

Te Whakatika

The Aotearoa New Zealand Professional Practice
Journal for Outdoor and Environmental Learning.

Issue 46
Autumn 26



In this issue

Porirua Climate & Rangatahi Voice
Current Good Practice in EOTC
Bridging the Gap (Environmental
Studies)

Re-anchoring Wellbeing in Place
Donations Scheme & Equity
The Mountains Won't Make
Me Choose
Recognising Practical Intelligence

Making the Most of the
Outdoor Classroom
Unconventional Spaces
of Learning

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Contents

Editorial Celia Hogan	04
Re-anchoring Wellbeing in Place Erin Porteous	06
Donations Scheme & Equity Chris North, Dr David Irwin, Dr Allen Hill, Mike Boyes, Dr Lena Mkwara	12
Porirua Climate & Rangatahi Voice Conor Twyford, Wairere Pene, Orini Rokx-Taratu, Amanda Dobson, Michele Whiting	18
Current Good Practice in EOTC Jenny Langrish	26
Bridging the Gap (Environmental Studies) Yotam Kay	30
Making the Most of the Outdoor Classroom Naomi Ishihara	35
Unconventional Spaces of Learning Katie Earle and Dr Judy Bruce	39
'In Memory of Mike Boyes	42
The Mountains Won't Make Me Choose Laura Hermans	43
Recognising Practical Intelligence Dave Williams	48
Support for Educators: Resources and professional learning	54
Conference Flyer	57
Latest Open-Access Research Dr David Hills	58

Te Whakatika Purpose statement

Sitting at the nexus of academic inquiry and educational practice, Te Whakatika seeks to create a space to share good practice, innovative ideas, and critical engagement in outdoor and environmental learning.

In doing so, Te Whakatika seeks to:

- Provide access to the space between academics and practitioners, to connect these spaces.
- Encourage academics to make their work accessible to practitioners through practical application
- Encourage practitioners (teachers and other education providers) to share good practice and innovative ideas from their work through writing articles.
- Encourage strong connections between theory, research, and practice
- Encourage and support high quality learning and teaching in outdoor and environmental contexts.



Editorial

By Celia Hogan

Kia ora koutou, As this edition of *Te Whakatika* comes together, our sector finds itself sitting in a moment of reflection, uncertainty, and change. Across Aotearoa, many educators are navigating curriculum shifts, increasing pressures within schools and organisations, and ongoing questions about the place of Outdoor Education, Environmental Education, and EOTC within learning in Aotearoa. At the same time, there remains a deep commitment from people across this community to keep showing up for young people, for te taiao, and for each other.

This issue reflects that tension and that hope. The articles gathered here speak to wellbeing, equity, identity, climate, belonging, learning spaces, and the role Outdoor Education and Environmental Education continue to play in helping people connect more deeply to themselves, each other, and place. Together, they remind us that this work still matters profoundly.

Erin Porteous explores what it means to re-anchor wellbeing in place, while Chris North and colleagues examine the realities and tensions surrounding the donations scheme and equity within education. Conor Twyford and his co-authors bring forward the voices of rangatahi engaging with climate and community in Porirua, reminding us that young people are not disconnected from these issues; they are living them.

Jenny Langrish reflects on current good practice in EOTC, offering practical insight into the realities educators are working within right now. Yotam Kay challenges us to think about Environmental Studies and the spaces between disciplines, while Naomi Ishihara and Katie Earle both explore the possibilities that emerge when learning moves beyond conventional classroom walls. Laura Hermans' article speaks powerfully to identity, tension, and belonging within outdoor spaces, and Dave Williams explores the concept of practical intelligence and the deeper ways people learn through experience, judgement, and connection.

This edition also arrives with a sense of sadness following the passing of Mike Boyes. Mike's contribution to Outdoor Education in Aotearoa has been immense. Through his teaching, writing, research, and mentorship, he helped shape generations of educators and influenced the direction of Outdoor Education both here and internationally. Many within our community will have crossed paths with Mike in some way; through university study, conferences, professional conversations, or simply through the ideas and questions his work challenged us to consider. His passing feels significant for our sector, and we acknowledge that loss with gratitude for all he contributed.

Perhaps that is part of what feels important right now; being present with where we are. Not rushing to tidy everything into certainty, but recognising both the challenges and the strengths within our field. Outdoor and environmental education has always evolved through people willing to adapt, reflect, advocate, and continue creating meaningful learning experiences despite the pressures around them. That spirit remains deeply visible throughout this edition.

Thank you to all the contributors, reviewers, and supporters who continue to give their time and whakaaro to *Te Whakatika*. These shared stories and reflections matter. They help us learn from one another, stay connected as a sector, and continue imagining what Outdoor Education and Environmental Education in Aotearoa can become.

Ngā mihi nui,
Celia Hogan
Editor, *Te Whakatika*

Re-anchoring Wellbeing in Place

By Erin Porteous

The role of educational spaces in supporting youth wellbeing has become critical. As educators, we instinctively recognise that learning cannot flourish when young people are feeling anxious, disconnected, or overwhelmed. Across Aotearoa New Zealand, concerning youth mental health statistics suggest that many rangatahi are navigating schooling alongside significant wellbeing challenges. While these challenges are often viewed through a clinical lens, they are deeply intertwined with a growing disconnection from place. Rapid societal change has altered the lifestyles of many New Zealand youth, shifting their rhythms away from the play-based, outdoor-oriented upbringings of previous generations. These changes influence not only individual wellbeing, but also how young people relate to others, to their learning, and to the physical environments they inhabit.

Modern-day living, characterised by digital saturation and reduced unstructured free time, has taken a significant toll on wellbeing. Hidaka (2012) suggests that mental illnesses such as depression and anxiety may be understood as “diseases of modernity”, potentially preventable through a return to more environmentally grounded ways of living. For many youths, the consequence of being digitised and disconnected from their local environments has resulted in a loss of place-literacy. By re-anchoring wellbeing in physical wellbeing, schools can provide a practical counterbalance to these modern stresses.

Time in nature

One of the most profound changes is the decline in time spent outdoors, famously described by Richard Louv (2005) as “nature deficit disorder”. While the evidence is clear that time in nature enhances mood, reduces stress, and enhances social connections (Barton & Pretty, 2010; Capaldi et al., 2014; DeVille et al., 2021), the value lies in moving beyond ‘nature’ towards a specific, place-responsive connection. This aligns with Catherine Knight’s (2020) advocacy for “neighbourhood nature”, where accessible local areas such as parks, coastal verges and walkways are critical for the “daily dose” of nature required for restorative health.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, this resonates deeply with kaitiakitanga, or the guardianship and responsibility between people and the natural world. However, as unstructured outdoor play declines, many youths have lost familiarity with their immediate local environments. They may not know where their nearby green and blue spaces are, which limits their sense of agency and identity as local kaitiaki. Schools are uniquely positioned to counter this trend. By moving past general outdoor activity toward place-responsive programmes, educators can help students move away from being visitors in nature, to becoming “apprentices to place” (Wattchow & Brown, 2011).

A case study: Surfing as a place-responsive wellbeing programme

For my PhD research, I explored the impact of a school-based surfing programme on the wellbeing of young people. This study serves as a critical insight into how place-responsive pedagogies function in practice, moving beyond theoretical benefits to lived experiences. Participants were all female, aged between 15 and 16, and engaged in a 90-minute surfing session weekly for ten weeks. This programme was deliberately place-responsive, centred on a local beach, and facilitated by senior students within a tuakana-teina framework. While a follow-up article will discuss the tuakana-teina relationships in depth, the findings here focus on the unique value of the local coastal environment.

What became clear from the participants was that surfing was only part of the stories they shared. The coastal environment played an active and powerful role in shaping their experiences of wellbeing. Crucially, it was repeated engagement with the same stretch of coastline that allowed the environment to move from a generic

“outdoor space” to a meaningful “place”. The consistency over the programme allowed participants to notice changes in tide, weather, and landscape, transforming the ocean into a co-facilitator of their growth rather than a one-off challenge to overcome.

An intimacy with nature through repeated engagement

Once students moved past the initial challenges of surfing, they began to enjoy moments of peace and serenity. One participant captured this beautifully when she said the ocean had some ‘mysterious property’ that makes “everyone just feel better”. Growing research shows that blue spaces such as lakes, rivers and the sea have distinct wellbeing properties (Britton et al., 2020; Foley & Kistemann, 2015). This experience highlights the capacity for a specific place to act as a restorative anchor for wellbeing. This mattered because the students found more than a temporary escape, they experienced a lasting sense of calm rooted in a place they now knew intimately.



A defining finding of the study was that repeated engagement with the same place is what truly supports wellbeing. Rather than a one-off excursion, visiting the same beach weekly allowed participants to build deep self-confidence, familiarity and mastery. One student shared, “I feel I can become more familiar with the ocean, like knowing where the rips are, safest spots”. This matters for wellbeing because familiarity replaces fear with a sense of agency.



As young people move from observer to a knowledgeable participant in their local landscape, they develop a secure sense of belonging that supports their mental and emotional health.

This sustained access is also a matter of equity. Some participants had never surfed before due to cost, transport, or family commitments. One participant noted “[people] are limited... they can’t go surfing like whenever they want to, being able to do this through the school every week, it’s very accomplishing to me”. When these place-responsive programmes are embedded into the rhythms of everyday schooling, they ensure that the wellbeing benefits of the local environment are inclusive, equitable, and sustainable for all rangatahi.

Becoming apprentices to place

Place-responsiveness involves learning with, through, and from place. Throughout the surfing programme, participants moved from unfamiliarity and in some cases, fear, toward a respectful confidence in the water. For participants who did not grow up near the ocean, this transformation was particularly significant.

The learning was both behavioural and emotional, with participants developing agency and environmental awareness. Early in the programme, senior facilitators led safety briefings. Soon after, participants themselves identified rips, safe entry points, and changing ocean conditions.

In this sense, they became apprentices to place (Wattchow & Brown, 2011), developing ecological literacy alongside technical skill. Through repeated, weekly engagement with the same coastal environment, participants began to develop familiarity and confidence in place. Their relationships with the beach evolved into a culture of care that deepened their sense of belonging.

Place responsive pedagogies in schools

Place-responsive pedagogy treats the environment as part of the teaching team, helping to shape identity, relationships, and wellbeing. In the surfing programme, the ocean was not merely a backdrop but central to the participants’ growth, challenging them both physically and emotionally while fostering resilience. One participant captured this as she reflected, “I’m just kind of grateful, ...to learn something new, especially around the ocean you’re living in.” This supports Richard Ulrich’s (1993) argument that nature is not neutral but actively shapes human health.

Key considerations for schools

Aotearoa New Zealand offers rich, diverse nature spaces that vary across regions and localities. Because of this, schools should recognise their own unique place and the possibilities within it.

Drawing on the work of Wattchow & Brown (2011) and insights from the surfing case study, the following considerations can guide planning:

When considering the programme purpose

- How will this experience foster positive emotion, engagement, and connection?
- How might it build meaning, resilience, or belonging?
- How does it support the four dimensions of hauora - physical, emotional, social and spiritual wellbeing?

Considering place

- What natural spaces are nearby or within walking distance? *The case*

study showed that selecting a local beach allowed for the repeated engagement necessary to move from fear to confidence.

- How familiar are staff and students with these environments? *Building familiarity over time helps students transition from “visitors” to “apprentices” of that specific green or blue space.*
- What activities are appropriate, accessible and culturally relevant?

