

Pahl, Kate, Nunn, Caitlin, Carr, Simon ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4487-3551> and Kraftl, Peter (2025) Co-producing the treescapes of the future with children. (Unpublished)

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Co-producing the treescapes of the future with children

Authors: Kate Pahl, Caitlin Nunn, Simon Carr, Peter Kraftl

Co-production is much more than consulting with children and young people. It means being guided by their perspectives and voices to imagine and plan a future they want to live in.

Headlines

Successful engagement with long-term environmental planning requires listening to, and acting on, the voices of children and young people.

Children and young people often demonstrate ways of relating to and valuing treescapes that are very different from those of adults.

Co-production enables authentic voices and values to emerge through activities across the whole planning, planting, maintenance and use cycle of treescapes.

Co-production not only produces better design, it also enhances children and young people's connection with nature and sustainability.



Background

We engaged children and young people with designing and planning, planting, measuring and caring for treescapes across a variety of contexts including schools and public parks. Co-productive methods such as involving children and young people in creating new treescapes enabled the emergence of children and young people's language and values associated with their neighbourhoods and communities. Our innovative approach has implications for sustainability, place-making, climate action and environmental education as well as urban planning.

Findings

Co-production involves doing everything together, involving children and young people in a whole cycle:

- Planning and designing treescapes,
- Planting treescapes,
- Measuring treescapes,
- Caring for treescapes.



Co-production produces different kinds of knowledge and ideas.

Children and young people might develop plans that adults haven't considered. They come from diverse cultures, linguistic heritages and contexts – children and young people are not a uniform group.





Findings

Embodied knowing is very important for co-production. Knowledge gained through physical and emotional interactions within a treescape – climbing and sliding, measuring, remembering fun times – is extremely powerful for children and young people. It encourages a sense of place and belonging.

Co-production takes time. Our way of working is intrinsically inclusive because of the slow, deliberative, collaborative ways in which we worked, our close attention to children's experiences, and being attentive to their voices and their languages.

Co-production is a conversation. Children do understand that you can have a conversation with a tree and the tree can talk back. We were able to create a new language of description for thinking about trees. This 'lexicon of experience' included stories, videos, designs, ways of measuring, ways of caring that we all learned from.



Implications & Recommendations

Co-production enables the views of diverse children and young peoples to emerge more organically, offering a pathway towards authentic voice. Co-production involves:

- **Doing with** children and young people - listening, not telling, and an openness to learning from children.
- **Recognising** young people's learning, their skills (designing, planting maintaining, caring, measuring), their play, their ability to simply be with trees.
- A focus on **ethical care** – talking with children and attending to their interest in bugs, bark, worms, climbing, running, feeling and laughing.
- Access means **more than physical access** - treescapes should feel welcoming to people from different backgrounds and with different abilities.
- Children and young people as **empowered designers** of treescapes. Children think of new ideas when designing treescapes, and these ideas may be very different from adults' – for example, wavy lines, water, paths, reading corners.

Children see trees as essential for climate resilience and community well-being. The presence of recreational and relaxation spaces reinforces policies advocating for accessible, health-focused green spaces. Their version of treescapes focuses on thinking ahead to a future they will live in.



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This note is based on: Kraftl, P., Ambreen, S., Armson, D., Badwan, K., Curtis, E., Pahl, K., Schofield, J.E. (2024) 'Starting with trees: between and beyond environmental education.' *British Educational Research Journal*.

Future of UK Treescapes Programme Impact & Insights Note Series: <https://www.uktreescapes.org/impact-and-insights/>
Editor: Deborah Talbot