



How can curriculum-focused environmental education support young people's well-being? Research report and recommendations for practice

A Ph.D. study by Rachel Manning, University of Exeter 2017 – 2021



University of Exeter



Field Studies
Council

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This document summarises the research undertaken by Rachel Manning from 2017 to 2021 at the University of Exeter, working with the Field Studies Council. The study explored how young people experience feelings of wellbeing in curriculum-focused, residential environmental education programmes at the Field Studies Council centre in Slapton. Alongside this, it provides an insight into the ways in which curriculum-focused environmental education could be designed to support young people's wellbeing.

Introduction

Young people are being increasingly exposed to complex ways of thinking, experiences, problems, and pressures that they may not be well equipped to handle, and there is growing evidence that social pressures are seeing mental health and wellbeing issues in young people grow at an unprecedented rate. According to the United Nations [1], there is a heightening concern for young people's psychological and physical wellbeing as normal life course activities have been disrupted and restrictive guidelines stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic have hampered young people's activities and social interactions.

A growing body of research positively links human health and wellbeing with the natural environment [2,3,4]. Specifically, there is an increasing interest in outdoor learning for promoting enhanced mental, social, and physical wellbeing in young people [5,6]; a topic more pertinent than ever, given the unprecedented repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Alongside a growing interest in outdoor learning, there is a fundamental goal of improving young people's wellbeing through education and there is increasing critical consideration about the role of schools in supporting and promoting wellbeing. However, there is a necessity to develop a robust evidence base to help inform policy and decision-makers develop services that will improve young people's physical health, wellbeing, and support academic development

Connection to nature has become a prominent feature in educational theory, with environmental education acknowledged as a powerful facilitator of developing young people's connection to nature. Many students in the UK benefit from curriculum-focused environmental education (EE) (such as A-level and GCSE biology and geography fieldwork) which is provided by organisations such as the Field Studies Council (FSC). Despite this, there has been little insight into the impact of curriculum-focused residential environmental education experiences, such as science and geography field trips on the wellbeing of young people and the everyday emotions experienced within curriculum-focused based experiences of the natural environment.

The Study

This research was undertaken between 2017 and 2021 and was part of a collaboration between the University of Exeter and the Field Studies Council (FSC).

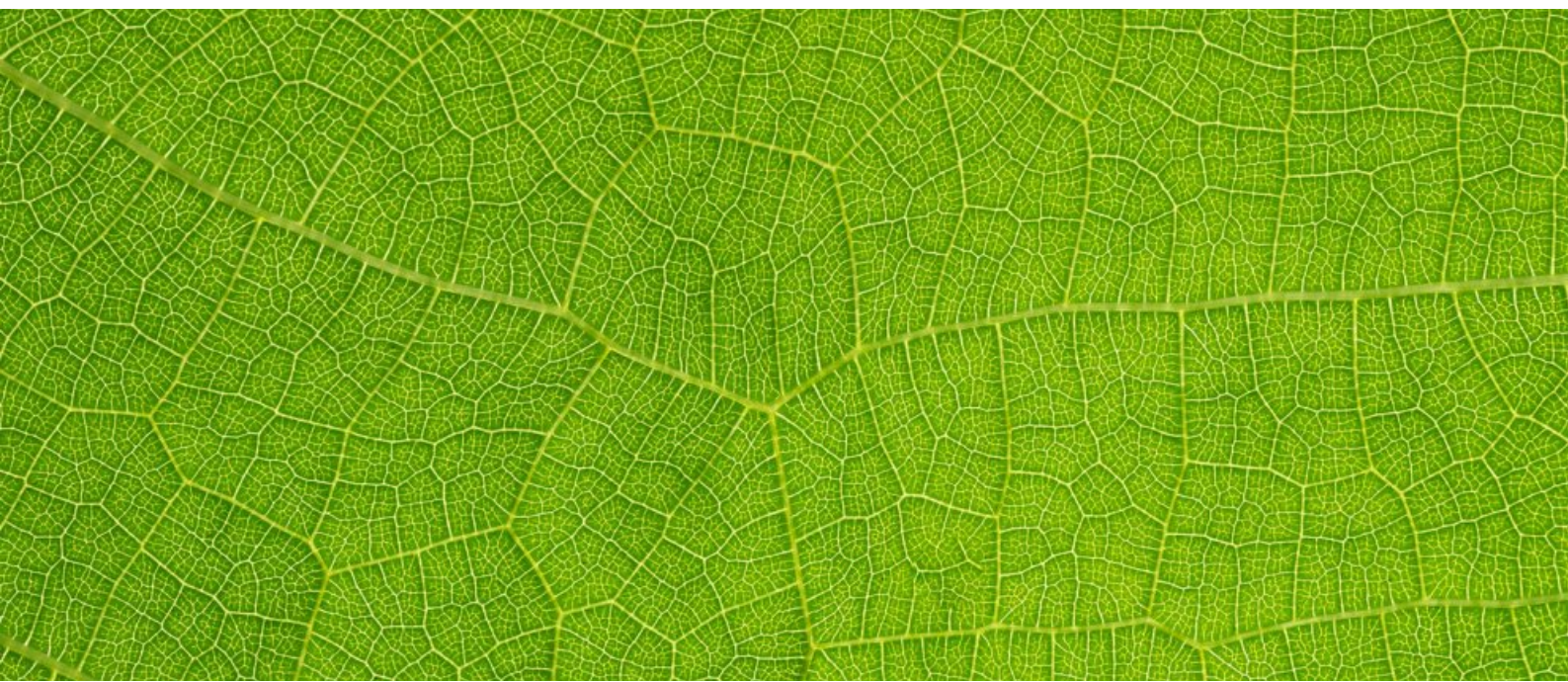
The aim of the study was to:

Develop an understanding of young people's feelings of wellbeing in curriculum-focused environmental education

The research was carried out at the FSC centre based at Slapton Ley. FSC Slapton Ley is one of twenty-nine FSC centres across the UK that provide opportunities for people to learn about, discover and explore the environment.

Methods

284 young people between the ages of fourteen and eighteen visiting Slapton Ley for between 3 and 5 nights to carry out fieldwork that is tailored to meet GCSE, A-Level and IB requirements for Biology and Geography took part in this research. They took part in pre and post trip focus groups and kept diaries throughout their time at Slapton Ley.



How does curriculum-focused environmental education impact young people's wellbeing?

This study revealed young people's wellbeing is impacted by several factors within curriculum-focused environment education. These encounters were both positive and negative, and can be grouped in to three categories: experiences of place, experiences of people, and the learning experience

1. Experiences of place

The environments and places that young people encountered during their visit to Slapton Ley played a key role in their wellbeing. This study identified the following key points:

- Young people recognised and valued the restorative potential of the natural environment.
- Some young people felt anxious, stressed, and isolated in a rural natural environment.
- Spending free time in the natural environment without any work pressures was considered by young people as having a positive impact on their wellbeing.
- Some young people felt unable to relax in the natural environment because they felt it was scary, dirty, and unfamiliar.
- The natural environment played a more positive role in supporting the wellbeing of those who are used to spending time in nature, due to feeling more comfortable in natural environments.

We went down to the beautiful beach and we spent time with friends and bought ice cream there and it was an amazing time and everyone felt peaceful and relaxed watching the sea

These kinds of places are the places you go to forget about the stress like school, but we were actually thinking about it while we were here, it was like the point, so we didn't get any feeling of relaxation from the environment

Being on the beach put me in a much better mood, I liked being outside with friends and skimming stones, I felt calm

R8 – we got a lot done, however, it was like we spent 15 minutes somewhere and then right onto the next thing and yeh R9 – it felt like we were being marched around lots R4 – yeh we didn't get time to really enjoy what we were doing really, we didn't like get time to appreciate our surroundings

When we went into the woods, I hated it because we had to walk pretty fast and I was in an environment which I wasn't comfortable in, but we were all just expected to get on with it which I hated – had to touch insects and dirt and go up and down steep hills

2. Experiences of people

This study also highlighted the impact that people within curriculum-focused environmental education have on young people's wellbeing, such as their friends and the tutors. Quality of relationships was identified by the participants as having an important role in their overall feelings of wellbeing. The key points this study identified are:

- Being able to spend time with friends and develop stronger friendships allowed young people to enjoy themselves more.
- The mood and attitude of the FSC tutors played a key role in influencing young people's wellbeing.
- The young people felt that tutors needed to be able to build a good connection with them and empathise with them to support their wellbeing and learning.
- Some young people felt nervous and anxious around people that they didn't know.
- The lack of time spent on their own and inability to reflect on the day left some young people feeling anxious.