Considering people

- What strengths and capabilities already exist among staff?
- Are there senior students who could act as tuakana? *The tuakana-teina framework within the surfing programme allowed for peer-led learning and communal ties to the local beach.*
- Could the programme link to existing service, leadership, or mentoring initiatives?

Considering an activity

- What low- or no-cost activities are feasible?
- What resources does the school already have?
- How can sessions fit within timetable constraints?
- What opportunities exist for reflection?

Schools face context-specific considerations like school size, community access to transport, parent and whānau involvement, and existing EOTC structures. While staffing and safety requirements can be a real challenge, place-responsive approaches often do not require expensive equipment or large-scale restructuring. Participants suggested that even simple classroom tasks, such as reading or art, would feel more engaging if moved into the local outdoors.



Success lies in repeated, intentional connection to a local site, rather than one-off, high-cost events.

Small, intentional shifts can have a meaningful impact:

- Incorporating short visits to nearby parks, beaches, or bush areas
- Embedding tuakana-teina relationships into existing programmes
- Using nature as a context for reflection, creativity, or wellbeing check-ins
- Making outdoor time a regular, sustainable practice rather than an occasional event

An important finding from the surfing programme showed how much connection to place serves as a foundation for broader wellbeing. The interactions young people have within a specific natural setting help them feel a sense of belonging not only to their peer group but to the local environment itself. By learning a challenging new skill in a consistent, familiar location, students develop a sense of accomplishment that is embedded in that self through a deepened relationship with their surroundings.

In practice, place-responsive outdoor experiences can offer a powerful counterbalance to modern stresses. In an era where young people's lives are increasingly fragmented, digitised, and disconnected from their local environments, place-responsive outdoor programmes offer schools a practical and sustainable way to re-anchor wellbeing within the local, physical world. By moving beyond general outdoor activity and instead supporting young people to build deep connections with their place, schools can foster a sense of belonging and identity where learning can flourish.

Ultimately, when students become apprentices to the environments they inhabit, they find more than a temporary escape, they find a robust foundation for their hauora to thrive.

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About the Author

Erin Porteous is an outdoor educator and secondary school teacher based in Aotearoa New Zealand. Her work focuses on place-responsive pedagogies and the role of nature-based experiences in supporting youth wellbeing. Through her PhD research, she explored how school-based surfing programmes can foster belonging, resilience, and connection to place. She is passionate about supporting wellbeing through improving connection to place, people and nature.



Impacts of the Donation Scheme on Equitable Access to Education Outside the Classroom: Rearranging the deck chairs? Chris North, Dr David Irwin, Dr Allen Hill, Mike Boyes, Dr Lena Mkwara

Abstract

Equity is an increasingly prominent issue in education, and Education Outside the Classroom (EOTC) can become a ‘pressure cooker’ for inequities because of the additional costs associated with trips. The government funded Donations Scheme provides eligible schools with \$150 per student per year in exchange for no longer requesting donations. A previous article in *Te Whakatika* by North, Spencer, and Hill (2025) examined the Scheme’s impact on the quantity of EOTC. This article draws on a survey from 2022, distributed to EOTC coordinators and which included quantitative and qualitative data. Results show that equity was most positively impacted in primary schools and the lowest decile schools. Themes from the qualitative analysis included: differing definitions of equity, funding and competition within schools, the challenges faced by rural and remote schools, differences linked to decile, and differences between primary and secondary schools. While substantial financial inequities persist across society (and the Donations Scheme alone cannot resolve these), the evidence suggests the Scheme is contributing to improved equitable access to EOTC in many schools.

Introduction

Socioeconomic deprivation has a major impact on the learning of young people. Statistics New Zealand reported one-in-seven children (over 14%) were living in material hardship in 2024/2025 (James, 2026). A recent New Zealand Council for Education Research study indicates that that majority of school boards are focused on equity in their schools (Boyd et al, 2025). In this report, the authors used an OECD definition of equity:

Equity does not mean that all students obtain equal education outcomes, but rather that differences in students’ outcomes are unrelated to their backgrounds or to economic and social circumstances over which students have no control. (OECD, 2018, p. 18)

The government introduced the Donations Scheme (the Scheme) in 20XX, in order to ease the pressure and expectations placed on households when schools requested donations, particularly within lower socioeconomic communities. Schools regularly use donations to support the cost of EOTC, as this can be costly for schools and whanau | families. While the Scheme was never intended to address wider societal inequities, it does hold potential to support powerful learning opportunities through EOTC for a wide range of students. A previous article (North, Spencer and Hill, 2025) explored the impact of the Scheme on the quantity of EOTC that schools reported providing.

This article now asks if this Scheme has influenced equity in EOTC, or if it is simply rearranging the deck chairs.

Findings

At the time of the EOTC national study (Hill et al., 2020), the Donations Scheme was not yet implemented. Therefore, to understand the impact of the Scheme, in 2022 a survey was distributed to those who responded to the national study and members of the National EOTC coordinator database. In total, 106 respondents returned the survey with 93 fully completed surveys (some totals will vary depending on how many respondents completed each question). Although the data collected present some statistically significant results, it cannot be used to accurately generalise across the approximately 2,500 state sector primary and secondary schools. There are, however, indicators of trends, and school-specific comments add richness. Abbreviations used in discussion are PS for Primary School; IS for Intermediate School; SS for Secondary School; and CS for Composite School.

Impact of the Donations Scheme on quantity of EOTC provided

While the Donations Scheme was not specifically targeted to EOTC, it is interesting to see the impact on the quantity of EOTC offered in different types of schools.

Table 1 Impact of the Donations Scheme on EOTC quantity by school type

Impact of the \$150 Donations Scheme on EOTC	Primary/Intermediate	Secondary	Composite (yr 1-13)	Other	Total
About the same	22	14	7	2	45
Doing Less	9	8	0	0	17
Doing More	28	3	1	0	32
Total	59	25	8	2	94

Table 1 shows that:

- Primary/Intermediate schools were more likely to be doing more EOTC under the Scheme (48% doing more & 37% the same)
- Secondary schools are more likely to be doing the same or less EOTC (32% less & 56% the same). Please note that North, Spencer and Hill (2025) indicated that secondary schools were “more likely to be doing less”, rather than “the same or less” and this is corrected here.

- Composite schools are more likely to be doing about the same amount of EOTC.

Impact of the donations scheme on quantity of EOTC based on school decile

Post hoc statistical analysis for decile affect shows a significant difference between decile 1-2 and decile 5-7 schools, (z = 2.035, p <.05).

Table 2 Impact of the Donations Scheme by decile

Table 2 shows that:

- Schools in deciles of 1 and 2 were more likely to be doing more EOTC under the Scheme.
- Schools in deciles of 5-7 were more likely to be doing the same amount of EOTC under the Scheme.
- No statistically significant results were found between schools in deciles 3 and 4 and the other schools.

Impact of the \$150 Donations Scheme on ETOC	Decile 1-2	Decile 3-4	Decile 5-7	Total
About the same	8	14	22	44
Doing Less	0	6	11	17
Doing More	13	10	9	32
Total	21	30	42	93

Impact of the donations scheme on equitable access to EOTC based on school type

The justification for the Donation Scheme was to reduce the pressure on whānau and communities (particularly those from the most deprived areas). It was therefore interesting to see whether the Scheme influenced equity in the context of EOTC.

Table 3 Impact of the Donations Scheme equitable access by school type

Table 3 shows that:

- The majority of all school types felt that equitable access was increased by the Scheme
- The proportion of schools that felt that equitable access was not increased was greater in secondary schools than in primary schools. Noting that the small sample size means we cannot state this with certainty.

Impact of the \$150 Donations Scheme on EOTC	Decile 1-2	Decile 3-4	Decile 5-7	Total
Strongly Disagree/ Somewhat Disagree	0	5	9	14
Strongly Agree/ Somewhat Agree	15	20	28	63
Total	15	25	37	77

Impact of the donations scheme on equitable access to EOTC based on school decile

Those schools serving the lowest socio-economic areas are generally most impacted by scarcity of funds. The differences in the impact of the DS between deciles reflect this context.

Table 4 Impact of the Donations Scheme on equitable access by decile

Table 4 shows that:

- The majority of all deciles in the Scheme felt it increased equitable access.
- The proportion of schools that felt that equitable access was not enhanced was greater in the higher decile categories.

While the quantitative data supports the impact of the Donations Scheme increasing the quantity of EOTC and also enhancing equitable access to EOTC, there are important differences between

Impact of the \$150 Donations Scheme on EOTC	Primary/ Intermediate	Secondary	Composite (yr 1-13)	Other	Total
Strongly Disagree/ Somewhat Disagree	7	7	0	0	14
Strongly Agree/ Somewhat Agree	40	15	7	2	64
Total	47	22	7	2	78

school types (e.g. primary and secondary), as well as across the deciles. In order to better understand this situation, we now turn to the qualitative data.



Equity and improving equitable access to EOTC

There is a logical correlation between quantity of EOTC (more EOTC being offered) and equity (all students having access). The quantitative data above indicates that the Donations Scheme may have resulted in an increased quantity of EOTC for primary schools, and for low decile schools (deciles 1-2). Similarly, the majority of respondents perceived equitable access was increased. The trends suggest that the increases in quantity of EOTC and equitable access were felt least in secondary schools and deciles 5-7. The quantitative data was supported by a range of comments from the survey:

It allowed more participation for more whānau because it has reduced costs to families (IS, Decile 2).

in the past, for overnight camps if parents did not pay students could not attend, so this barrier has been completely removed enabling every student to be treated equally. (PS Decile 5)

Able to offer more to our whānau as we can afford to offer increased activities and curriculum-based learning (PS, Decile 6).

All students are able to attend our school camps (1-3 days duration) ...We take our students to shows and performances in town and the Donation Scheme makes this affordable. We are a rural school (40 km from [local town]) so

participation in any event costs money. The impact of the Donations Scheme is very positive. (PS Decile 2)

These data show that for some schools, access to EOTC curriculum enrichment learning experiences have been made more equitable through the Donations Scheme. This is a positive finding and may begin to address some equity issues in this context. It is important to note that improving equity in educational access and outcomes in Aotearoa New Zealand has been a significant challenge over many years and remains a priority.

Questions about Adequate Funding / and access to EOTC

Schools are not fully funded for all educational activities and events resulting in parents, caregivers and whānau being asked to make contributions or donations. Prior to the Donations Scheme, schools asked for donations for many different activities including most EOTC events. With the advent of the Donations Scheme, eligible schools (decile 1-7 only) that opted into the scheme were unable to ask for any donations with exceptions for overnight camps or trips. Because of a lack of specialist knowledge, equipment and facilities, particularly for overnight camps, many schools are forced to outsource EOTC activities to private providers. Such outsourcing comes with costs, putting

more pressure on schools. For instance, a school camp will cost between \$150 - \$750 per child. As a teacher in the survey noted: “The price is often inhibitive for students...” (PS Decile 7).

Whilst the Donations Scheme has alleviated financial pressure on parents in some schools, only 50% of schools thought the \$150 allocation was sufficient.

This creates conditions where schools often must pick and choose what or who will be funded, “... we only have a small amount of funding so can't cover everyone.” (PS Decile 4)

The limitations of the funding available through the Donations Scheme seems to be more keenly felt by secondary schools. It is likely that more funding and resources are required to provide EOTC in secondary schools, particularly for higher risk HPE and outdoor education activities requiring qualified instructors, specialist equipment, site safety management planning and often travel to activity locations. By contrast, many primary school programmes are often more curriculum wide and localised, with lower levels of risk. Consequently, secondary schools are perhaps more likely to find the \$150 ceiling too low, hence inhibiting what is possible.

