



DISCOVERING NEARBY NATURE AND URBAN ADVENTURES:
WHERE WE LIVE & LEARNING OUTSIDE

Abstract Book

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Teach on the beach within reach: The challenges of, and opportunities for creating place-responsive activities for primary aged children in an area of urban deprivation in the UK

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Many coastal towns comprise some of the most disadvantaged communities in the UK. These areas, often with an industrial legacy have been marginalised through government underfunding over many years resulting in social, health and economic inequalities in, and challenges for their populations. Children and young people live near the sea but many rarely or never visit it as there are challenges and barriers to accessing coastal areas and exploring their affordances.

However, there are recent funded initiatives to facilitate place-based, experiential outdoor learning to provide opportunities to inspire children and young people about their environment and local community towards increased place attachment, place identity (Lewicka, 2011; Scannell & Gifford, 2013) and place-responsiveness (Mannion & Lynch, 2016). It is hoped that these experiences will provide communities with an increased sense of belonging to their local places and spaces, enhancing the way in which they value and care for these coastal environments to become active citizens for a sustainable future.

Context

Multiple indices of deprivation show that Barrow-in-Furness, a town in Cumbria, NW England is classified as the most deprived area in the county and falls within the 10% most deprived nationally in respect of employment, health and disability and living environment. Children and young people in the town value their local environment with ‘nature, the sea, walks, family and friends, community and friends’ being stated as the best things about living in the area (CCF, 2021). However, recent reports suggest that although Barrow Borough was ranked the third highest in England for the number and quality of natural landscapes and assets, it is 282nd for how communities use their landscape (RSA, 2024). Furthermore, research commissioned by Natural England (a government agency) found that although young people (11-18 years) in the area recognised the psychological, physical and social wellbeing benefits of being by the sea, the barriers of going there were numerous and interconnected and particularly hard for young people living with multiple pressures and disadvantages (Pound et al., 2019). These included social barriers including no sense of belonging, negative personal attitudes and fears, not knowing where to go, getting there and being able to afford to go, or knowing what to do once they were there and natural risks such as tides, quick sands and rockfalls.

If you live in town and don't see the beach regularly, you don't feel like you belong

I can't get to the beach near our town and if I did go, what would I do there?

To address these challenges, central government funding and planning permission has been granted for a Hub with an environmental education centre close to the beach nearby at Earnse Bay ‘to connect people to open spaces, nature and education’. The Hub is c. 4 km from the centre of Barrow-in-Furness and closer to other communities on Walney Island (Figure 1) with a regular bus service. It will provide community facilities surrounded by open spaces, and classrooms and workshops supported by an educator (Westmorland and Furness Council, 2025). This paper outlines a project developing ‘Learning Naturally’ activities based at the Hub for 4–11-year-olds to engage them in place-responsive outdoor learning and to explore the human and more-than-human affordances of that place (Lynch & Mannion, 2021; Stewart, 2020).