I'm not very open about my emotions so it upset me realising how everyone else was coping but all I wanted to do was be alone

I felt really excited coming to Slapton, this feeling lasted until our first experience in a classroom when I felt like our tutor had no connection with us

I felt very tired and quite unhappy as it has been a long day but once I was in a room with my friends I had so much fun and was really happy

I think there are a lot of people who I haven't previously talked too much, but I think I probably feel more confident about talking to them now. Because we have all been staying on the same site and have been together, it made me more confident talking to other people that I previously didn't know very well

I found it quite enjoyable because all the tutors were really nice, they were good at welcoming us when we arrived and it made me feel safe and secure whilst I was staying here

3. Learning experiences

This study revealed that feelings of wellbeing were influenced by the young people's own value and motivations they place on the trip, and whether these values were met. How the trip was structured, and the learning outcomes were important to the participants. The key points identified are:

- Feelings of achievement in relation to their academic needs were important to young people.
- Long learning days left young people feeling tired, anxious, and stressed because they were unable to concentrate fully on their work.
- Learning outside, for some young people was enjoyable.
- Young people felt they could remember information better when they learnt it outside in a real-world setting.
- Feelings of challenge, both mentally and physically, helped young people feel a sense of accomplishment and achievement.
- If the learning wasn't relevant to their learning needs, young people felt annoyed, stressed, and anxious that they were wasting their time.
- Some young people felt stressed learning outside if they couldn't hear the tutor or were distracted by the environment.
- Similarly, they found it stressful and conflicting learning outside when they wanted to explore the area more but felt they had to focus on their learning.

I felt kind of unhappy, like just knowing you couldn't go back and just relax after you have done loads of hard work. You had to go straight back into work again, again and again. It would have been nice to have more of a rest

You feel a sense of accomplishment that you have gone out and done it all yourself and you have been independent

I just want to get a good NEA to be honest, I have come all this way to do it so it would be pointless wasting with anything else, so get as much data and evidence in terms of what I need"

When you are sitting by the waves and all you can hear is just the waves instead of the actual tutor and then talking about the information that we have just learned and I feel like I am clueless because I don't know what they are talking about and you just miss information that is important and that's annoying

I do agree that the work is too long, but the work isn't hard and like counting plants is like a form of meditation because your brain is so switched off

The challenging nature of balancing multiple perspectives of curriculum-focused environmental education

This research has identified the value of embracing a learner-focused approach to curriculum-focused environmental education that focused on the agency and autonomy of learners within educational experiences in the outdoors, and a deeper understanding of young people's values and motivations for engaging with environmental education. It highlights the need for a richer engagement with young people's differing social and cultural contexts to understand the way nature is experienced by different groups (both positively and negatively) and how this can be addressed within environmental education.

Several young people expressed a need for a structured, cognitive-based approach to learning to support their wellbeing, whilst others viewed environmental education as an opportunity for experiencing the natural world and developing a connection with nature and others. Many of the young people consistently spoke about the conflict which arose from having to do work whilst in natural environments, and the negative impact this had on their wellbeing. Young people mostly view the natural environment as a space for providing an opportunity for restoration, relaxation, and developing social bonds. However, for experiences of the natural environment to be beneficial for young people's wellbeing it is important for experiences of the natural environment to be in line with young people's different social and cultural values.

This research also highlights how not only researchers and policymakers struggle to define and understand the purpose of environmental education, but also the learners themselves. Curriculum-focused environmental education approaches which seek to support the wellbeing of young people should nurture approaches which can balance their academic aspirations with their need for free time to experience nature in an unstructured manner.

Recommendations for practice

Based on the participants' discussions, this research identified four key recommendations for supporting the wellbeing of young people within curriculum-focused environmental education.

1. Incorporate unstructured, free time into curriculum-focused environmental education

This research highlights the need to incorporate unstructured free time, away from learning activities, into curriculum-focused environmental education. This time provides young people with the opportunity to experience their surroundings in ways that are important and meaningful to them. This includes escaping the stresses of their workload, which offers the opportunity to utilise the potential restorative benefits of the natural environment, helping promote their agency and autonomy.

