

Our big outdoor classroom

esprit
SCHOLEN

Take your class into nature!



Close to AICS



Close to De Eilanden

Voor
Nederlands:
zie
achterkant

Learning
without
boundaries
A shared project

Experiences and tips
of Esprit Teachers
2025



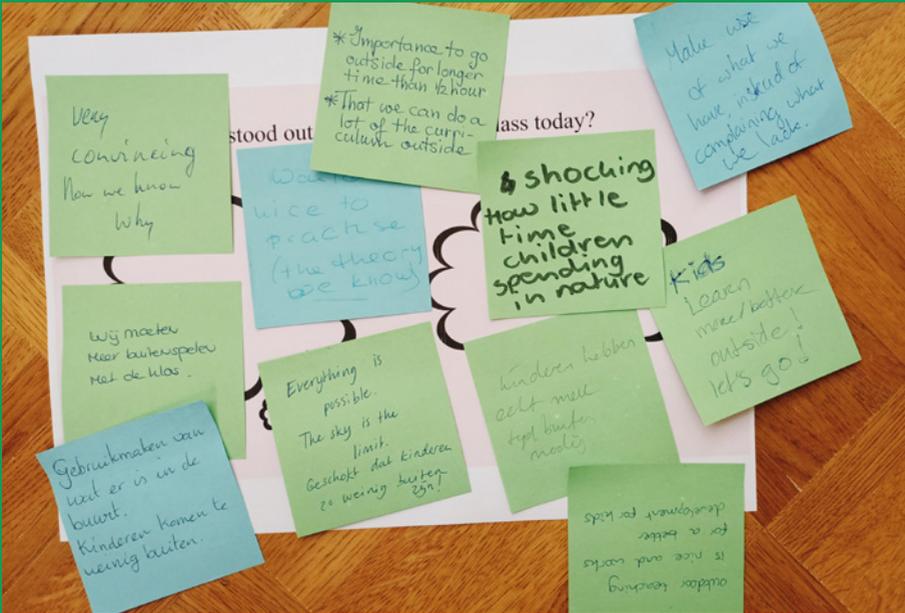
Close to WSV



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Outdoor learning: only advantages!

1. Foreword



Pedagogy for sustainability and outdoor education

Education for sustainability and learning in, from, and with nature are inextricably linked. At Esprit Scholen, we are committed to sustainability and are strong advocates of pedagogies that foster a connection with nature.

Aurélia is an expert in this field, along with the many teachers she has guided. By focusing on nature connection, your students gain an additional teacher: nature itself. Numerous studies show that outdoor education has a positive impact on the well-being of both teachers and students, offering mental, social, and physical benefits.

Moreover, outdoor education leads to more pro-environmental behaviour and improved cognitive performance. Nothing but advantages!



Marlise Achterbergh
Sustainability Coordinator
Esprit Scholen

2. Learning without walls



In conversation with Aurélia Chevreul-Gaud,
Outdoor Learning Specialist

Aurélia Chevreul-Gaud
Outdoor Learning
Specialist



What is Outdoor learning?

Outdoor learning takes the school curriculum into the open air. To fully benefit, it is experiential, rooted in local natural spaces, really regular and designed to deepen connections with the living world. Humans and nature are too often seen as separate. In reality, we are an integral part of the living world. Teaching outdoors allows us to collaborate with nature as both a source and a model for learning. This approach not only enriches education but also nurtures health, well-being, and a sense of environmental responsibility.

Where to start?

It begins with curiosity and small steps. We start this journey with our favorite lesson, our hobby, or something that sparks joy – and we try it outside! Once there, we observe our students, ensure safety, and reflect together on the experience. Establishing routines always takes a bit of time, but the rewards are immense and long-lasting. Over time, outdoor learning strengthens the connections between teachers, students, and nature.

What's the heart behind this booklet?