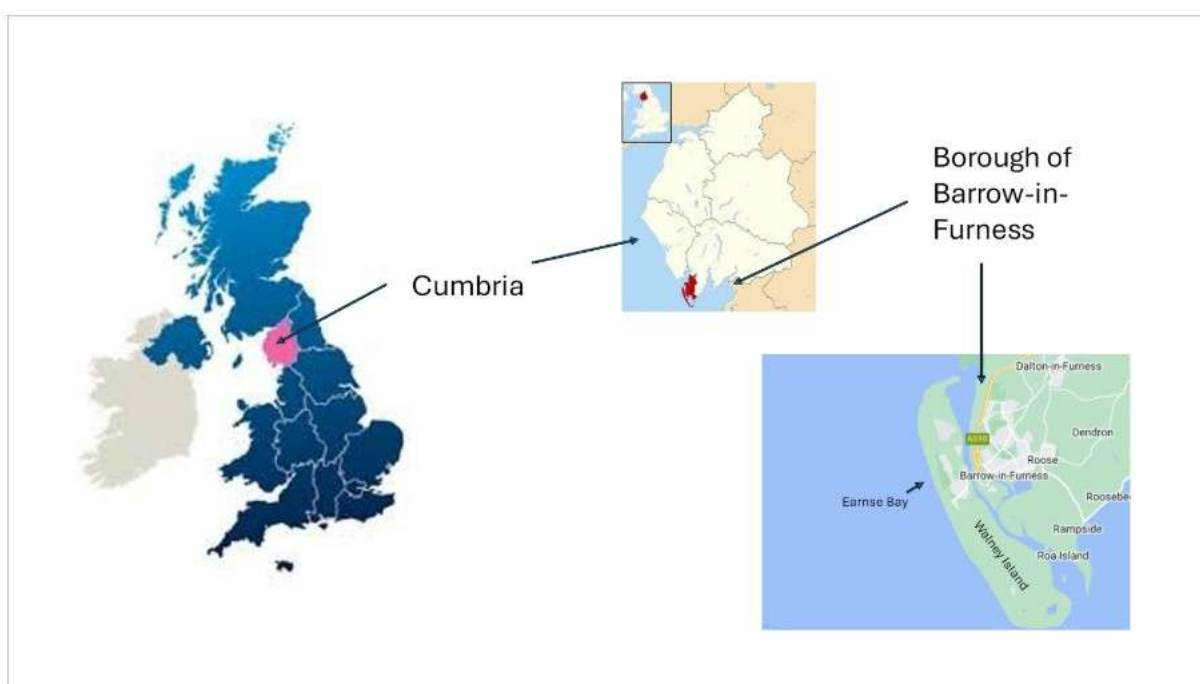


Figure 1: Location of Earnse Bay and Barrow-in-Furness, Cumbria, UK

‘Learning Naturally’ activity plan development

Natural England’s (NE) advocacy for ‘time in nature’ responds to strong evidence of its benefits for children’s mental and physical health and wellbeing, development and learning (Natural England, 2024). As the funder for the ‘Learning Naturally’ project, they were the major stakeholder, and the project team liaised regularly with them. The specification initially was on science, related to NE’s purpose to ‘help conserve, enhance and manage the natural environment for the benefit of present and future generations, thereby contributing to sustainable development’. However, it soon became clear that activities on the beach could span all curriculum areas, and that outdoor play was an important component in planning. NE were also keen that teachers could feel confident in time to lead their own activities, and some could be self-directed for non-formal education groups and informal learning.

Curriculum developers created learning opportunities following the pedagogic principles of child-centred outdoor and experiential learning that stimulates curiosity and critical questioning. The activities were intended to promote excitement and joy in learning, making time and space for play. They responded to other stakeholders including children, local teachers, teaching assistants, parents and headteachers (including a deputy headteacher of a SEND school who developed an adaptive curriculum for their students), local educators such as ArtGene (an artist led charity engaging communities in the re-visioning of the social, natural and built environment of Barrow-in-Furness), local residents and visitors to the beach.

A thematic framework was developed comprising four themes: ‘Earnse Bay’, ‘Planet Earth’, ‘Wind and Tide’, ‘Communities and Awesome Species’; and ‘The People of Walney Island’. The framework spanned seven year groups, with activity plans comprising two and a half hour sessions, which could be used progressively or for stand-alone learning. In-school learning before and after visits was also suggested, as well as adaptations for differing tidal and weather conditions, with considerations for access and inclusion for every child. Cross-cutting themes of ‘Wellbeing’, ‘Sustainability and Taking Action’, ‘Special Earnse’ and ‘Safety on the Shore’ were embedded in all activity plans. The emphasis was on highlighting the special and often unique affordances of Earnse Bay as well as at other coastal environments to emphasise place-responsiveness. The activities also provided learners with opportunities to situate their place in the wider global context, through exploration of the human and more-than-human affordances (Stewart, 2021) for example, collecting objects on the strandline, ocean literacy and World War II historical military assets.

‘Learning Naturally’ in action

A key part of the project was delivering some of the planned activities to children from local schools to enable curriculum developers to ascertain their efficacy in meeting the intended objectives. This involved observing the actions and responses of the children, listening to their voices and gaining feedback from teachers, teaching assistants and parents who experienced the activities.

