RJ Working: The Health & Wellbeing Case for Environment and Nature Education

Introduction

Mental health and wellbeing are deteriorating in children and young people across the UK [1, 2]. Young people with poor mental health and wellbeing, particularly from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, are at higher risk of serious physical illnesses in later life [3,4].
Time in green spaces can lower stress [5], improve emotional and behavioural disorders [6] and overall wellbeing in children [7]. However, UK children are some of the most disconnected from nature in the world [8]. Time in nature also increases awareness of and connection to the natural world, encouraging pro-environmental behaviours in children as they grow up [9]. This is important, as individuals living in disadvantaged areas are and will continue to be disproportionately affected by the negative impacts of climate change (www.lcat.uk) and because today's children are key stakeholders in the future protection and restoration of nature [10].

Children exploring their relationship with nature

Social and emotional learning (SEL) methods and models are widespread ways of improving the mental health and wellbeing of children in schools [11]. They focus on equipping children with essential self-awareness, self-regulation rituals and positive relationships [12].
RJ Working, a Cornwall-based charity, has developed a programme titled The Restorative Green Ripple Effect. The programme aims to support improved mental health and wellbeing in participating children. It is designed to achieve this through combining 1) the positive benefits of spending time in nature with 2) a type of SEL model, termed Restorative Practice. This synthesis is intended to equip children (especially those from underprivileged backgrounds) with social-emotional skills to improve their understanding of themselves and their peers; while strengthening their relationship with nature and motivation to protect and restore the natural environment.

Case Study

Impact evaluation of '**The Restorative Green Ripple Effect**', an intensive programme using Restorative Practice with school children in Camborne (research funded by Cornwall Council).

Camborne has three areas in the 10% most disadvantaged nationally (IMD) and a fourth close to this [13]. Rosemellin School, based in Camborne, works with resultant complexity, and feeds into a secondary school with the highest rate of exclusions in the South West [14], so successful transition is a vitally important process. This programme is designed to contribute to the needed peer group culture of care.

Forty-four children (aged 9-10) participated in the Green Ripple Effect Programme in October 2025. Of these, 41% had pupil premium status, 13% had English as an additional language and the gender balance was 52% girls, 48% boys.

Six groups (7/8 participants) worked in circles to enable every voice to be heard, co-creating learning. They completed nature-based activities with two trained Restorative facilitators for 1.5 hours a day. Activities included mindfulness and sensory experiences, e.g. spending five minutes in silence noticing sounds. Restorative language and principles taught oracy; inter-peer relationships strengthened through props and prompts for talking about feelings.

Examples of projects created by participating children

To self-report their experience, participants completed survey questions, both quantifiable yes/no and open-ended. Secondly, children were asked open-ended questions to trigger reflections captured on a voice recorder during activities. To gain deeper insight into survey answers,18 children (diverse in gender and personality) provided accounts through 1:1 semi-structured interviews. To triangulate responses, the participating Teaching Assistant completed a survey at key points and session facilitators completed surveys after each of the 18 group sessions.

Key Findings

Inductive thematic analysis of semi-structured interview/session answers revealed two overarching thematic benefits of the Green Ripple Effect programme: 1. Social-emotional development (with sub-themes of nature-induced emotional regulation, strengthened social bonds and empathy towards others) and 2. Nature connection (with sub-themes of nature knowledge, shared responsibility and appreciation of time outside).

Social-emotional development responses ranged from nature helping children to re-centre during the busy school day: *"When you need time alone, you can just listen to the birds"*, to overcoming negative preconceptions about nature: *"I used to be terrified of spiders but I found they're more scared of you"*; peer group development *"I've got to know more about people I don't speak to, especially the girls"* and improved self-esteem "*I feel more confident to speak in front of the class, [since] the session, I've been putting my hand up a lot.*"

Nature connection responses included young people exploring the natural world for the first time: "*(I saw) new animals I've never seen before because I don't go around nature, I just do it around school because at my house, there's nothing, I can kind of, look at. School is a good place to look at all the trees and all the plants*", and young people voicing a new shared sense of responsibility for nature: "*I used to pick plants and not care about nature. And then as soon as we learned about it, I took care of nature and made sure I don't pick any plants, or look for animals [to] step on them.*"

Conclusion

A sign created by participant

The 'Restorative Green Ripple Effect' has a positive impact on participants and provides opportunities for young people from underprivileged backgrounds to gain understanding of themselves, strengthen social bonds and develop a deeper relationship with nature. We recommend i) Cornwall's schools replicate and develop this programme, so the benefits are felt by higher numbers of young people and ii) impact evaluation continues, with an explicit focus on health and wellbeing.

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