I witness the remarkable evolution of the teachers I work with over the years, as well as the transformation in how our students connect with the living world. Experiencing this shift first hand brings me immense joy! Amsterdam and the Netherlands offer countless opportunities for outdoor learning, with accessible and intriguing natural patches to explore. So the foundation is there, and I have no doubt that the stories and reflections shared by teachers in this booklet will inspire even more teachers to take the leap and embrace outdoor learning. Enjoy the ride!



Close to De Verwondering

3. Thriving outdoors



Boosts school outcomes

The benefits of outdoor learning for our students and their generation are vast. It significantly enhances school outcomes, benefiting both the learner and the learning context. Outdoor learning is essential for the development of executive functions such as working memory, attention control, and cognitive flexibility. It enables students to engage with all their senses, subtly stimulated by a rich and unpredictable environment. This approach improves learning retention, expands transferable skills, and strengthens cognitive connections, amongst many other things.

Crucial for health and well-being

In times of physical inactivity and sensory scarcity, it supports stamina, core strength, and agility. Experiencing natural surroundings helps restore comfort zones and develops resilience. It stimulates the immune system and serves as an invaluable resource for building emotional and mental health. It fosters a sense of belonging and strengthens community bonds.

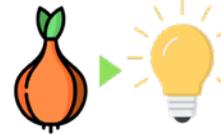
‘No one will protect what they don’t care about; and no one will care about what they have never experienced.’

Sir David Attenborough

Fundamental for environmental education

If we want our students to learn to protect nature, they must first feel connected to it. Studies show that breaking down the barriers between indoor and outdoor classrooms – and thus between children’s indoor and outdoor lives – leads to lasting and spontaneous pro-environmental stewardship. By connecting students with the living world, both human and non-human, outdoor learning nurtures a lifelong commitment to protecting our planet.

Outdoor Learning



Boosts school outcomes



Crucial for health and well-being



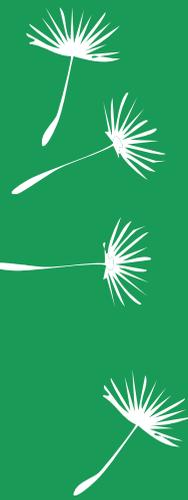
Fundamental for environmental education



‘I used to think that outdoor learning was another learning setting, rich in learning opportunities and provocation. Now I think that Outdoor learning holds an important place in the integrity of teaching.’

Patricia Marti Bedos, Group 2 Teacher

4. 10 tips for starting your outdoor journey



1 Dress for the weather

Send regular reminders to students, parents, and caregivers about appropriate clothing for outdoor activities.

2 Start with the playground

For your very first times, use it as a transitional space to establish outdoor agreements and routines. Then select the natural area closest to your school.

3 Give positive instructions

Frame your guidance around what is allowed and the flexibility available, rather than focusing on prohibitions. For example: 'We can do this as long as...'

4 Rain is inevitable – embrace it!

Check the weather forecast, prepare accordingly, and adapt. Rainy days can be some of the most memorable.

5 Observe your students

Pay attention to the changes outdoor learning creates in their behavior and their words – it's inspiring!

6 Be a role model, get familiar with your outdoor classroom

Build your own confidence by visiting your outdoor classroom regularly, in all seasons, being aware of the living things there and nurturing your own nature connection.

7 Find your style

Are you a meticulous planner, a spontaneous adventurer, or somewhere in between? Feel free to do what works for you, there is no right or wrong.

8 Start with learning IN nature

Begin by taking your usual lessons outside. For example, read a book under a tree.

9 Incorporate learning ABOUT nature

Every outdoor lesson naturally includes elements of nature education, but primary curriculums also offer many opportunities to focus on it directly.

10 Aim for learning WITH nature

Use nature to actively explore curriculum topics – for instance, experimenting with shadows to teach about light – opening the door to a profound, multidimensional understanding that sparks deep reflection.

Finally, have fun exploring stories and tips shared in this booklet, and make use of the additional resources at the end to support your journey outside!



5. Outdoor learning in early years



At ease in nature!

