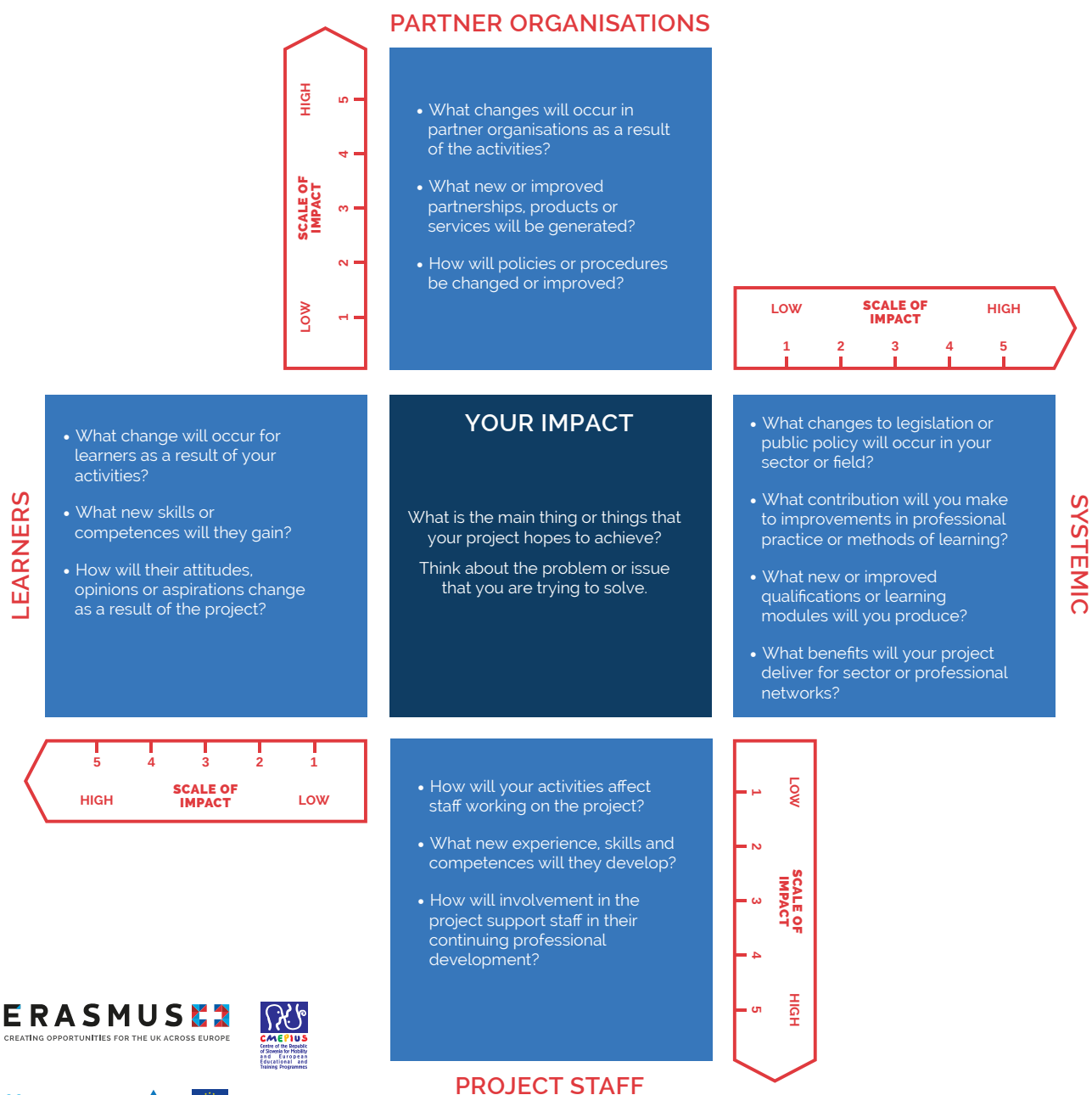
In 2016-2017 the UK NA, in partnership with the Slovenian NA and with input from several other NAs, designed a set of support materials called the Impact+ Exercise to help the projects and their partnerships to identify and evidence the impact of their activities within or outside Erasmus+. The resulting tool sets out a four stage model of measuring impact which constitutes the Impact+ Exercise.

The stages are:

1. Exploring aims, identifying outcomes and impacts
2. Exploring indicators for outcomes and impacts
3. Exploring data sources and data collection
4. Bringing it all together (impact summary).

For more info:

<https://erasmusplus.org.uk/impact-and-evaluation.html>



ERASMUS
CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE UK ACROSS EUROPE



Erasmus+

Erasmus+ is the European Union programme for education, training, youth and sport. The Erasmus+ UK National Agency is a partnership between the British Council and Ecorys UK.

Redefining Resilience Through Ecology at School



Aspects of environmental education have been introduced into school curricula across Europe over the last 30 years, cultivating wider awareness of climate change. However, this has done little to alter our trajectory. Chris Sakellaridis argues that these programmes can go further to teach young people to adapt to and mitigate climate change by increasing their resilience and sense of belonging as well as harnessing their skills for change.

You are 13 years old. For the past seven years, you have received lessons on the environment, recycling, respecting and loving nature, dirty and clean energy, a future with frequent disasters. You have made posters and artwork, written letters, sang songs, acted in school plays, cleaned your local park. You have probably gone on field trips to woodlands, farms and shelters, nature parks or other areas; listened to talks from scientists; learnt about different species and habitats. Today, in class, you are learning about CO₂ and its effect on the warming of the planet, the water cycle, and extreme weather phenomena. You know that many things are wrong with the way the world works, and teachers, parents, environmental organisations, and activists all tell you that you should do something about it.