Rural schools

A variety of respondents indicated that being rural or remote did impact on equitable access to EOTC and suggested that school location should be taken into consideration. One respondent noted:

We are a remote school... [with] a 2–3-hour drive from the nearest city, Nelson, and so the transport costs ...are amplified for us (SS, Decile 6).

Concern about equity in terms of rural schools was also expressed by schools which were ineligible for the Donations Scheme:

[The Donations Scheme] should be available to small rural schools anyway, as they are always drawing on the same families when trying to do any fundraising, going on camps, trips etc. (PS Dec 9)

Compared to urban or suburban schools, the responses here indicate that rural or remote schools are more impacted by transport costs

and this impacts equitable access. Hill et al. (2020) identified that schools valued exposing students to new places and experiences. For urban schools, accessibility to diverse experiences is generally more achievable locally and by public transport (unless the trip is to more extensive natural areas, where urban schools would be at a disadvantage).

Funding mechanisms

Comments about equity are most often about the adequacy of funding as perceived by the respondent to achieve desired education outcomes. Ministry of Education funding of schools according to Decile, and its replacement the Equity Index, was an attempt to deal with socio-economic inequity that has become deeply embedded in our communities over the last 40 years (see for example Rashbrooke, 2018). Decile calculations allowed the Ministry to rank constituents within school zones into socio-economic clusters of houses to support school funding decisions. The move to the Equity Index in 2023 shifted the focus of the Ministry to deprivation experienced by individual students using “better variables more accurately” (MOE, 2021. P.7) based on administrative data that was more regularly updated and was considered a more nuanced student-centred approach. The respondent below expresses their view of how better systemic funding based on equity factors could contribute to more equitable access to EOTC:

It would be a fairer system if all low decile students were funded equally no matter which school they attended, and that they took their funding with them as they moved school. With proper funding all students would be able to participate in EOTC regardless of their family circumstances. The aim has to be to have an all-inclusive education system. (SS decile 5)

Conclusion: Rearranging the deck chairs?

This article explored how the Donations Scheme influenced equity in the context of EOTC. The data indicate the scheme has had a positive impact—particularly for schools in lower socioeconomic communities and for primary schools. However, the level of funding it

provides is only sufficient, at best, to meet schools’ minimum requirements. Residential school camps are costly, and the Donations Scheme acknowledged this by the exemption allowing schools to request donations for overnight trips.

Few respondents mentioned stepping away from the Donations Scheme; the majority of comments indicated an improvement in equity and a reduction in the burden on whānau/communities. It would therefore be overly cynical to claim that the Donations Scheme is simply re-arranging the deck chairs. Nonetheless, the long-term underfunding of education remains and the statistics about child poverty and deprivation are confronting. The Donations Scheme cannot overcome these systemic issues that surface in all aspects of society and are sharply felt in education.

Rather than ending on a negative note, we acknowledge the mission of Education Outdoors New Zealand (EONZ) “to break down barriers to outdoor learning and ensure that all ākonga have safe and equitable access” (EONZ, n.d.). Local, low-cost, low risk events can and do provide for high quality experiences for ākonga (see ‘EONZ revisioning school camps’). In a time when many people are struggling financially, and despite ongoing concerns about the sufficiency of the Donations Scheme, more equitable EOTC is an important goal. This means taking creative and innovative approaches to EOTC that focus on equity and high-quality learning. Ultimately, despite financial limitations, it is the role of educators and school leaders to provide deck chairs for all our learners.

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Supporting Porirua taiohi leadership on climate action: the power of community connection

By Conor Twyford, Wairere Pene, Orini Rokx-Taratu, Amanda Dobson, Michele Whiting

Across the city of Porirua, many families hold connections to the Pacific and to papa kāinga (communal Māori land), where the impacts of climate change are now hitting hard (Daly, 2025; Dingwall & Fruean, 2025). In Porirua, following a 2019 campaign led by young people, a climate emergency was declared (Porirua City Council, 2019). In the intervening years, Porirua suburbs, as well as the urban centre, have been impacted by floods, slips and sea level rise (Beca Limited et al., 2024). Overflows of raw sewage into Titahi Bay are a regular occurrence - destroying access to kaimoana and creating huge harm to the mauri of the local area (Wong, 2024).

Children and young people in Porirua should have a major stake in climate change decision-making. Yet Aotearoa New Zealand's National Adaptation Plan (New Zealand Government, 2022), and until recently, Porirua's climate change strategy (Porirua City Council, 2020) do not mention how they can be involved.* In addition, as Titahi Bay based author Nadine Hura (2025) has commented, the jargon of climate change – phrases like the “Paris Agreement” and “carbon neutral” - can be inaccessible, alienating, and disconnected from the lived experience of Indigenous people. For many tamariki and rangatahi living in Porirua, their immediate priorities may also not include climate change – issues of housing, employment and health may be much more front of mind.

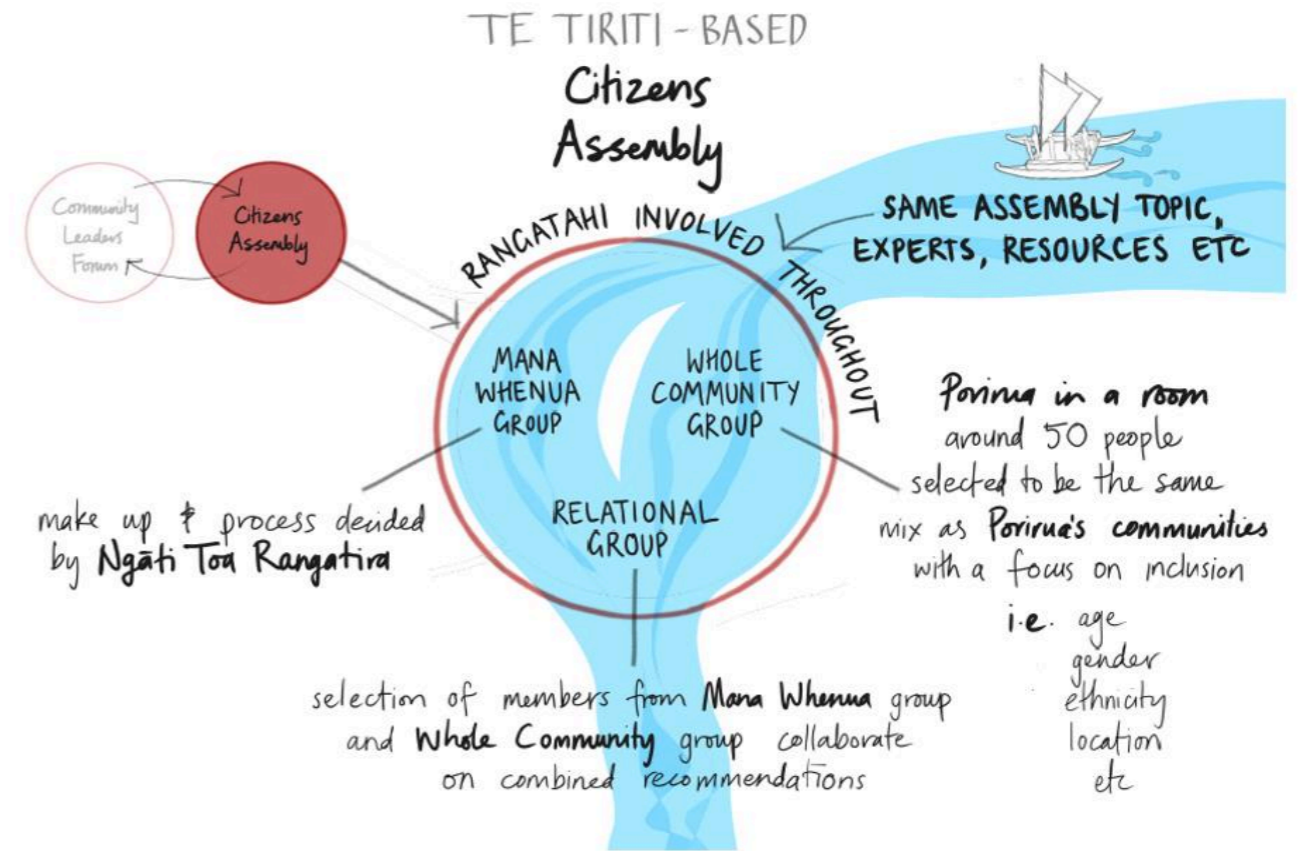
From February to June 2025, Te Rūnanga o Toa Rangatira, the local tribal authority, teamed up with a local community organisation, Te Reo o Ngā Tāngata/The People Speak, to hold the Porirua Assembly on Climate.

The Porirua Assembly on Climate sought to develop community-led local solutions to climate change using the standard three-part citizen's assembly approach: education, deliberation and recommendation-building. However, it took a uniquely Tiriti-based approach. Following in the footsteps of Matike Mai (Mutu & Jackson, 2016), organisers adopted a tricameral model involving a mana whenua (tribal) group, and a whole-of-community group. Supported by expert advice, each group met separately across five Saturdays, finally merging into one relational group to develop a set of joint recommendations. Organisers' aim was to bring together a representative group of people from across Porirua to address the Assembly question:

“Learning to live with Porirua's changing world together. How do we connect and respond as our climate changes?”

* To find out more about the Porirua Assembly, see <https://www.ngatitaoa.iwi.nz/poriruaassembly> as well as Emily Beausilei's account of its early development: cambridge.org/core/product/identifier/S0008423924000635/type/journal_article

† Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Treaty of Waitangi) is New Zealand's founding document, agreed in 1840 between representatives of the British Crown and rangatira Māori, or chiefly Māori leaders (Orange, 2023).



Structure of the Porirua Assembly on Climate

[artist: Cally O'Neill]

As part of this process and supported by local community educators from Enviroschools and Papa Taiao Earthcare, 40 tamariki and rangatahi from across 8 Porirua schools met separately over a period of months, and then together at a one-day taiohi (youth) wānanga on 14 February 2025.

In the lead up to the wānanga, young people were provided with immersive experiences in Te Taiao, getting their hands dirty, planting trees and learning about composting and building soil. They were also involved in discussion: to develop shared understandings of t concepts of connection and response, which were central to the inquiry ques how they felt about what they already knew about climate change, and what needed to change.

At the wānanga, they came together once again in nature-based settings to write their own waiata and poems and make their own art to present to participants on Assembly Day Two. A rangatahi-led climate action group, Future Unity, emerged from that day: check out their Instagram [@futureunity](https://www.instagram.com/futureunity).

Taiohi connect in the lead up to the wānanga (photographer: Amanda Dobson, Enviroschools)**





Assembly participants reported feeling deeply affected by listening to the concerns of tamariki and rangatahi. In addition, some older rangatahi were invited to stay on for the three remaining days of the Assembly. When the Assembly recommendations were produced, it was clear that tamariki and rangatahi had had an impact.



