



Becoming a green(er) teacher

Dutch Outdoor Education Day, April 11, 2017

Teachers readily and clearly identify the benefits of outdoor education and express their intention to practice it more often. However, to practice what you preach means overcoming a barrier.

At first sight, it seems teachers can cross the barrier when you provide them with ideas, materials and methods. Elaborating on the subject, it becomes clear that teachers feel a lack of **time and space** to experiment, explore and experience for themselves how outdoor education can be realized.

What if you do provide teachers with time and space? It raises **awareness** and one example generates a multitude of own ideas to use the outdoor environment in ways that strengthen the quality of education.

Outdoor education is well worth the time, because I can see how valuable it is for children's vocabulary. When language is directly linked to something you can feel and touch, words become meaningful.

Acknowledging the **importance of outdoor education** is not quite the same as knowing and recognizing how to put it into practice.



Outdoor education is unknown and exciting; both teachers and pupils are not very familiar with the concept. Teachers are therefore quite often insecure about using the outdoor environment as a teaching space.

Experience is the key to increase teachers' confidence in the outdoor arena.

In fact, the very same quality that motivates them to teach outdoors: because teaching outdoors is tangible and for real.

But how?

But how (do you organize outdoor learning)? In the research project 'The green teacher': a project aimed to explore the benefits of greening a schoolyard on children's wellbeing and functioning, and how teachers can be supported in realizing outdoor education, we asked 152 teachers in 13 primary schools (with both grey and green schoolyards) which opportunities and barriers they identified for outdoor teaching. Consequently we explored the outdoor environment with five schoolteams, in very small steps, trying out ideas. For the purpose of the Dutch Outdoor Education Day we share some of our experiences.

What do pupils think of outdoor education?



PUPILS LIKE OUTDOOR EDUCATION, BUT IT DOES NOT HAPPEN VERY OFTEN.

More than 80% of pupils, of school with both grey and green schoolyard, would like to have outdoor education, but only one third of those pupils indicates their school organizes this.

ACCORDING TO CHILDREN OUTDOOR EDUCATION IS NICE BECAUSE OUTSIDE YOU CAN ACTUALLY SEE WHAT THE TEACHER TALKS ABOUT.

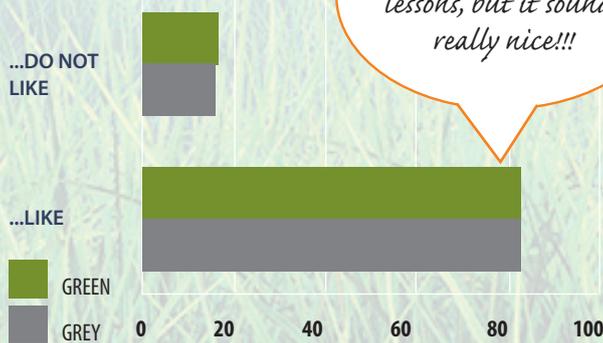
According to children outdoor education is nice, because 'you can enjoy the fresh air' and 'you don't have to sit still'. Also, there is more to experience outside, pupils think you can learn better, different and more 'real-life'. They also enjoy the feeling of freedom and the sense of adventure they experience outdoors. It makes them more alert and gives them an energy boost!

Children give the following reasons for why outdoor education is not nice. They say that if they are outside, they want to play rather than learn. Also, some pupils find it impractical and wonder for instance what will happen when it rains and how you can write things down.



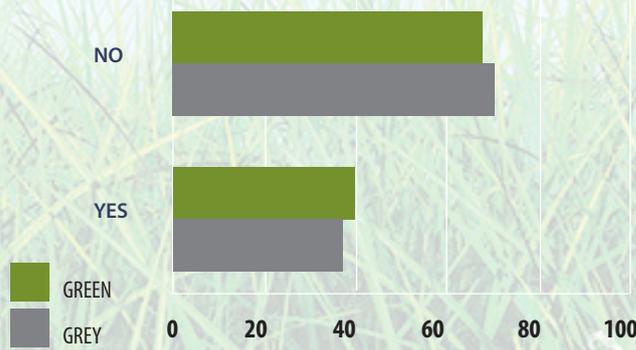
More than 60% of pupils say they never receive outdoor education

IOutdoor education



I never had outdoor lessons, but it sounds really nice!!!