In the early years, we focus on fostering free and sensory play to spark curiosity and connection with the natural world. By taking time for shared reflection – observing, asking questions, and sharing discoveries – we help children grow their awareness and appreciation of outdoor spaces. Establishing a simple yet regular outdoor routine allows us to build a strong foundation for their learning journey, nurturing confidence and joy in exploring the world around them.



‘Start with low expectations: when you are outdoors, you are already doing the best for your children.’

Claire Doyle
Group 2 Teacher

Group 1 working as a team and building a den/tent together.

‘One of my students struggled with literacy and maths and started feeling insecure in class. When we went outside, I realised that this is where she thrived. She came up with beautiful creations. Realising this, enjoying the activities and having others admire her work, gave her a true boost of confidence.’

Hanna Streng, Group 2 Teacher

‘With a new class, I always practice my routine inside before our first outdoor lesson, so expectations are set.’

Hanna Streng
Group 2 Teacher

Group 3, shrinking and looking for a proper habitat during their tiny hike.



'My greatest success was making faces on trees with clay. This was a wonderful activity proposed by Aurélia and well connected to our learning. Students were all very active, collecting materials, decorating faces they made and at the end of course wanted to take a picture of their work and some wanted more time. Their focused engagement was the most memorable sign.'

Anja Podpečan, Group 3 Teacher

'We put outdoor learning in the weekly schedule, so it's always there and gives you a reminder before planning.'

Anja Podpečan
Group 3 Teacher

Group 1, checking if the park was also covered with snow and experiencing the fancy 'crack' under their feet.



'First Outdoor lesson of the year: choose 3 things I can smell, 2 things I can see, something I can hear. Take the time to choose!'

Eliza Johns, Group 3 Teacher and Year Level Leader



Group 3, getting prepared to celebrate their ancestors according to the Celtic tradition.

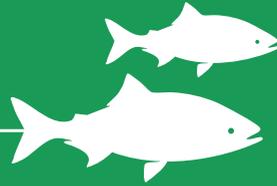
Group 3, portrait of a tree friend.



'Nature element hunt is one of my favourites: kids learn so many things by collecting and exploring different items in different seasons.'

Veronica Garces
Group 1 Teacher

6. Outdoor learning in middle years



Aware of nature

In the middle years, we focus on fostering deeper connections between what we learn inside and from the living world. We encourage students to engage with nature through hands-on, practical experiences.

By working together on outdoor projects, they develop collaboration skills and a sense of responsibility, making decisions and reflecting on their actions. They grow more aware of their surroundings and of the interconnectedness between humans, and non-human living things. It is essential that students establish their personal connection with nature.

Group 4, studying the creatures of the pond, with whom we share an essential source of life: water.



'It's great to get inspiration from outdoor specialists and see the reward of outdoor learning. When inspired, you inspire others.'

Dirk Smith
Group 5 Teacher

'Outdoor learning is so valuable for my students, they really enjoy it and this is what they need!'

Tanja König, Group 4 Teacher

Try the
Chesnut
Meditation:



Group 5, modeling a town in order to move it in a smaller space and wondering about the consequences of density.



‘First outdoor lesson of the year: walking, discovering our outdoor classroom and talking of expectations!
What do we notice with our senses?
What can we do to feel safe outdoors?
What are our roles and responsibilities?
It is also a link to our kick-off unit on wellbeing.’

Toni Sexton, Group 4 Teacher and Year Level Leader



‘Ensure proper clothing: a rain jacket is essential! It’s fine if they get dirty, and consider asking for extra socks in their backpacks.’

Dirk Smith
Group 5 Teacher

Group 5, lighting the fire with a flint, inquiring into energy.



Group 4, landscape decoding.

‘Put it in your timetable and try it!’

Toni Sexton
Group 4 Teacher and
Year Level Leader

‘I remember we accompanied a child with neurodiversity outside. He had difficulties behaving well in class to follow instructions. Once he had the freedom to move around outside, everything fell into place.’

Dirk Smith, Group 5 Teacher



Group 4, discovering their outdoor classroom for the first time.