Top: Tamariki and rangatahi at the Taiohi wānanga, 14 February 2025
Photographer: Marty Taylor, Papa Taiao Earthcare

Bottom: Tamariki and rangatahi present to Assembly participants, 22 February 2025
Photographer: Amanda Dobson



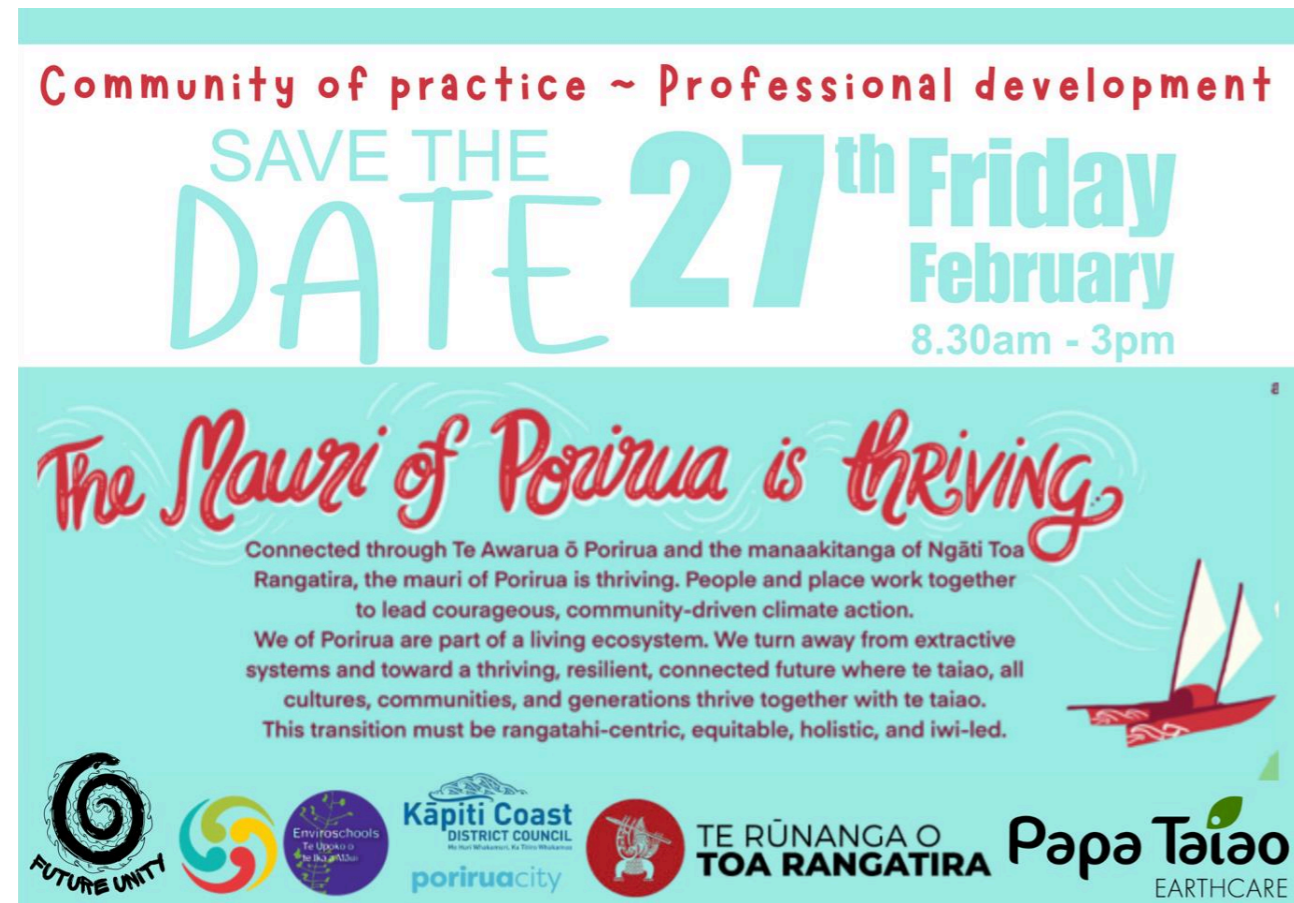
The Porirua Assembly on Climate recommendations - in summary form

(Design: League of Live Illustrators)

Throughout this process, connection to Te Taiao played a crucial role, highlighting how important being connected to the whenua, awa and moana is to build taiohi voice and agency in climate. Yet this occurred at a time when Outdoor Education is under serious threat in senior secondary school (Fleury, 2025). The challenge educators faced post-Assembly: how to build and embed Porirua tamariki and rangatahi learning and maintain their voice, agency and leadership in this time of turbulence?

Following the Assembly, several workstreams were set up and the educator group involved in organising the wānanga

agreed to pick up the Education one. Despite limited capacity and time, they envisioned building a Community of Practice (COP) in Porirua; its purpose, to build a kaiako network across Porirua around taiao-based learning experiences and practices that can support ongoing place-based connection for taiohi. An invitation was issued to kaiako across the city to attend a Community of Practice Professional Development Day on 27 February 2026. Organisers were delighted when 45 kaiako from across the city replied – including 12 from ECE, 29 from primary and 4 from secondary. Iwi representatives and the mayor also attended. The agenda for the day was grounded in local mātauranga and connection to place.



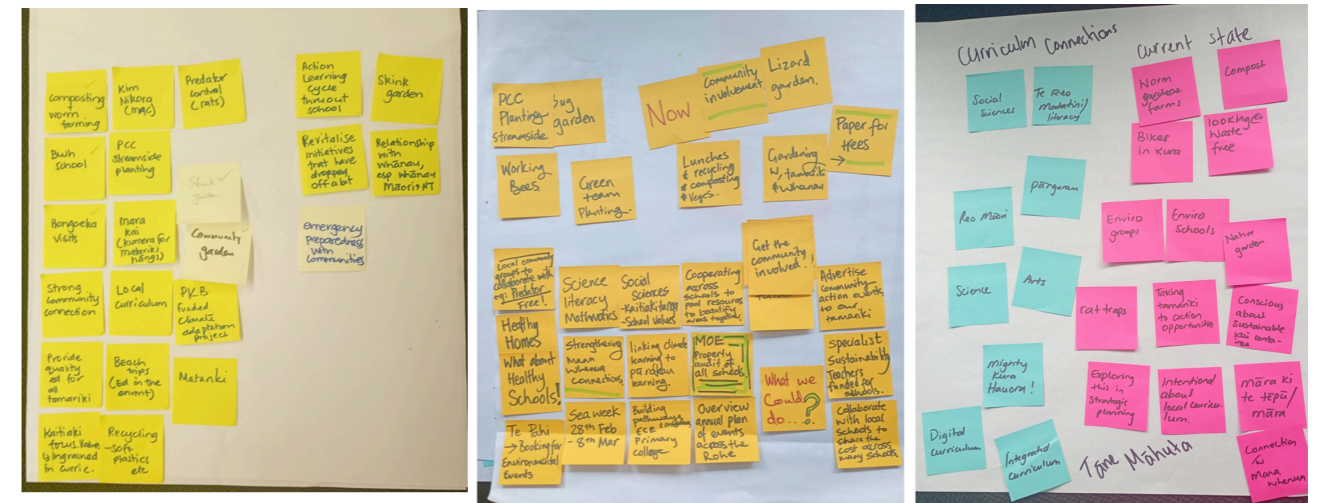
Invitation to the Community of Practice Day

(Design: Wairere Pene)

After ice breakers and whakawhanaungatanga, kaiako were briefed on the outcomes of the Assembly and provided with a guided tour of Mutumutu ki Mukukai – a powerful exhibition curated by Ngāti Toa Rangatira showing how colonisation has led to land loss, the poisoning of the harbour and the loss of access to kaimoana. They also learned about how the local community, Porirua City Council and Te Rūnanga o Toa Rangatira are working together through the Porirua Harbour Accord to restore the mauri of the harbour – Porirua’s original “Pak n Save”.

Kaiako then formed into clusters based on whether they worked at ECE, in the West, East, North, or in intermediate and secondary schools. When asked to share what they were already doing, kaiako were encouraged to realise how much they were already doing, and how much they could learn from their colleagues. At the same time, teachers discussed the need to embed what they were already doing in children’s ongoing learning. The seeds for an ongoing Community of Practice were sown.

At the end of the day, kaiako walked together across to the harbour-side, to reconnect with the whenua and the moana. The next steps? With support from the community educator team and the local Council, kaiako hope to keep



Kaiako gather by Te Awarua o Porirua/Porirua Harbour, 27 February 2026
Photographer: Amanda Dobson

communicating with and supporting each other – the aim being to support tamariki and rangatahi to connect with Te Taiao in ways that build voice and agency through affirming their sense of belonging and their cultural identities. There’s a widespread sense that this won’t be without its challenges – these efforts are happening at a time when ECE and schools are under pressure to do so much, when a formal commitment to Outdoor Education is under threat, and when connections to critical literacy and culturally responsive learning are being removed from the curriculum (Fleury, 2025; Ford & Jepsen, 2025). But as one kaiako said on the day, “the Porirua

Kaiako are already doing a great deal to connect taiohi to te taiao!
Photographer: Amanda Dobson

COP brings such hope and innovation in tumultuous times”.

What our experience points to is what can be done, when communities come together, to create space for young people to build collective voice, agency and leadership on climate change. Our learnings? Certainly, the enduring relationships held by the educator team across the Porirua community were important. Despite limited resources and little time, we drew on those relationships – with schools, teachers, children, and each other – to build space for taiohi involvement. The use of creative, culturally responsive methods and a separate, parallel wānanga process for young people were also critical to building young people’s voice and inclusion in the Assembly. Finally, being hosted by Mana Whenua and assistance from Assembly organisers provided an invaluable bedrock of support.

While much of Aotearoa may not have a climate plan, thanks to the Tiriti-based, iwi-led and citizen-powered Porirua Assembly on Climate, this is not the case in Porirua. The challenge now is to continue to sustain and extend the intergenerational learnings

from the Assembly, so that young people can be supported to not just to survive, but to thrive.

What would we tell others? While this situation presented challenges – and opportunities - educators in Aotearoa have always approached such challenges with strength and determination. We know how to connect and work creatively to empower children and learn from them. Our advice? Work with the willing to do what you can, where you are, with what you have. Despite the many challenges we face, educators are ideally situated in our communities to support children and young people to act on issues affecting them. Through community connection and collective action, educators can help ensure that taiohi voice, agency, and leadership in climate change, and all the other issues affecting them, is supported from the ground up.

*As this article went to publication, Porirua City Council passed its refreshed Climate Change Strategy. While the Strategy is not yet online, 29 of its 66 actions relate to the Assembly recommendations. Excitingly, it commits Council to “Engage with the younger generation most impacted by climate disruptions” by “encouraging continuous feedback and considering inputs from youth-led climate advocacy”. This was marked as “very high priority” in the action plan attached to the strategy, with staff time and budgets dedicated to it. This is a groundbreaking example in Aotearoa of the inclusion of taiohi voice in climate policy, and a direct result of young people’s involvement in the Porirua Assembly process.

** all photos used with permission

The lead author extends her grateful thanks to the University of Canterbury Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha for the Aho Hinātoe scholarship which enabled her to undertake her research.

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Glossary

- Awa** — river, stream, creek, canal, gully, gorge, groove, furrow
- Kaiako** — teacher, instructor
- Mana Whenua** — territorial rights, power from the land, group with authority over land or territory, power associated with possession and occupation of tribal land

- Mātauranga Mauri** — life principle, life force, vital essence, special nature, a material symbol of a life principle, source of emotions - the essential quality and vitality of a being or entity.
- Moana** — sea, ocean, large lake
- Papa kāinga** — original home, home base, village, communal Māori land
- Papa Taiao Earthcare** — An ecological restoration training organisation grounded in Mātauranga Māori
- Rangatahi** — younger generation, youth
- Taiohi** — youth, adolescent, young person, juvenile
- Tamariki** — children - normally used only in the plural
- Te Taiao** — world, Earth, natural world, environment, nature, country
- Te Tiriti o Waitangi** — Treaty of Waitangi
- Tuakana** — elder brother (of a male), elder sister (of a female), cousin (of the same gender from a more senior branch of the family), prefect
- Waiata** — song, chant, psalm
- Wānanga** — seminar, conference, forum, educational seminar
- Whakapapa** — genealogy, genealogical table, lineage, descent
- Whakawhanaungatanga** — process of establishing relationships, relating well to others
- Whanau** — extended family, family group
- Whenua** — land - often used in the plural

All kupu (words) except proper nouns sourced from [Te Aka Māori Dictionary](#)

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Conor (Pākehā) has worked for many years in the community sector and unions in Aotearoa and the wider Pacific. Her Master’s thesis (2022) explored the perspectives of education union members on how they centre te tino rangatiratanga of tamariki Māori in climate action. She is currently undertaking doctoral research at the University of Canterbury Te Whare Wānanga o Waitaha.