The reliance on nature-based experiences for promoting restoration and wellbeing within environmental education needs careful consideration, alongside an understanding of young people's differing perceptions of what equates to a restorative environment is also required. There needs to be further consideration of the workload that is suitable for young people across a residential field trip to allow them to learn effectively and gain positive experiences from their surroundings.



2. Understand and accommodate learners' needs and motivations

Achievement-based emotions that occur within curriculum-focused environmental education programmes – such as hope for success, or anxiety about failure – must be understood. Only then can relevant learning experiences that support young people's wellbeing be conceived. A dynamic approach where staff and tutors are equipped with the knowledge and skills to recognise the varying needs of young people is needed to support the wellbeing of young people

This research revealed that for young people, personal meaning within their learning is important for supporting their feelings of wellbeing. Within curriculum-focused environmental education, young people feel more positive, confident, and interested in their learning when the content and activities are meaningful and relevant to them and their curriculum needs. When there is a lack of personal meaning to learning, young people can feel bored, frustrated, and anxious about failure.



Learning was considered meaning to the young people if they were able to align and connect it to their own values and lives, alongside the needs of the curriculum. Curriculum-focused environmental education offers a unique opportunity for young people to develop a connection to their learning in a real-world setting. However, in educational settings where there is a strong focus on assessment, with little time and space for reflection, personal growth and meaning-making young people can struggle to find a connection to their learning. Subsequently, this research has highlighted that curriculum-focused environmental education should make space for young people to explore what they value and find meaningful in the learning and ways to connect these meanings and values to the curriculum, going beyond knowledge transfer to inspire positivity and confidence.

Key points:

- Where possible practitioners in curriculum-focused environmental education should discuss the values that the learning group holds to understand what gives meaning to their learning in the setting of environmental education
- Content and activities within curriculum-focused environmental education, where possible, should be framed around what young people value, to help them find meaning and engage with their learning on a deeper, more personal level
- Curriculum-focused environmental education should encourage learning that connects young people to the topic through group discussions, avoiding simple knowledge transfer where young people are simply taking on knowledge in a passive way
- Curriculum-focused environmental education needs to help young people connect the curriculum to their lives to create space for personal growth

3. Provide space for challenging young people, where there is time and space for reflection

Young people can gain a sense of achievement and accomplishment from overcoming challenging experiences within curriculum-focused environmental education. However, it is important to understand young people's differing perceptions of 'challenge'. A one size fits all approach to a 'challenging experience' is not always appropriate, what is a transformative challenge to one young person, may be too much to handle for another.

Tutors and outdoor practitioners play a key part in supporting young people to overcome challenges in outdoor learning; be it tutors suitably facilitating their learning or providing emotional support. Opportunities that foster feelings of challenge promote wellbeing, but must be facilitated by tutors that are able to support young people in feeling safe when they feel challenged. This is achieved by supporting them in feeling settled in new environments and allowing them time for reflection on their experiences. Young people stated that when experiences were challenging, time to reflect increased feelings of transformation and wellbeing.

4. Promote and focus on staff wellbeing and training to maximise the support of young people

Staff that actively engage with young people in educational environments are now facing the challenge of having to support young people's learning as well as their wellbeing. It is therefore important that staff feel supported and confident in doing so. It is striking that young people were able to recognise unmotivated and disengaged staff, and this had knock-on effects on their own wellbeing.

It is hard to motivate wellbeing in others if staff feel burnt out and tired themselves. Curriculum-focused environmental education providers must not neglect the wellbeing of the staff tasked with supporting young people. Education providers must focus on the wellbeing of staff, and ensure they have the appropriate skills, knowledge, and training to facilitate strategies to support young people.



Conclusions

This research identifies the value of embracing a learner-focused approach, which focuses on the autonomy of young people for the development of wellbeing in curriculum-focused environmental education. A conflict of interest for extending these practices into curriculum-focused outdoor experiences exists, stemming from the competing and multiple demands of environmental education. It is important to recognise that this is also an issue that stems from traditional schooling approaches and the increased pressures that young people face within schooling.

By valuing young people's voices, this research helps illuminate the pathways through which their experiences can contribute to their wellbeing. With a recent focus on the wellbeing of young people, this study provides an important exploration of how they experience curriculum-focused environmental education and provides a set of initial recommendations. Based on the recommendations, this research can help inform the design and delivery of future curriculum-focused environmental education programs to support educational outcomes and wellbeing.



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