

# Nature-based learning in urban international settings

Clair Watson gives us insight into a number of various urban settings across the globe who have adopted different types of nature pedagogy. Clair has worked with nurseries, schools, government entities and NGO's to raise the standards of early years provision internationally. She is an advocate of nature play and connecting children with nature, especially for urban based children.



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## Background

Nature-based learning is on the rise as educators and parents increasingly recognise the importance of young children spending time outdoors, connected with nature and unplugged from their technological devices. This has become even more apparent since the Covid-19 pandemic, where many children and families have spent extensive time in lockdown and confined to indoor paces, for some children this equates to more than half of their lifetime.

## What is nature-based learning?

Nature-based early years education is an umbrella term combining early childhood education and environmental education, (Larimore, 2011). This eclectic mix exposes children to extensive daily time spent outdoors in a natural environment, traditionally in a forest, woodland, or natural space with trees. Nature pedagogy is used to describe '...the practice of teaching alongside nature and the learner' (Cree and Robb, 2021, p 42). It supports a play-based approach

whereby learners are immersed in, learn about and alongside nature. The time spent in nature varies with some children spending as much as 75-100 per cent of their time outdoors only retreating to makeshift shelters and huts during adverse weather conditions.

## Brief history

Nature-based education in the early years is not a new idea and various theorists, such as, Froebel, Montessori and the MacMillan sisters advocated nature-based learning, and playing in nature. Nordic children, notably the Swedes, have been learning in the outdoors for over 100 years. In Denmark, *naturbørnehavens* or forest schools were first established in the 1950's by Ella Flautau and her neighbours. Due to a lack of space for early childhood education centres they had to look for alternative solutions and started meeting in the nearby forests. This idea took off and *naturbørnehavens* started popping up all over the country. In 1993 a group of visiting practitioners from Bridgewater, UK observed the Danish





practice, took the concept to the UK and began establishing forest schools and communities.

## The benefits

Being in nature emanates a natural calmness and supports a positive sense of wellbeing away from the busyness of modern life. Without the restraints of school routines and classroom walls children are free to explore, discover, and connect with their natural environment, developing an awareness of eco literacy and understanding why and how to respect our fragile planet.

Learning in nature provides a myriad of possibilities to discover, imagine, create, observe, question, and hypothesise, fostering all areas of child development and wellbeing. Collaborating and working in partnership with others enables children to take calculated risk, problem-solve and find solutions when faced with challenges, building strong social skills and teamwork.

## International programmes

Nature-based education programmes such as forest schools, beach schools, outdoor nurseries, nature-based pre-schools and bush kinders have been increasing worldwide. Each country's programme has similar core beliefs and common threads but differ in their delivery as they weave their programmes into their curriculum, making adaptations to suit their individual environmental and cultural needs.

Nature-based pre-schools can now be found all over the United States and Canada, where many children attending mainstream pre-schools have daily access to natural

woodlands. There are three spaces often described as the inside, outside and beyond that ideally merge into each other. The *inside* being the pre-school building, *outside* being the space for outside play and the *beyond* being the forest or woodland that's connected to the pre-school facility (Larimore, 2015).

Australia's bush kinder programme is based on the philosophies of forest school with its own unique twist. *Bush* is the natural physical space and the adjective *kinder* is the shortened form of kindergarten. Bush kinder programmes have evolved and include beach kinder programmes for settings located near or on the beach. These programmes enable children to regularly spend a small part of their early years programme in the bush or at the beach.

Other countries such as, New Zealand have developed 'enviroschools' which tend to be deeply connected to Māori values. Japan has developed the *Mori-no-ie* or *Mori-no-youchien* forest programme which is gaining momentum.

## International urban environments

The global population living in cities, is projected to '... increase to almost 60 per cent in 2070...' (UN Habitat, 2022, p69), therefore, it is essential we connect urban based children with the natural world, but how? Several international settings are working hard to find solutions, using ideas and experience from different countries to create their own nature-based learning programmes.

## Nature day – Nairobi, Kenya

It can easily be presumed children living in Kenya have wildlife and nature on their doorstep. This may be true for some children, but not for those living in the city of Nairobi. The team at Braeburn School, Gitanga Road started seriously thinking about how they could provide nature learning opportunities for their city-based children. The teachers decided to create a monthly nature day excursion to the nearby Ngong forest. The initiative was an instant hit with the staff and children.