Wairere Pene

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Wairere works intuitively across practices including ako, wānanga, pure & tohi (ritual and ceremony), toi, and spatial design. She works to cultivate the inherent skills of taiohi to action change within their communities, with a focus on ‘Ko wai au’ (identity). Wairere is an environmental educator and community facilitator for Papa Taiao, working predominantly with secondary age groups and their community.

Orini Rokx-Taratu

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Orini was raised in Tokomaru Bay in Te Tairāwhiti. Deeply passionate about Te Taiao, she draws inspiration from her experiences of witnessing the effects of environmental degradation on her home community. Orini believes that the health of our people is reflected in the health of our whenua. She is a tuakana of Future Unity, a rangatahi-led climate action rōpū in Porirua.

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Amanda is Tangata Tiriti/Pākehā, born and raised in Te Whanganui a Tara. For the second half of her life she has been based in Porirua, in the rohe of Ngāti Toa Rangitira. An early childhood and primary educator of many years, predominantly in bilingual and Kaupapa Māori settings, she is part of the Enviroschools Te Upoko o te Ika a Māui regional team.

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Michele has had a lengthy career as a teacher and principal. Her Master’s thesis focused on cultural diversity and evaluation in schools. Before retiring in 2019, Michele led the re-establishment of a collaborative network of schools in Porirua East. She continues to work in educational leadership and curriculum development, particularly in the 2023 refreshed Social Sciences Curriculum and Aotearoa Histories.

Current Good Practice in EOTC: Lessons from a Sabbatical Inquiry

By Jenny Langrish

Introduction

As an educator committed to providing appropriate and safe Education Outside the Classroom (EOTC) opportunities for students, I conducted research on current good practice as part of my Secondary Senior Managers' Sabbatical (Term 3 2025). I gathered evidence by conducting surveys, visiting schools in both New Zealand and the UK, and engaged with EONZ for advice and guidance.

I have taught at Whanganui High School since 2001, and I have been a member of the senior leadership team since 2010. This sabbatical provided me with a unique opportunity for professional growth and development and the time to research current good practice across a variety of schools.

Whanganui High School conducts approximately 250 EOTC trips during a school year, with a huge variety of opportunities for students to experience education beyond the classroom walls. Geography, Biology and History field trips bring subjects alive, plus multiple sporting and cultural trips tap into the varied interests of our ākongā.

Purpose

The key objective of this sabbatical was to ensure appropriate policies and procedures were in place to enable ākongā to engage in safe, appropriate and well organised EOTC events. While the volume of supporting documentation is vast, providing staff with the support and time to navigate these requirements amidst the rapid pace and demands of daily teaching is vital.

The research into current good practice in EOTC highlights strategies that directly enhance student engagement, motivation, and achievement. By identifying effective models from both New Zealand and the UK, I found approaches that strengthen curriculum delivery, deepen authentic learning experiences, and improve equity of access.

Methodology

I visited schools in the UK and New Zealand, took part in Professional Learning and Development (PLD), administered and analysed survey results and engaged with current literature and policy.

In the UK I visited three schools and had an in-depth look at their processes to draw comparisons with New Zealand schools. In New Zealand, I visited a range of secondary schools and explored the systems used, plus cultivated collaborative networks with fellow educators for safe and effective practices.

Key Findings

1. Time and workload remain major barriers

The main challenges New Zealand staff face in EOTC included:

- Ensuring appropriate documentation is completed in a timely manner, whilst checking all risks are considered and mitigated.
- Recruiting staff and volunteers for trips, including qualified personnel suited for activities offered.
- Managing busy school calendars and balancing a variety of school events and academic needs.
- Recognising high teacher workload and acknowledging the significant time investment required.
- Addressing administrative fatigue regarding EOTC compliance

One of the clearest messages from the research was that effective completion of EOTC documentation and procedures takes a lot of staff time and this fact should be recognised and supported.

The main challenges UK staff face in EOTC included:

- Ensuring trips are linked to the curriculum and relevant to current course content.
- Finding the time to organise and provide trained staff for the trips.
- Managing student behaviour.
- Addressing issues such as trips being over-subscribed, so not all students can attend, which led to parental complaints.
- Balancing school schedules and the potential negative reduction of lesson time.
- Coping with the administrative issues,

such as communication with families, permission requirements and following up on finances.

Despite systems and terminology varying between countries, the core pressures were similar: time, staffing, cost, administration, communication with whānau, and the challenge of keeping EOTC manageable while still meaningful.

2. Strong systems reduce pressure and improve quality

Several schools developed sound practical systems to support staff and improve the consistency of EOTC processes.

- A variety of app and software use was reported. This had the bonus of finance, administration and risk assessment being in one place, but the downside of reduced flexibility to make changes, plus a longer timeframe was required.
- Compilation of a 'library' of risk management documents avoided repetition for staff (noting that specifics for new trips needed to be considered)
- Availability of school site risk plans ready for external visitors was advantageous.
- Effective PLD to all staff at the start of the school year led to consistency of knowledge and compliance.
- Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) set up for common trips and sports reduced workload from year to year.
- Senior leadership support and involvement in trips led to helpful feedback for improvement.
- Use of external providers to upload paperwork and give advice appeared prevalent in the UK.

A common theme for good practice was the streamlining of the processes, without

compromising compliance. Providing timely and effective PLD also led to comprehensive completion of the Risk Assessment and Supervision (RAS) by staff.

3. Collective preparation matters

The research highlighted that effective EOTC systems rely on shared responsibility rather than one person carrying the load.

The key is 'collective preparation of risk management'.

- Collective preparation of risk assessments is needed to ensure that all staff involved in trips are engaged in the process and share responsibility for safety. Any changes to staffing need to be considered.
- Effective Board input, as suited to each school, is required. Some schools set up sub-committees to look at EOTC due to the time pressures of full Board meetings.
- Allocating a dedicated EOTC coordinator has alleviated the administrative burden on teaching staff in some cases. There was a significant disparity in the budget and time allocation provided for the role across different schools.

4. Technology can help, but is not the whole answer

Digital platforms were increasingly being used to support EOTC administration, communication, and planning.

Schools used apps such as Schoolbridge, Notion, Smartsheet, and School Apps. Some schools utilised these platforms for other school administration purposes.

Survey responses and discussions led me to conclude that the use of Kamar as the platform for EOTC administration was not

the preferred platform, at least not in my school. At this stage, with multiple other changes in the NZ education sector, it was not the appropriate time to bring in a new system, but to reinforce good practice in existing systems.

The findings suggested that digital tools can support good systems, but they do not replace them.

5. EOTC remains highly valued

Across both contexts, EOTC continued to be seen as an important part of student learning and engagement.

UK schools, from my small sample, utilise more external EOTC platforms and providers. EOTC is still highly valued for student engagement across the age groups, subjects and extracurricular events. New Zealand schools have a greater focus on Outdoor Education. Whilst EOTC (and Outdoor Education as a subject) will still be a key part of many schools, government curriculum decisions will have a big impact on subject choice and pathways for a number of students.

The opportunities provided to our ākonga through EOTC are invaluable and reflect the strong outdoor culture we value as New Zealanders.

These findings reinforced the importance of continuing to prioritise high quality EOTC opportunities for young people.

Suggestions for the Sector

Survey respondents suggested:

- Facilitating more dialogue between local schools.
- Continuing to offer PLD, with ideas such as short videos highlighting the importance of key EOTC safety elements for teachers.

- Sharing quality documentation between schools (seeing actual trip forms in use).
- Streamlining all documentation (a huge amount available to schools, but it can feel like an unwieldy amount).

Conclusion

This sabbatical provided me with the time to visit schools and to investigate good practice in the field of EOTC.

I hope that EOTC (and Outdoor Education as a subject) will continue to be valued for all ākonga and that the importance as a whole-school priority is reaffirmed. Effective completion of EOTC documentation and procedures takes a lot of staff time and this fact should be recognised and supported. Collective preparation of risk assessments is vital to ensure that all staff involved in trips are engaged in the process and share responsibility for safety. Standard Operating

Procedures (SOPs) for common trips or repeated activities and sports can also help reduce workload from year to year and support greater consistency across staff and programmes.

Navigating the documentation required for safe EOTC outings, alongside the other numerous daily school operational matters, is a significant task. While the administrative requirements for safe EOTC experiences are undeniably extensive, the true value of EOTC is reflected in our ākonga long after they leave school; it's the ex-students who stop us in the supermarket, perhaps to reminisce about Geography trips among the Lake Tasman glacial ice or the memories of tournament week. At times, the 'tsunami' of paperwork may obscure our vision, but these lasting memories remind us why we persevere: the impact on our students is invaluable.



About the Author

Jenny Langrish is Deputy Principal at Whanganui High School, where she's been a fixture for the past 25 years. Her own passion for education outdoors initiated by the field trips offered during her Geography degree at Cambridge University.

Jenny was awarded a Secondary Senior Managers' Sabbatical to see how other schools are tackling education outside the classroom. When she isn't navigating trip documentation or balancing the demands of senior leadership at a busy secondary school, Jenny is usually out there herself, leading a Geography field trip, driving a minibus full of students, or training for her next marathon.

Bridging the Gap: Creating Pathways for Sustainability in the Junior Secondary Curriculum

By Yotam Kay

In this article, I share the development of a one-term course named 'Environmental Studies' at Hauraki Plains College for Year 9 students, as a possible pathway to engage students in Environmental Education (EE) in secondary schools. In this practice-based case study, I aspire to provide insights into the practical aspects and logistics of developing this new programme, my attempts to seek student voice through surveys and co-construction, and the insights students shared through end-of-course surveys.

When I first joined Hauraki Plains College (HPC) as a Horticulture and Sustainability Teacher, I was excited to offer a Year 12 Sustainable Futures course based on the level 2 Education for Sustainability (EfS) standards. However, to my disappointment, the course did not go ahead due to the low number of registered students. Fortunately, the attempt to integrate EE into HPC did not end there. The school Principal, Sharon Moller, developed an alternative plan: a one-term elective course for our Year 9s to build students' competencies and interest in sustainability, and serve as a pathway into senior sustainability.

Towards the end of 2024, after an initial course design, I provided HPC with a brief description of an Environmental Studies course for Year 9 students, which was passed to students to inform their course selections. To my delight, 42 out of 202 enrolled in Environmental Studies, one of 12 elective one-term courses, allowing us to open two cohorts for the 2025 school year.

The brief for the course was: "Learn about local and global environmental issues and what we can do about them. In this mostly outdoor class, you will create an environmental vision for the school, learn about our local environment, and design an environmental project around the issues you care about. Projects can include topics such as protecting nature and wildlife, sustainability in sport, waste and recycling, energy systems, and sustainable lifestyles such as fast fashion."