Hopefully, all this exposure has helped you gain a lot of knowledge about “the climate”, “nature”, “the environment”, “fossil fuels”, “sustainability”, “activism”, “the planet”, and other issues. Does this mean that you feel capable and empowered to deal with the impacts of climate change? Or is this knowledge perhaps too abstract and detached from your everyday life?

For the past 20 to 30 years, school curricula in Europe and around the world have progressively adopted different forms of environmental education, including climate awareness. Various educators have successfully incorporated the Sustainable Development Goals and UN principle of teaching for sustainability into their lessons. They have also helped young people develop the four most important skills of the 21st century: creativity, critical thinking, communication, and collaboration. For all this work, they should be applauded (and rewarded).

Yet the latest IPCC evidence reports an accelerating climate emergency. Increases in the frequency and severity of torrential rains and flooding, wildfires, heavy and persistent snowfall, erosion, and desertification have made it all the more necessary to equip everyone – but especially young people – with the skills they need to face these extreme events and incremental shifts.

Added to this is the social emergency caused by harmful economic policies, extreme inequality, trade imbalances between North and South, a global pandemic, and war. Ahead of November 2021's COP26 in Glasgow, scientists warned that "our biggest challenges are not technical, but social, economic, political and behavioural."

These are the challenges education in climate and sustainability must focus on. Presently, the dominant approach to educating young people on the threats we face is to present them with facts, figures, and scientific arguments. But as the Covid-19 pandemic and vaccine hesitancy have demonstrated, people cannot be persuaded to act simply by means of scientific communication; lived experiences are central to behavioural change. Recent proposals on EU education systems by the European Commission seem to be learning these lessons; they emphasise whole-school and community-based approaches to teaching on climate change, sustainability, and the environment.

TEACHING RESILIENCE

Resilience is a fundamental 21st-century skill entailing the capacity not only to withstand and endure change or hardship, but also to survive and bounce back. But while present discourses around building resilient cities, communities, and infrastructure and institutions imagine resilient individuals who have the skills, knowledge, and emotional capacity to cope with a difficult and rapidly changing environment, the teaching of resilience itself is noticeably absent from today's education systems.

What might it look like to teach resilience? Forest schools, outdoor education activities, and traditional survivalist groups are good examples to draw from. Their pedagogy connects positive outdoor experiences with cultivating healthy social and adaptive skills. Behind this approach is the philosophy that by giving young people the opportunity to experiment, take risks, make mistakes, and socialise, they develop both skills and a sense of belonging. Such alternative models redefine success, challenging our present education systems that breed excessive stress among young people and make them more likely to disengage.

A green approach to resilience goes beyond "character building"; it teaches values and climate mitigation and adaptation. It is important to be honest with young people about our current trajectory, as well as to show them that the best way to deal with this is to work collectively and equally; to share and repair resources; to prevent pollution, destruction, and loss; and to preserve and restore natural ecosystems.

Teaching resilience from this perspective requires school curricula that are not only practical but also meaningful for everyone involved. One simple change to curricula, which would have immediate results, would be to introduce ecology as a stand-alone subject. To enable a maximum degree of localisation and school input, the scope could be kept broad yet designed to address the six processes that have the greatest impact on our climate and society: food production and distribution; water management; energy production and trans-

mission; resource extraction; industrial production and product lifecycles; and waste management.

One hour a week in primary school and two hours in secondary, along with educational visits, talks and other activities, would ground students' understanding of the climate emergency in these very real and tangible aspects of human life and how they might change. Additionally, skills such as food-growing, repairing, reusing, reducing energy and water use, and finding innovative ways to bring down our daily resource consumption could be woven into the broader curriculum at school. Teaching these processes would introduce an ecological systems-thinking approach to today's challenges. Although not test-based, ecology should nonetheless be formatively assessed, with students' skills and knowledge reviewed and reflected upon.

FACING FACTS AND SPOTTING FALSE HOPES

In Greece, the pressing need for a more ecologically minded education system to develop the skills and resilience needed for the future is clearer than ever in the context of extreme weather events, wildfires, and environmental degradation. For years, environmental education initiatives, organised by devoted teachers and parents, have been successful despite extreme challenges. However, participation remains voluntary. Recent education reforms by the Greek government have promised to remedy past failures but also to introduce a "greener" agenda in schools. Whether these will go beyond mere window dressing remains to be seen.

Fully embedding ecology within our education systems and incorporating deeper and more systemic approaches within climate and sustainability education would help cement the initiatives of the last 30 years. Crucially, such a move would also allow schools to invest more time and resources in this crucial task. With the right support and training, primary and secondary school teachers would be given the opportunity to connect different subjects and create even more engaging learning environments.

Talking to children and young people about the climate emergency and the real threats it poses should not be confused with doom-mongering. The climate debate often generates a false binary of hope versus despair. While it is certainly important to avoid creating the paralysis that comes with helplessness, false hope is an even worse road to take, leading to passivity and apathy. Facing the facts head on is important if we are going to mitigate some of the worst outcomes of a warming planet.

Helping children and young people develop their adaptability, fortitude, and thrift will empower them to approach changing circumstances with confidence, and to take appropriate action, both individually and collectively. Providing young people with a deep understanding of the ecological impacts of the systems that meet our basic human needs will also foster within them a solid sense of belonging in the world.

Highlighting our very real inter-connectedness with the life systems that support us, as well as with each other, would be a starting point for renouncing hyper-consumerism, exploitation, and excessive individualism for a truly green society.

BY Chris Sakellaridis

This article was originally published in the Green European Journal:

<https://www.greeneuropeanjournal.eu/redefining-resilience-through-ecology-at-school/>



Good Practice