Each class has a designated Kenya Wildlife Forest warden who eagerly awaits the children's visits, greeting them at the gate, accompanying them into the forest and providing invaluable local knowledge. Every visit follows the same trail giving the children familiarisation and the opportunity to make observations of the changing forest. Teachers plan a focused intention for each visit, such as, looking at different types of tree bark or bird identification, however, there is always flexibility depending on what happens in the forest on the day.

Everyone looks forward to the monthly trips, staff feel less pressured, the pace slows down, learning takes place over and beyond the focused learning intention. The children are notably calmer, behavioural issues disappear, children become mesmerised and curious in what they see, hear and smell. Parents are generally supportive, with some going on additional family visits to the forest and one family has even taken up camping as a result! These monthly sessions have been so successful that all the children in the foundation unit now visit the forest along with one of their sister schools.



## Forest schools – Dubai, United Arab Emirates

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has limited natural greenery due to its desert climate, and for six months of the year temperatures reach 46 degrees celsius combined with periods of very high humidity. This hasn't stopped Sunmarke School in Dubai from developing and implementing Forest School type programmes.

The early years staff were passionate about project led planning and for the children to experience 'real' outdoor learning; they began by taking classes of children to a clump of trees opposite the school to give them space and contact with nature, very quickly other classes wanted to join in. This experience was so well received the same clump of unloved trees is now the grounds for the school's forest school programme. Every child in early years visits the 'forest' weekly, and it is defiantly the highlight of the children's week!

One of the pioneering teachers is now the school's forest school leader who strongly believes in child-led learning encouraging them to explore and discover. Learning is enhanced by offering additional resources and suggested experiences; a range of different types of tea are frequently brewed in the mud kitchen using mint and other herbs grown in the school's hydroponic systems and children dig for natural hidden treasures and relax under the trees as they enjoy their home-made flower petal foot spa!

The children are given boundaries, taught to respect the environment and how to stay safe, they are also encouraged to take appropriate levels of risk, climbing trees, using rope ladders, and balancing on planks to develop essential core muscle strength and coordination. The children are introduced to other key skills and can be seen persistently whittling carrots with peelers before later moving on to using knives to carve into wood.

Wildlife is dominated by ants and beetles, they're everywhere! The children are always interested to observe them travelling up and down trees and across the sand carrying their loads. They have had to work hard to encourage birds, caterpillars, and other insects by adding bird feeders, bug hotels and log piles. This in turn sparks creativity and imagination as children initiate ideas, such as building a new bug hotel and working as a team to move large logs into place.

The best part of forest school is when the water sprinklers come on and the mud arrives! The only issue is getting the children back into class!

## Forest-beach school – Hong Kong, China

Hong Kong comprises of more than 250 islands with a rich biodiversity, large areas are allocated to natural country parks, protected areas and marine parks. However, most of the inhabitants live in apartments in the busy city centres with only some families preferring the outer lying islands in favour of space and quiet.

Despite the treasure trove of natural spaces and wildlife many children have limited or no exposure and connection with nature. The early years team at Malvern College recognised this and took up the challenge to find a way to connect their children with nature on a regular basis.

The school acquired a couple of sites and set about creating a forest-beach school programme that supports the forest-beach school ethos of a holistic, integrated approach enabling the children to connect to and understand the natural environment. The children lead their own learning through curiosity, discovery, and interest, and can be seen constructing sandcastles and waterways, playing with natural materials, hammering nails into wood, and observing the various critters scuttling along the beach and in the forest.

The programme is guided by a level 3 certified forest-beach school leader who carefully supports the children to take appropriate levels of risk, how to handle tools safely and even introducing them to fire. Parents are invited to support and share the children's experiences and build an understanding of the need to benefits of connecting with nature and an empathy for their unique natural environment.

This initiative has sparked other settings in Hong Kong to follow in their footsteps.

## Final word

Nature-based learning can take place anywhere and if there isn't natural nature close by it can be created, as one school in India demonstrated by planting their own forest! Connecting children with nature is on the rise and needs to continue until every child has the opportunity to see, hear, smell and feel nature.

'No one will protect what they don't care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced.' Sir David Attenborough. **eye**



## References

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