The course was designed with the motto 'In, For and About the Environment', and meant to provide students with a range of engaging and fun activities. While the course is informed by climate-change education and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (Bolstad, 2024; Everth et al, 2021; Petrie et al, 2020; Shephard et al, 2024), I adopted a hopeful approach to understanding environmental issues (Birdsall, 2020), emphasising collective actions that lead to sustainable futures (Hopkinson, 2020).

While I developed a detailed course outline, I took a co-constructive approach and regularly asked for students' input. An example of encouraging co-construction is that I started the course with a Think-Pair-Share activity, asking students for their ideas about what learning and activities this course should include before sharing my thoughts. I updated my unit plan to reflect students' requests and continued to encourage student input throughout each term. Based on the students' interests, key topics we covered in this course included: propagation, planting and caring for native trees; vegetable gardening and maintaining

a fruit orchard; waste minimisation and recycling; climate change and sea-level rise; and exploring the local environment within walking distance of the school.

As I sought advice and through conversations with our EOTC Coordinator and our Enviroschools Facilitator, I learnt about various places of interest I could take students out to explore the local environment within walking distance of the school. I also learnt that our school has a general policy for short, low risk walks in the local area, and that they do not require submitting and completing EOTC form, which reduces paperwork and allows for more activities. It is worth noting that in conversation with other teachers, I learnt that many do not know they can take students outside the school grounds for such short, low risk walks without an EOTC form.

Lessons at HPC are 75 minutes long, which comfortably allows for running outdoor activities. When asked, students were always eager to go outside, even when the weather was far from ideal. However, we also had indoor lessons during which students primarily worked on their course project or were assigned paper or Google Classroom activities when I was on sick leave. We spent about two weeks on each of our four key topics (native trees, waste and recycling, vegetable gardening, sea level and climate change), with most lessons starting with a 10- to 30-minute class activity that often included a worksheet or game related to the topic. These activities were completed individually or in pairs, followed by a classroom discussion and a brief explanation of the upcoming outdoor activity. If our outdoor activity required more time to get to and from the destination, I included only a brief



explanation of the day's activity.

Outdoor activities included: collecting and sowing native seeds (eco-sourcing), potting up native plants, planting and releasing native trees in the school's new wetland project; growing, weeding and harvesting vegetables in the school's horticulture area, pruning fruit trees and harvesting fruit on the school farm, visiting a local community garden; visiting the local recycling centre, exploring and designing waste and recycling systems at the school; exploring the Piako river, the drainage and flooding prevention infrastructure around Ngātea, breaches of the stop bank; with one course taking part in a Conservation Week event in Thames, and one course visiting the Ngātea Water Gardens.

Student feedback took many forms, including verbal and written activities, and catch-ups with individual students during lessons and breaks. The course assessment components included a pre- and post-test, a course assignment (student project), and participation in classroom and outdoor activities. Examples of projects students chose for their main assignment included: posters on sustainable fishing and recycling of various materials, Kahoots on native trees and climate change, and a blanket made from used chip bags, accompanied by a slide deck.

Towards the end of each term, students were asked to provide written feedback on the course, and 28 students from two cohorts completed it. The survey's purpose was to better understand students' experience of the course, and although the two cohorts included different activities, both followed a similar structure and covered similar topics. The survey included open-ended prompts such as: 'what I found interesting about this course', 'what were the best things about this course', 'what I



want to explore more about', and 'do you feel more motivated and knowledgeable to take action to help the environment after this course'.

While my observations and verbal communication with students support the results, I was surprised by the clarity of the feedback students provided in response to several prompts, especially those about what they enjoyed most. Key findings included:

- 100% of students reported that both the most interesting and best thing about the course was being outside;
- 71% specifically mentioned enjoying hands-on activities such as gardening and orcharding;
- 89% reported enjoying learning about planting and caring for native trees.

Interestingly, not a single student mentioned that classroom activities were enjoyable or the best part of the course. However, 21% chose to write that they found 'waste minimisation and recycling' interesting, and 32% mentioned that 'climate change' is interesting.

Supporting the data was the following comment made by a student regarding how the course could be improved - 'going outside instead of doing Kahoot in the classroom', which highlights that even what I perceived as a fun and engaging classroom activity, such as Kahoot, is still less appealing from their perspective than being outdoors.

More interesting outcomes of the survey came in answer to the prompt 'I want to explore more about', and included: 'learning more about growing food', 'learning about climate change and sea level rise', 'learning more about native animals', and 'how to live more sustainably'.

Another quote I found revealing of students' attitudes came in answer to the prompt "If you could give one piece of advice to a student thinking about taking this course, what would it be?" with one student commenting:

"It is lots of fun and it also feels rewarding because your [sic] not only learning, but your [sic] doing something for the environment."

While more thorough research is needed to affirm and expand on the outcomes of this case study, it seems that a significant number of students would like their classes to include more outdoor activities, which align with both students' interests and enjoyment. I think that such a course as the one we offered fills a gap in junior secondary schools and provides the continuity of EE, which is common in primary schools but less so in secondary schools (Bolstad, 2020).

While this course format might be suitable for other schools, I think educators should consider increasing the time they spend with students exploring their local school environment. For example, while I was teaching Year 9 Social Studies in 2025, I took my classroom outdoors eight times during the year, each aligned with our local curriculum. While taking a full class outdoors can be challenging, systems can be put in place to support a safe and productive learning environment in outdoor settings, both in and around the school.

Following a successful implementation in 2025, students' interest in Environmental Studies at HPC continues to grow. For the 2026 school year, 51 Year 9 and 51 Year 10 students chose to take a one-term environmental studies elective. It will be

interesting to follow up on whether these courses will affect students' senior course selection in 2027 and whether we will see an increase in students' interest in enrolling in courses such as senior social science (geography and sustainability in particular), horticulture, the sciences, and outdoor education.

As a side note, I am happy to report that this year, 26 Year 12 students chose to take a new course I designed, 'Sustainable Food Production', based on Horticulture unit standards and Education for Sustainability achievement standards. In conclusion, I hope this case study inspires other schools and educators to consider expanding their offerings of environmental studies courses and the range of outdoor and action-learning activities.

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About the Author

Yotam Kay has two decades of experience in environmental education and completed a Master's in Teaching and Learning with a specialty in Senior Sustainability. Yotam works as a teacher at Hauraki Plains College, co-authored two bestselling books, and established the award-winning market garden and education centre, Pākaraka Permaculture.

Making the Most of the Outdoor Classroom

By Naomi Ishihara

Every Outdoor Classroom programme (ODC) is different from one another. This is not only because every school has a different outdoor environment, but also because each school has different means of funding the programme, which affects the hours available to teachers and students. In this article, I will share my experience of being the ODC teacher at a Waldorf school in Aotearoa, NZ and how I developed and currently manage the programme.

The Motivation - Why the Outdoor Classroom?

In the Waldorf curriculum, there is a strong emphasis on engaging students in practical hands-on activities and developing a sense of reverence and gratitude toward the natural world. This is consistent throughout schooling from kindergarten to high school. As modern society provides fewer practical experiences in nature in the lives of Tamariki, the Outdoor Classroom has become more and more popular amongst Waldorf schools over the past few decades. Our school, inspired by similar programmes at other Waldorf schools in the country, started the Outdoor Classroom programme in 2023, funded by the Proprietor Trust as a 0.2 teaching position.

On a personal level, I am an advocate for free, unstructured play in an outdoor environment for all Tamariki. I believe play, a deeply engaging, creative act of free will, is one of the most fundamental ways in which Tamariki learn. Furthermore, play can heal us and make us whole. However, childhood



freedom, which enables free play critical for healthy child development, is eroding. Societal and cultural factors at various levels have contributed to this (Gray, 2023). Programmes such as Outdoor Classrooms and Nature Schools can provide students a space to be themselves, to create a balance in their lives, to heal, and nurture the connection with nature that all human beings are fundamentally in need of (Corlet, 2023).

The Framework

In school, the available outdoor environment, the students' developmental age, the hours and frequency of sessions, and the student-to-teacher ratio provide a framework for what an ODC could look like. At our school, classes of Year 2 to Year 5 attend a weekly ODC session at the school garden, which is our 'classroom'. Year 2 and 3 classes have a 60-min period, while Year 4 and 5 classes have a 75-min period. Each class has approximately 30 students with their class teacher and often with a teacher aide. The adult-to-student ratio is typically between 1:10 and 1:15.

Constraints and Realities

We are fortunate to have this programme to cater for the needs of students as well as delivering the Waldorf curriculum, which supports healthy human development in such profound ways. I personally found 60 minutes per week for students to be quite limited. We have 30 students in one relatively small space, which restricts my available time to engage with each student in more meaningful ways. These constraints highlight that the programme sits alongside students' wider school experience. So how can we make the most of this? Even a small amount of time outdoors can have a meaningful impact when it is used well.

Start From the 'Classroom' as the Best Teaching Resource We Have

Treating the environment as the primary teaching resource helps us make the most of the time students have in the Outdoor Classroom. Tamariki are naturally curious about their surroundings, and learning to understand and use their environment can be deeply empowering. Our programme is therefore shaped by what the environment offers.

The seasonal rhythm provides us with a natural flow of learning contexts. In spring, students often find broken eggshells, as well as dead baby birds that have fallen from nests in trees. These are great opportunities for the students to imagine what birds' lives are like. When tamariki find dead creatures in the garden, it often creates meaningful moments, as they process their understanding of life and death in their own ways. We often see students spontaneously create a grave for a dead bird they found, decorate it with flowers and sing a song or perform haka.

As the weather warms up, we plant vegetables according to a planting calendar and seasonal signs. Summer presents plenty of fruits and vegetables to harvest. We eat some and preserve the rest for later in the year. Summer is also when we do most of the natural dyeing, as the garden provides vibrant flowers, leaves and seed pods to dye fibre with. Autumn and winter are great for foraging and also working with tools and fire. This is the time we delve into the science and technology of fire making; students gain understanding and skills of starting and managing a small fire for cooking.

Every bit of learning that happens in the garden supports students in developing relationships with the environment, the connection, the sense of belonging, and, over time, the sense of kaitiakitanga.

The Session Structure

Starting and ending the session with a karakia is a valuable practice. It is not only culturally appropriate in Aotearoa but also helps create a clear mental and emotional transition into the learning space. Beginning with karakia signals to the group that a new learning space has been entered, and we are to leave everything else we had in our minds out of the space. This is also a practical way to support student focus and behaviour, particularly when the programme contains elements of risk such as sharp tools and fire. A high-focus learning activity happens in the first half of the session. I aim to leave at least 20–30 minutes of 'free play' time, allowing students to interact with the environment; we have school chickens they feed and care for, fruit trees they climb, and a hammock and rope swings to meet their sensory needs. We also have woodworking tools available for their spontaneous creative impulses.

Connecting with the Main Class Programme

As a supplementary programme, it works well to link with the students' main class programmes where appropriate. For instance, in the Waldorf curriculum, the Year 4 class has a unit of integrated lessons around farming and the community of people working together. They visit a farm as part of the main class programme and often come back with a bag of sheep fleece. At their ODC session, we process the fleece; washing it, carding it, making drop-spindles, spinning the wool, dyeing the yarn with what we forage in the garden, and then weaving a product using the yarn. This shows how raw wool is processed and how different people contribute to creating a finished product. They also engage in soil studies, learning how to nourish soil and grow food.



The Year 5 class has main class lessons about local geography. In their ODC sessions, we embark on the journey of learning about our local awa, its history of human impact, how to care for it through riparian planting, and developing an understanding of native vs introduced species. This builds an understanding of how interconnected our local ecological systems are. They set their own tracking tunnels in the garden and study the animals' prints with great fascination.

