

ENGAGE WITH NATURE

'Nature doesn't only make good things better; it also makes bad things less bad'.

Simon Barnes



Nature awareness is being knowledgeable about the workings of the natural world. Why are ladybirds coloured black and red? What is the difference between a mountain ash and a common ash? What is the larval food-plant of a peacock butterfly?

Nature appreciation is being able to engage with nature using all the five senses, plus a sense of mystery, fascination and awe relating to natural phenomena. It is founded on awareness. Many poets, artists and composers have a deep appreciation of the aesthetics of nature and it is the genesis of much inspirational, creative output in the arts. Many people are imbued with a sense of the divine when they engage with nature. Wordsworth was deeply affected by a sense of the sublime in 1798 when he wrote in his poem 'Lines Composed a Few Miles Above Tintern Abbey':

"And I have felt / A presence that disturbs me with the joy/ Of elevated thoughts; a sense sublime/ Of something far more deeply interfused/ Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns/ And the round ocean and the living air"

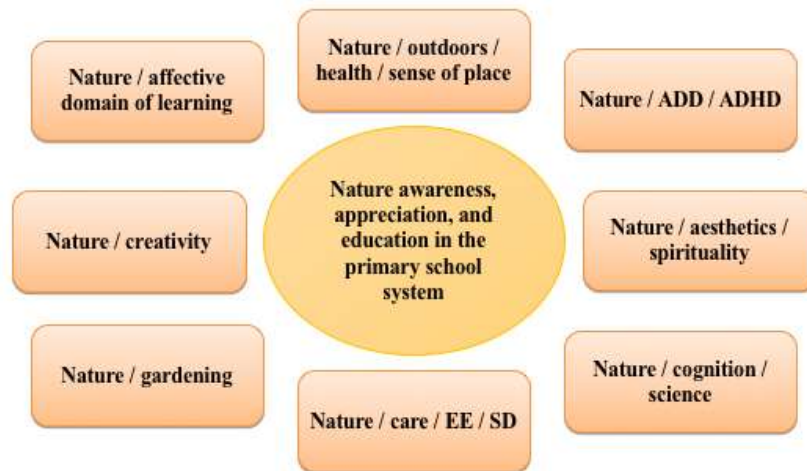
Nature education is concerned with the quantity and quality of nature engagement which teachers facilitate for the learners under their care. Is this engagement in an outdoor setting such as a wood or indoors using the interactive whiteboard? Is an awareness *and* an appreciation of nature promoted where children use all their senses or is engagement practised purely on a functional level? 'Let's do an experiment to see what conditions are most favourable for a plant's growth?'



Our approach to engagement with nature incorporates children's mental and physical well-being, aesthetic, spiritual and emotional development, creativity through unstructured play, positive outcomes for children with special needs, development of children's sensitiveness and caring characteristics with consequential growth in their pro-environmental behaviour. It also incorporates activities such as structured games and the acquisition of gardening skills both of which develop their socialisation skills.



Lack of involvement with nature could have serious consequences for children such as the development of ‘nature-deficit disorder’ a phrase coined by the American environmentalist, Richard Louv, in his seminal book, *Last Child in the Woods*.



Above is a diagram which outlines the conceptual framework behind www.engagewithnature.ie for education.

Literature on nature or natural history demonstrates that the affective domain of learning where love of nature is fostered in children can lead them to value it so much that they will care for it in their own place (place-based learning), and consequentially in a broader spectrum. David Sobel, an ardent advocate of place-based learning observed: ***‘What’s important is that children have an opportunity to bond with the natural world, to learn to love it, before being asked to heal its wounds’.*** In other words, teaching children about environmental catastrophes before they have bonded with nature is not good practice.



Nature-rich school grounds incorporating wild-life areas and cultivation and contemplation zones are important for regular, inexpensive immersion of children in nature and should be developed in all new schools and generous grants provided for such grounds in established schools. Hopefully, in the immediate future the Department of Education and Skills will introduce a comprehensive and compulsory policy on this aspect of the school environment.