Do you ever receive outdoor education?



The research project

These results are derived from the research project 'The green teacher': a project aimed to explore the benefits of greening a schoolyard on children's wellbeing and functioning, and how teachers can be supported in realizing outdoor education... 709 pupils from groups 4, 5 and 6 (aged between 7 and 10 years old, 52,5% boys) of 10 primary schools (six with a green and four with a paved schoolyard) were asked if they ever received outdoor education and whether they liked it.

Outside = the world

The ultimate goal of education lies in the world outside.

(LEARNING TO) FEEL SAFE

Find your favorite hideout, build a hut to shelter in, look for a place where you can be cross and no one will mind. Teachers say that outdoor children are able to explore: which places and settings feel safe; how you can make things safe; how to assess risks; how to conquer fear; how to push boundaries - or safeguard them; how you can (learn to) be true to yourself in various situations.



Children develop a fundamental trust in the world based on their own experiences.

Outside you can not only experience how 'living together' works, but also see how it is connected with the physical environment.

(LEARNING TO) BE INDEPENDENT

Make choices YOURSELF
Experiment YOURSELF
Confront problems YOURSELF
Resolve things YOURSELF
Be responsible YOURSELF

Outdoor space offers a more dynamic and unconstrained learning environment. Here you can escape the watchful eye of the teacher. According to teachers children are more likely to discover several aspects of themselves outside; inventiveness, resentment, fun, talents and creativity. Being responsible for 'real life' things, makes children more aware of their own place in the world.

I like outside education, because I can take care of the plants

Children like the social aspect of outdoor education: being able to see other children.

(GETTING) TO KNOW THE WORLD

Help each other, share, resolve conflicts together, dare and explore together, recognize each other's qualities, accept each other's differences and care for the environment together.

Keep things clean and tidy, mark and celebrate special occasions, form habits and traditions,

Build a brick wall, make a bench, design a garden, process a harvest, run a shop; become skillful in handling materials and tools and familiar with everyday practices.

The purpose

The ultimate goal of education is for children to develop into adults who can independently and responsibly find their place in the world.

Experiences with Outdoor Education

The nice thing about outdoor education is that you get to know another side of your pupils.

GROUPS 7 AND 8 DRAW THEIR FAVORITE PLACE AT THE SCHOOLYARD



A teacher who would like to become a green teacher, but is also slightly apprehensive because she is not sure what to expect, takes her class outside to draw their favorite place at the schoolyard. It is a conscious choice, hoping outdoor education will stimulate relaxation and creativity.

"We first discussed children's favorite places inside, then we went outside to draw at the schoolyard. I noticed the children felt at ease in the garden, they stretched out on the ground to make their drawings, well aware of which places they liked best. I also thought they were remarkably serious and concentrated making their drawings".

OUTDOOR EDUCATION IN YOUR OWN WAY

Teachers and school teams each give form to outdoor education in their own way. Outside, you can for instance:

- **perform a group task:** jumping meters together or write a story about what you see around you.
- **address a special need:** a child can clear his conscience by writing it on a piece of slate with water. When the writing has evaporated the child has had time to recapture itself which enables it to join class again.
- **use outdoor education cards:** have cards in every classroom with small tasks to do outside. Pupils can choose a card by themselves or in pairs and go outside to work on the task.

SOW, OBSERVE, CARE & HARVEST

Sowing beans with toddlers - a teacher's story: "every year this is a fascinating and exciting event. Planting the beans together with the toddlers. Then they observe, measure, draw, describe and wonder about the things they see happening."

Also in other groups teachers notice that planting a seed and observing its growth process makes a rich learning experience that creates a strong involvement. Children from a group 4 class regularly ask their teacher spontaneously if "they can take a look at their plant and measure its growth".

The weather was glorious so I decided to have lunch outside with the children. Eating outside created a calming atmosphere and group cohesion. Besides, we could address the topic of waste in the environment.

Tip

Try to think of doing something outside that you were going to do anyway, like telling a story, reading a book, eating, do a construction task or some physical exercise.