Communication is the Key

At the beginning of the year, I work with classroom teachers to map out a plan. We discuss what will be happening in the class programmes each term, what seasonal resources are available in the garden for specific learning contents, and make connections whenever appropriate. We then stay in touch week by week about any changes to the programme or timing.

At the end of each term, I send whānau an email overview of what the class has done. This helps them understand the purpose and outcomes of the programme more clearly. This has helped build stronger support from whānau, as they can clearly see how the programme made a difference in their tamariki. Sometimes whānau extend the learning at home.

The Differences it Made

Many parents comment that their tamariki look forward to Outdoor Classroom each week. Some have shared that, while out walking, their tamariki confidently identify poisonous plants they had learned to identify at their ODC with confidence. A mother shared with me that her daughter had become much more confident in the natural environment, and she insisted on going camping over the summer for the first time as a family, despite neither of the

parents being outdoor people. At the camp, she showed them how to build a fire with great pride. Another parent shared a quiet moment where she observed her 8-year-old son working alone in a garden; she said she was pleasantly surprised to see him carefully shaking the soil off the roots onto a garden bed, instead of throwing everything into a pile, noting his developing understanding of how to work in the earth.

We see the differences the programme makes. Each may be small, but together they are meaningful.

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Author Bio

Naomi Ishihara has taught both in the Primary and ECE sectors over the past 15 years and currently works as the Outdoor Classroom teacher in Christchurch Rudolf Steiner School. She has a background of studying Permaculture Design, developing and teaching Ecological Literacy programme and leading a one-day nature school programme in Christchurch.



Unconventional Spaces of Learning are spaces of hope for tamariki with diverse learning needs.

By Katie Earle, Usol Project Lead,
Dr Judy Bruce, Senior Lecturer, AUT

“Sione and Manaia*, two Y4 Pacific Island boys, came to our school, and didn’t talk. They cooperated but didn’t engage. Yet they were not defiant. We put them into our (newly started) Bush School. In that term, the Bush Teacher decided that the kids would make bow and arrow with the aim that each child hit a target. Sione and Manaia immediately knew what to do, and how to make it. They had their bows and arrows made in no time, and the other kids in the outdoor classroom were like ‘Woah’. Then Sione and Manaia started talking. The Bush Teacher invited Sione and Manaia to teach the other children how to make them. And from that point on, they both talked and engaged in all parts of their school life.”*
(School Principal)

After trialing the Usol in this school, the children attending showed improved attendance, fewer behavioural incidents and more engaged learning. The Usol is now a non-negotiable part of their school culture, and the principal shared that “the previous two ERO reviewers adored what we were doing within our Bush School”.

So, what exactly are USoLs?

Across Aotearoa we are seeing a growing grassroots movement of Unconventional Spaces of Learning (USoL). Usol are flexible learning environments usually focused on the holistic developmental needs of tamariki outside the classroom walls. These are not ‘extras’ or interventions—they are

experience pathways that can stand alongside and complement classroom learning. USoLs may exist as hybrid models within or associated with schools, or as standalone programmes without direct association with schools.

Over several years we have explored many USoL models across Aotearoa. Each USoL is unique with different approaches and foci, ranging from structured to unstructured ranges of play based learning, and each responding to unique local taiao. Some schools spend half a day or a whole day each week in the local reserve. Others have created an outdoor classroom space in their school grounds.

In this article we share some of the stories regarding USoL in outdoor environments, with insights from school leaders, kaiako and whānau.

Safe spaces to regulate

Being outside and co-regulation were key elements across these USoL spaces. Practical skills—the doing, such as fire-lighting or invertebrate studies—were important competencies for kaiako, yet what mattered more was the being aspect. Practitioners who noticed and explored their own nervous system regulation, were more likely to model spaces for tamariki to do this too. They could support co-regulation, open pathways for safety, agency, reasoning, and affirm the mana and gifts of tamariki.

The natural environment offered both a physiological and emotional reset for tamariki who attended. The elements of the outdoors activated the parasympathetic nervous systems (the relaxation response) which reduced levels of stress and supported tamariki to experience calmness. Kaiako and whānau shared how this often contrasted sharply with the overstimulation of an indoor busy environment, where many neurodivergent tamariki experienced states

of fight, flight or freeze—biologically blocking them from learning.

Tamariki need hope

One principal reflected that when a child has not yet developed self-regulation, or does not recognise what they are feeling or know how to manage their emotions, where is there hope? Especially if they experience themselves at the bottom of the class, day in, day out. The same principal observed that when a child knew they had their weekly USoL day, they carried a sense of hope into Monday and Tuesday, followed by a feeling of warmth later in the week, and were noticeably more settled on Thursday and Friday.

Likewise, this same pattern was seen at another school, where Johnny* was a whirlwind on arrival, and couldn't focus on learning activities. Along with this, he displayed regular physical and aggressive behaviours. Yet after his USoL—a day of unstructured play with an independent provider—he had his most settled day at school, because he had just filled up his bucket through experiencing an environment that supported his mana. This same sentiment was echoed by his parent, “This USoL programme has been a real lifeline for our family”.

Similar stories were shared from classroom teachers, parents, principals, advisors and hapū across the motu—there was improved focus, academic performance, emotional regulation and social engagement in the classroom and at home.

Try it for a season

In all the USoL programmes we visited between 2022–2025, we heard that each one began as a trial. One teacher in a school started with a trolley, and a handful of children. Today, three and a half years later, they have built an outdoor classroom

and have a regular Bush School four days per week. Another provider, an independent organisation, approached a school to take a handful of children out for a morning, once a week. Now, two years on, it is part of their school culture. Whatever path you may choose to take, start with a trial, a season. Just give it a go!

Resources and Research

We encourage you to head to [our website](#) to learn more about our USoL research and the resources we have produced to support educators and organisations.

The [‘How To Guide’](#) is a clear and practical step-by-step guide for helping you give hope to our most dsregulated children in our primary schools.

The [Phase 4 Research Report](#) outlines the findings that underpinned our How To Guide.

The [Highlights Summary](#) shares the summary of the four phases of research.

*Names have been changed to protect the children's privacy



About the Authors

Katie Earle

I come to this research as a Bush School founder and teacher, and as a long-time advocate for this specialised form of learning. Over time, this work has also positioned me as a practitioner-researcher and connector, working alongside schools, providers, and communities across Aotearoa. My lived experience inevitably shapes how I interpret and present these findings, including how I recognise their value and their relevance for practical application in real-world educational settings.

Dr Judy Bruce

My background is in Alternative Education, youth development and education. I work as Senior Lecturer at AUT and Associate at the Leadership Lab.

In Memory of Mike Boyes

Kua wheturangitia koe, e te rakatira. Ahakoa kua wehe atu koe ki te pō, ka mau tonu tōu aroha me tō manai roto i ō mātou ngākau. Moe mai e te rangatira.

You have become a star, our esteemed leader. Although you have passed, your love and mana will always remain.



It is with deep sadness that we acknowledge the passing of Associate Professor Mike Boyes, recipient of the EONZ honour Te Tumu herenga waka, herenga tangata.

Mike has had an enormous influence on outdoor education in Aotearoa over many decades - as a lecturer, researcher, mentor, leader, writer, and advocate for the value of learning beyond the classroom. Through his work, thinking, and relationships, he helped shape generations of educators and the wider outdoor education sector.

His contribution was recognised nationally through the New Zealand Order of Merit in 2010 for service to education and outdoor pursuits, and with the Sport NZ Lifetime Achievement Award in 2022.

The title Te Tumu herenga waka, herenga tangata recognises someone who binds people together through leadership, connection, and service. It is hard to think of a more fitting reflection of Mike's contribution.

Many people in our community will have their own stories, memories, lessons, and moments connected to Mike. His impact reached far beyond programmes or publications; it lived in conversations,

mentoring, encouragement, challenge, and the way he helped people think more deeply about outdoor education and our place within it.

Our thoughts are with Helen, Mike's whānau, friends, colleagues, former students, and the many people across the sector feeling this loss.

We know many people across our community will want to share stories and memories of Mike.

We have created a memory board where people can contribute photos, reflections, stories, short videos, or small moments that capture who Mike was and the impact he had.

There is no pressure to write something perfect. A few words, a photo, or a simple memory would be very welcome.

Please contribute [here](#)

Ngā mihi nui Mike. Thank you for all you gave to outdoor education in Aotearoa. Your influence and legacy will continue to travel with us.

Please note, we are currently working on a way to honour Mike, and we will have further details in our future communications.



The Mountains Won't Make Me Choose: Queerness in the Outdoors

By Laura Hermans

“My name is Laura, my pronouns are they/them, and I will be your instructor for this week.”

Sometimes sniggering, sometimes silent. Our youth aren't often used to the practice of introducing yourself with pronouns. This time, I see the eyes of one of the kids lit up. An almost imperceptible change in their posture. Head slightly higher, shoulders slightly straighter. I know they will come find me to have a chat later. I feel confident, empowered, and itchy. Though my leg hair is a luscious and soft fur, I learn it's not long enough to deter the determined sandflies of the Lewis Pass.

In the near three decades of my life, I have seen the environment queer people grow up in change extensively. From my parents not understanding what 'a non-binary' is, to kids at camp off-hand asking me 'if you're not a mister or a miss, what should we call you instead?', swinging all the way back again to the government trying to push queer folk further back into the margins with policy changes such as the controversial and contested ban on puberty blockers (RNZ, 2025).

Gay and trans rights have thankfully progressed in the past decades, from decriminalising sexual intercourse between males in 1986 (Homosexual Law Reform Act 1986, 1986), to the ban on conversion therapy in 2022 (Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act 2022, 2022). Yet, the rainbow community still faces specific stressors rooted in societal discrimination, bias, and marginalisation. Often, this impacts mental health significantly. Persistent discrimination, exclusion, and

heteronormative expectations contribute to heightened stress levels, which result in increased rates of anxiety, depression, and suicidality (Shaikh et. al, 2024).

I am seven years old, standing in the schoolyard of a Dutch primary school. This is where I grew up. It's gym class, and our teacher divides the teams: girls versus boys. This makes me feel bad in ways a seven-year-old can hardly explain. I know which side they expect me to be on, but I don't understand why they do or why I don't like it.

One of the places in which the stressors for rainbow youth are amplified are our spaces of movement. The spaces where we teach and instruct gym class, sports teams, outdoor activities and school camps, all pose challenges of varying degrees in terms of expectations around getting changed and levels of privacy. Research shows that rainbow youth face more barriers to meet minimum physical activity recommendations (Sport New Zealand, 2025) and are about half as likely to be involved in sporting events (Yee, A. et. al, 2025). Trans and non-binary twelve-year-olds especially, have the lowest level of sport participation out of all groups in Aotearoa, New Zealand (Evans, et. al, 2023).

I too experienced a large amount of stress in my adolescence around my gender and sexual identity. During this time, I dropped out of my all-female field hockey team. I still remember the disgusted whispers about my leg hair during the halftime break of one of our pick-up games. It was wispy, blonde, prickly and quite short because I was still attempting to conform to expectations by shaving it. The inquisitive gazes of my teammates, however, already understood that I was failing to conform to 'womanhood' in the way we were all being taught by

society. Changing rooms, bunk rooms, tent groups, most competitive sports teams: they all are often segregated based on a binary view of gender. Offering separate facilities for boys and girls can help reduce misconduct and abuse (Sport New Zealand, 2020). However, when we don't have strong policies and practices in place on what to do when youth come through whom don't identify within that binary system, the very design intended for safety can cause significant distress to them and can act as an opening for bullying and harassment instead. Thankfully, organisations like Inside Out have excellent resources like Making Schools Safer (2021) that provide tools on how to make sure every student experiences a sense of safety.