7. Outdoor learning in upper years

A shared pulse with nature

In the upper years, we view the living world as an essential learning environment, where nature becomes both a resource for knowledge and an emotional anchor. Students deepen their understanding of their unique connection to the natural world. They find solace, inspiration, and creativity in it. They also understand how to assess and manage risks, building confidence and critical decision-making skills. Through reflection, exploration, and teamwork, students grow into mindful individuals, better equipped to navigate the complexities of the natural and social worlds.

'When they go outside, it is good to ask the kids to explain to their parents an activity they did.'

Carla Kuys
Group 6 Teacher



Group 6, mapping in 3D indispensable sources to settle and survive.



Group 2 and Group 7, involved in the Outdoor Buddy project, student led and initiated by Olimpia Brzozowski and Claire Doyle.

'A good tip is to pair up with other teachers and share their experience to feel confident.'

David Lee
Group 7 Teacher



Group 7, embarking on a scientific expedition to explore a planet with a new, authentic look.

My greatest success in teaching outdoors has been witnessing my students engaged and motivated while working together. They collaborate naturally, solving problems and helping each other. Through outdoor exploration, I've seen creativity and teamwork flourish. Watching them connect with nature and each other while building confidence has been rewarding.

Karen Costigan, Group 6 Teacher and Year Level Leader



'Ignore the weather! Dress appropriately, embrace the elements, and share the joy of being outdoors!'

Karen Costigan
Group 6 Teacher and
Year Level Leader

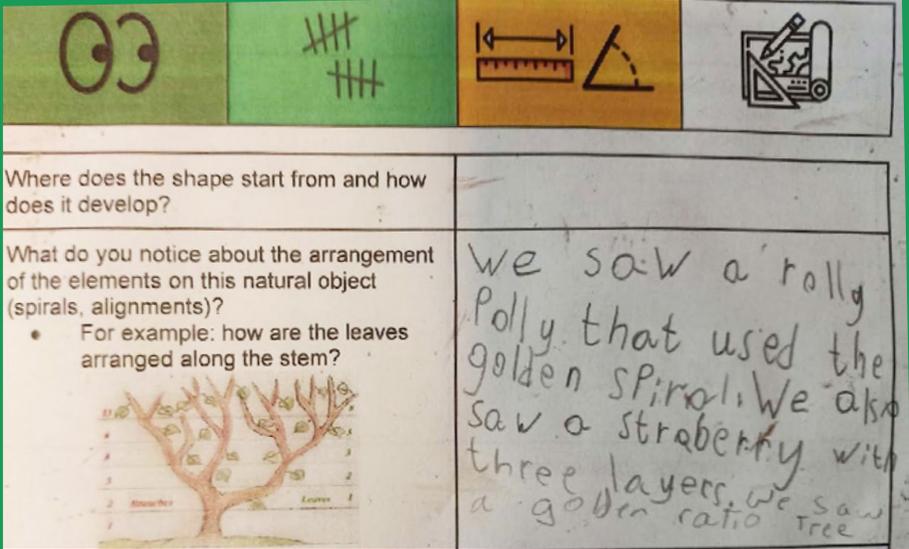
'Do bird watching, the kids love it!'

Carla Kuys
Group 6 Teacher

Group 6 crafting their respiratory system using plants – the very organisms with which we exchange the air we breathe.

'One of the greatest successes of teaching outdoors is witnessing a student transform in ways you've never seen before, simply due to a change in their environment. For example, one of my students, who typically displayed a lack of initiative and maturity in the classroom, became enthusiastic, engaged, and started taking more initiative during outdoor activities. I've personally observed how learning outdoors positively impacts students' behavior and commitment.'

David Lee, Group 7 Teacher



Group 6, inquiry into geometry and harmony in nature.

Group 7 migrating like geese, reflecting on human and non-human migration challenges and needs.



'It is important to get them outside from the start of the year.'

Carla Kuys
Group 6 Teacher



8. Resources & support



Are you eager to teach in your big outdoor classroom?

Just do it!

Find here
where to start:



Close to Spring High