Outside, learning comes alive



OUTSIDE YOU CAN LEARN WITH YOUR WHOLE BEING

Outside you don't have to sit still for hours, you are not just listening, or reading (along) or watching (others). You are learning in a physically active way, using all your senses. How can you learn the differences between walking, strolling, skipping, slinking, sneaking up to someone and wandering? How can you learn to understand forces, speed, volumes and sizes?



Outdoor lessons are nice because it is nice to be outside and you don't just have to sit still at a desk.

Outdoor education makes learning tangible and meaningful. Experiences make it easier to remember what you learn.

You learn things better and you can see it straight away.

OUTSIDE, LEARNING COMES ALIVE

Shall we measure how much it has rained?
Can you tell by the shadows what time of day it is?
Shift a ton of sand - easy peasy, ain't it?

Teachers find that outdoor education makes learning real, visual, realistic, concrete, meaningful and tangible.



OUTSIDE YOU LEARN WHILE YOU PLAY

Children say: 'Outside you can play and learn at the same time.' Some pupils like outside lessons because you can play and learn at the same time. Others said: 'an outdoor lesson feels like playing, you don't even notice it is a lesson.'

Teachers confirm this. Outside they see opportunities to combine learning with playing. It makes a challenging and inspiring learning environment. Children are encouraged to use their imagination and creativity, which increases their involvement.

Playing and learning in education

Some teachers make a clear distinction between playing and learning.

Some teachers identify with ease what children can learn in play settings.

Some teachers feel tense about allowing play in educational settings.

In our research project teachers discover the meaningful connection between outdoor play and learning.

How the outdoor environment appeals to children

THE OUTDOOR ENVIRONMENT INSPIRES, CHALLENGES AND GIVES SPACE

The outdoor environment invites children: to move, discover, experiment, dare.

The outdoor environment tickles imagination and stimulates children to be creative.

The outdoor environment makes children more involved.

The outdoor environment gives children space to develop at their own level and pace.



The outdoor environment appeals to talents and lets talents blossom. Teachers notice that outside 'differentiating' comes naturally. It offers more variation. Children have no problem finding a way of learning suitable to their needs.

CHILDREN SAY: 'OUTSIDE LESSONS ARE NICE BECAUSE THERE IS MUCH MORE TO DO AND SEE IN NATURE THAN INDOORS'

Children declare there is more to see and do outside. They like to look outside for animals, watch nature, listen to the birds, smell flowers, plant bulbs or work in the vegetable garden.

BEING OUTSIDE GIVES A SENSE OF FREEDOM AND TRANQUILITY

Being outside does not only give a healthy energy boost. It literally provides a breath of fresh air and breathing space. Teachers mention that being outside brings relaxation and calmness, a sense of relief, freedom and movement. It enables you to clear your head and provides a space to cope with emotions.

How nice that a child who needs this can run an extra round in the schoolyard or sweep it clean.



Tip

Start inside by inviting the children to join you in an outdoor adventure.

Make them curious and prepare them.

This makes the step to outdoor education easier and more familiar.

To be continued...



'THE GREEN TEACHER'

In the research project: 'The green teacher': a project aimed to explore the benefits of greening a schoolyard on children's wellbeing and functioning, and how teachers can be supported in realizing outdoor education' we asked 13 school teams to identify chances and obstacles for outdoor education in relation to their primary goals.

In the autumn of 2017 we will publish more about chances and obstacles teachers see specifically for the use of outdoor space in language education. We will link this to a literature study 'Head, shoulders, knees and TALKS. How to give language education for young children more body'.

'The green teacher': a project aimed to explore the benefits of greening a schoolyard on children's wellbeing and functioning, and how teachers can be supported in realizing outdoor education.

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Research group Nature & Children's Development

The research group 'Nature & Children's Development' is a joint initiative of Hogeschool Leiden and Thomas More Hogeschool Rotterdam. Its aim is to anchor nature as a space for growth of children in the practices of professionals in education, child care and youth work, centering on nature in the child's immediate surroundings, directly linked to their daily life. A natural incorporation of nature into the pedagogical space of education, leading to a change in thinking: from deadlines to lifelines.