

# Nature connectedness through the arts: Co-creating a curriculum to support pupil wellbeing in primary schools



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## The importance of connecting with nature using an arts-based approach<sup>1</sup>

Connecting with nature has shown huge benefits to our mental and physical wellbeing. Learning about nature also offers deeper opportunities for pupils to become more sensitised about our impact on the planet and what we can do to support the regeneration of the earth's biodiversity. The arts provide a distinctive lens for teachers to focus on aspects of nature to develop projects to enable sustained and long-term impact on pupil wellbeing.

## The aims of our project

The project set out to understand how a group of year 5 pupils form connections with nature through the arts to support their wellbeing and how these connections supported pupils to conceptualise a nature-connected curriculum. The project also sought to understand how this work would support pupils to build their eco-capabilities.

## Research that inspired this work

The research of Walshe et al. (2022), conceptualising the notion of eco-capabilities,<sup>2</sup> inspired this research. Eco-capabilities build on the work of Amartya Sen's theory of human capabilities (Sen, 1993). This framework enabled an insight into how the participants connected

with nature using an arts-based approach and how many of the eight eco-capabilities (autonomy; bodily integrity and safety; relationality: human; relationality: nonhuman; senses and imagination; mental and emotional wellbeing; spirituality; and identity) they developed.

## Figures 1 and 2: Pupils on their nature walk which took place as a starting point for the project



## The methodological approach used to collect the data

A mosaic approach, adapted from Clark and Moss (2011), was used to incorporate creative approaches to understanding how pupils connected with nature and visualised a nature-based curriculum. The approaches ranged from a pre and post survey carried out to measure the impact of the project, and nature walks to connect with nature and to learn photography skills. Furthermore, the project incorporated a living willow sculpture as part of the legacy and focal point of the work. This enabled pupils to incorporate the skills they had developed in their design and technology lessons about natural den designs.

<sup>1</sup> Original blog post, published 9 July 2024: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/blog/nature-connectedness-through-the-arts-co-creating-a-curriculum-to-support-pupil-wellbeing-in-primary-schools>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-and-centres/curriculum-pedagogy-and-assessment/research/eco-capabilities-supporting-childrens-wellbeing-through-participatory-art-nature>

**Figure 3: Pupils working on prototypes of their natural den designs in design and technology**



### Key findings of the project

Pupils have built awareness of how connecting with nature supports their wellbeing and happiness. As part of their curriculum development, the pupils released a range of videos.

Some videos of the activities are:

- how to make a twig sculpture
- how to make a wind decoration

The project findings suggest that the skills gained from the project have long-term benefits, not just for the wider school community but also for the individual pupils beyond the study. These benefits include intrinsic understanding of personal wellbeing and how activities in the natural environment can enhance wellbeing. Furthermore, immersion in this project has supported pupils to understand how looking after the natural environment can start locally and with themselves. The project has highlighted five of the eight eco-capabilities: autonomy and individuality/identity; mental and emotional wellbeing; senses and imagination; relationality; spirituality. For example, for autonomy and individuality/identity, a feature of the project has been enabling pupils to have greater ownership of the direction of their learning and to express their personality. This will be further developed by the revised art curriculum.

Following the project, teachers have considered the impact of nature connection when designing their curriculum. This has helped teachers to see how curriculum content can connect with nature and support a creative approach to incorporate climate change and sustainability education literacies.

**Figures 4, 5 and 6: The creation of a living willow sculpture: a living legacy of our project**



### The longevity of the project

The participating cohort are now called 'nature bugs' and lead this work across the school. Some examples of disseminating the work are the nature bugs working with subject leaders to create a nature-connected curriculum so that the benefits of this approach can be fed across all areas of the curriculum, and supervising lunchtime nature activities with monthly themes to ensure the school's outdoor spaces are being used effectively to enable pupil wellbeing. Finally, the pupils have developed wider skills of communication by sharing their expertise and through work developed with their local community.

**Figure 7: The pupils exploring activities for the nature connection curriculum**



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<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bera.ac.uk/publication/nature-connectedness-through-the-arts>

### REFERENCES

- Clark, A., & Moss, P. (2011). *Listening to young children: The mosaic approach*. National Children's Bureau.
- Sen, A. (1993). Capability and well-being. In M. C. Nussbaum, & A. Sen (Eds.), *The quality of life* (pp. 30–53). Oxford University Press.
- Walshe, N., Moula, Z., & Lee, E. (2022). Eco-capabilities as a pathway to wellbeing and sustainability. *Sustainability*, 14(6), 3582.

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How do you understand Nature Connection? How might you describe or define this concept?
2. What aspects of this project can you use to develop skills with teachers to help primary pupils to connect with nature?
3. Which ideas of curriculum development within this project resonated with you?