44 Reception children (ages 4-5) joined us on a wet, windy day in July 2024 at Earnse Bay. One group followed the ‘What’s on the tideline?’ and the other, the ‘Who lives here?’ activity plans. The children eagerly participated in a game on the sand to teach about different tidal levels (one of the challenges for the developers had been to develop activities for teaching very young children about the tidal cycle) and exploring the strandline certainly stimulated curiosity, discovery and critical questioning, which were extended by the educators. Storytelling was embedded in the sessions following a recommendation from a local headteacher. ‘Rockpooling’ also realised our objectives with each child having a bucket (provided free by a local supermarket chain) to search for ‘awesome creatures’, illustrated by the educators using an aquarium prior to the session, which included an eel to the delight of the children.

Play is an important part of the Early Years Foundation Stage framework in England (Department for Education, 2024) and time and space for structured play on the sand was included in the sessions. Children were asked to make sandcastles and decorate them with ‘found’ materials and objects. One girl had never made a sandcastle successfully and was being alienated by her peer group. Working with an educator, she soon learned the technique and on building a group of

sandcastles, became an accepted and integral part of the group. Another child had only been in school for three days and spoke no English, yet language was no barrier to these activities, and he produced a most expansive and decorated sand sculpture.

The group of 10–11-year-olds (year 6) visited the sand dunes, a walk of some twenty minutes along the coast. This gave opportunities for an illustration of the state of the tide in relation to the tidal cycle (including mathematics for working out how accurate the tidal prediction was) and exploration of other coastal features and species including ragwort, thyme, marram grass and sea holly. Transects were walked on the dunes looking at adaptations of plants. Nature journaling (Bell, 1997; Laws & Lygren, 2020) proved to be successful and a spontaneous debate about human exploration and trampling of sand dunes versus dune conservation was a valuable outcome of a ‘teachable moment’ and a nexus of adventure and learning.

The headteacher for the group of 8–9-year-olds (year 4) had requested the topic of ‘life cycles’, a dynamic concept which proved challenging to teach at one point in time. The sand was used as a canvas and latterly a gallery for the children to draw and explain their knowledge of a named life cycle. Important life cycle stages were highlighted, and the children then explored the sand, sea edge and rockpools to find creatures and ask questions about their life cycles. Sieving sand for lugworms after an explanation of how they excrete sand on the surface was an activity that generated much excitement and interest for the children. The feedback given by the children when back in school is shown in figure 2.

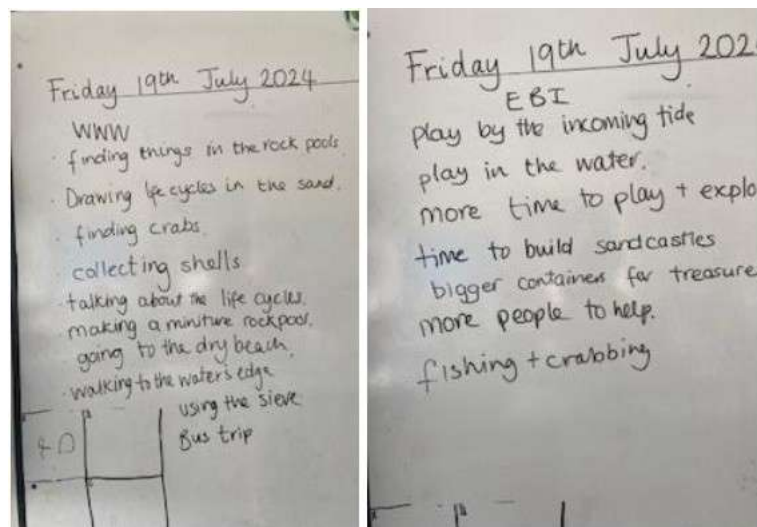


Figure 2: Children’s evaluation, Year 4 (8-9 years) [WWW: What worked well; EBI: Even better if]

The activities were well received although the importance of play (or perceived lack of it) for this age group too, needs to be appreciated by educators as well as the whole experience of an out-of-school trip, which includes a bus journey. The piloting of these activities reinforced the advantages of creating a conducive teaching environment in inclement weather and the need for the availability of waterproof clothing at the Hub.

Conclusion

The project reflects the manifestation of place-based learning and place-responsive education in practice, discovering nature close to where children and young people live in an urban area and providing adventurous, creative and inspirational learning activities on the beach. The Hub is expected to be completed by 2026 and although a curriculum can exist without a building, its facilities will provide enhanced experiences for children and young people to learn and experience *their* place.

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