For me, it was the outdoors that provided me with a sense of safety, when all other spaces of movement failed me. Trapped in 'boys versus girls', changing rooms I didn't want to be in and all-female teams, and with no representation or education to understand my own experiences, it was long distance hiking that provided me with a freedom to just be me.

On the trail, the trees don't expect anything from me. They don't make me pick a side of an arbitrarily drawn line. The only thing that matters about my chest is whether I can take the next deep breath. The only thing that matters about my legs is whether they have the strength for the next step. The mountain doesn't care who I am. The sense of relief that came with this was so strong for me, I changed careers from politics into outdoor education. I want every rainbow kid to have access to that same feeling I had.

Outdoor education can be the vehicle to provide that. Being away from the stressors of daily life is especially valuable to those students who might experience



marginalisation and discrimination in their day-to-day existence. Letting these students know that they are safe and are being seen can have a profound effect on their wellbeing.

I have witnessed this firsthand. I share my pronouns and a piece of my identity, and often the rainbow students flock to me. Tell me with glee about their rainbow clubs or queer movie nights. They gloat about their first girlfriend, though they might swear me to secrecy, because they're not out yet in their 'real lives'. I spend three days with these teens and get to know things their parents don't know.

A growing up in New Zealand study (Neumann et. al., 2023) found that 15% of young people selected 'mostly a boy', 'somewhere in the middle', or 'mostly a girl' when asked about their gender identity.

Approximately one out of every 100 respondents in a Youth19 study identified with a minority gender such as Trans boy, Trans girl, Non-binary, Agender, Takatāpui, Fa'afafine, Fa'atatama, Akava'ine or other options (Fenaughty et. al, 2019). These aren't just statistics. This is the lived reality of many students coming into the places where we teach. Places, which if we tend to them right, can be safe havens from the rising anti-rainbow sentiment in society (Plum & Zhuge, 2024).

Now especially, our queer and takatāpui youth need to see our allyship. They are being actively excluded in other places, such as the removal of gender from sexual education (Lardies, 2024) or the disestablishment of the Māori Health Authority, including removing requirements for takatāpui input to the health system (Rainbow Support Collective, 2024). It's up to us to actively include our disenfranchised students in OE programmes.

As the whakataukī reminds us, **Ahakoā he iti he pounamu** (*although it is small, it is precious*). Inclusive practice is as easy as offering your pronouns to a group and holding space for them to offer theirs if they want to. It's as systemic as knowing how you design tent groups if there's students that don't fit in with either gender, and it's as assertive as pulling students up on their words and making sure they don't use words such as 'gay' or 'queer' as a curse or slur.

Personally, I am unapologetic and assertive in my identity. My light shines bright so our tamariki and rangatahi don't feel like they must dim theirs. Every kid, regardless of their identity, deserves to grow up with the same baseline of psychological safety. Every kid, regardless of their identity, should be able to participate in sports, to go on camp



and to connect to nature. To belong in our outdoor spaces. The beauty is, you don't have to be part of the rainbow community yourself to be a strong ally and facilitate this. The most important thing is that you're unwavering and clear in your support. Do this, and you'll get to see the true shine of students' joy that they might try to dim for the purpose of fitting in. I have seen kids who were straggling behind on hikes riddled with anxiety suddenly boosting to the middle of the pack and pushing themselves to give their all after learning they won't be judged. It's a privilege to witness this, and I wish these kids to be able to feel that safe and shine that bright beyond the handful of instructors who look or speak like me.

As an educator, you don't have to have all the answers. You don't have to be an expert. All you have to do is try. The biggest impact an educator made for me growing up was to pull me aside one time and to gently ask me if I 'was the same' as another kid in class

who had just come out as trans. By asking me this question, the space between girl and boy opened up, and there I could be seen for who I was. That, largely, was enough.

Unsure how to best support our rainbow youth or where to start? Offer your pronouns to a group, wear a rainbow pin, but above all make sure you can hold the tender conversations that might follow. Learn, make mistakes, apologise, be humble, and repeat. Experiential learning, you're familiar with it! EONZ has a great rainbow resource on their website, and I'm always open for a chat.

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About The Author

Laura Hermans (they/them) is a queer poet, (outdoor) educator and systems change agent, among others. They're the founder of Soft Pals Club, championing vulnerability as a strength and the start-up Wild Pride camps: Rites of Passage camps for queer people. They are passionate about sustainability, inclusion, and justice. Originally from the Netherlands they used to work in political communication before taking their values into the – literal – field of outdoor education. If you have any questions about queer inclusive practices, they welcome you to get in touch.

Recognising Practical Intelligence in Outdoor Education

Reframing Academic Rigour in Secondary and Tertiary Contexts

By David Williams

Outdoor Education in Aotearoa New Zealand has long held a place within schooling and tertiary education. The field simultaneously draws on theory and lived experiences, the classroom and te taiao, reflection and praxis. Yet despite its experiential foundations, assessment practices have often emulated more traditional academic assessment methods, favouring written reports, reflective essays, and post-activity analysis as primary demonstrations of learning within NCEA

Achievement Standards and in tertiary settings. In an era where artificial intelligence can generate polished written responses with increasing ease, educators must ask a pressing question:

How do we ensure that students genuinely understand what they are learning in Outdoor Education?

This theoretical article proposes practical intelligence as a construct for reframing academic rigour in secondary and tertiary Outdoor Education pathways from Levels 2 through 7. Practical intelligence recognises that intelligence is not only articulated in writing; it is enacted in applied skilfulness, contextual judgment, adaptive problem solving and embodied knowledge. Rather than diminishing academic excellence, practical intelligence may serve to strengthen it.

Practical Intelligence Matters in Outdoor Education

The New Zealand Curriculum (2007) states that Outdoor Education in Aotearoa New Zealand is characterised by experiential learning in spaces beyond the four walls of the classroom that support personal, social, and environmental development. Through shared outdoor experiences, students develop leadership, resilience, cooperation, and a connection to place. Programmes increasingly recognise Māori values such as kaitiakitanga, manaakitanga, and whakawhanaungatanga, emphasising relationships between people, community, and the environment (Williams, 2025). Together these elements reflect a holistic, place-responsive approach to learning that supports the development of individual and collective hauora and responsible engagement with the outdoors (New Zealand Curriculum, 2024; Williams, 2025).

Traditional academic intelligence has often been associated with analytical and linguistic performance (Sternberg, 1999). Essays, examinations, and written reports have long been considered markers of higher-order thinking (University of Waikato, n.d.). While these types of assessments remain valuable, they can inadequately capture competence in experiential disciplines (Deneen & Boud, 2022).

Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that learning is situated; it develops through participation in authentic contexts. Kolb (1984) similarly positions experiential learning as foundational to understanding. If Outdoor Education is inherently experiential, then our assessment approaches must reflect that reality. Practical intelligence reframes assessment around knowledge-in-action: the capacity to apply theory through embodied, contextual performance.

Theoretical Foundations of Practical Intelligence

The concept of practical intelligence is not a new notion and has been a basis for multiple scholarly articles. Sternberg (1985) describes practical intelligence as the ability to apply tacit knowledge to real-world situations. In outdoor contexts, this might involve adjusting a route due to changing river levels or modifying a group plan based on group dynamics.

Polanyi (1966) reminds us that “we know more than we can tell” (p.4). Experienced outdoor leaders often read environmental cues instinctively, sensing weather shifts or anticipating risk management scenarios before enacting responses. This tacit knowledge is not accidental; it reflects deeply internalised comprehension. Merleau-Ponty (1962) extends this further by positioning the body as a primary site of knowing. Movement, skill acquisition, balance, proprioception, and environmental awareness are cognitive processes embodied. In outdoor pursuits, fluidity and innate demonstration often characterise proficiency. Hatano and Inagaki (1986) distinguish between routine expertise and adaptive expertise with Outdoor Education requiring the latter as environments are dynamic. Weather shifts, equipment can fail, group morale fluctuates, so students must adapt knowledge to unpredictable realities.

Mātauranga Māori and Learning Through Doing

Outdoor Education in Aotearoa cannot be detached from mātauranga Māori. Māori pedagogical traditions emphasise akoranga ā-ringaringa; learning through doing. These pedagogies suggest: Learning is reciprocal (ako); Understanding emerges through engagement with te taiao and through

participation within community (Royal, 2003); knowledge is relational, contextual, and demonstrated through contribution (Hemara, 2000; Mead, 2003) and grounded in whakapapa (Bishop & Berryman, 2006; Smith, 2012).

Within Wintec's Outdoor Education programmes where I work, this alignment is visible through place-based learning in local environments, supported by wānanga-style reflection, kaitiakitanga practices, noho (overnight) experiences, and hands-on risk management. Practical intelligence resonates strongly with this bicultural context. It acknowledges that intelligence is enacted through relationship, with people, place, and environment. Moreover, the transition from a traditional, colonial pursuits-based model to a place-responsive model, reflects the partnership of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Wattchow & Brown, 2011). This prompts the need to adapt our assessment methods to recognise the pillars of knowledge within practical intelligence.

The Four Pillars of Practical Intelligence in Outdoor Education

Practical intelligence in Outdoor Education can be understood through four interconnected key competency pillars. See figure 1. which was created to show how the competencies interrelate.

1. Applied Skillfulness

Students demonstrate technically sound and contextually appropriate skill execution. Whether setting anchors, managing group spacing on a ridge, or executing paddle strokes efficiently, applied skillfulness reflects the integration of theory and technique. It is not simply physical ability; it

is repetitive intentional practice (Ericsson et al., 1993).

2. Contextual Judgement

Outdoor environments require real-time decision-making grounded in safety, ethics, and environmental awareness. Contextual judgement includes relevant route choice, hazard identification, cultural respect for place, and group management. This pillar reflects adaptive expertise (Hatano & Inagaki, 1986).

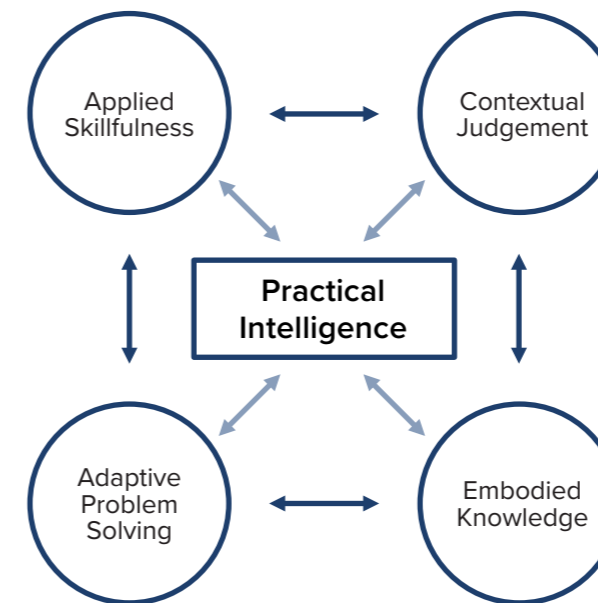
3. Adaptive Problem Solving

Outdoor settings are inherently unpredictable. Hatano & Inagaki (1986) believe adaptive problem solving involves integrating situational data and theoretical knowledge to respond effectively. For tertiary learners, it may involve designing contingency protocols and secondary students being able to adjust a plan on the fly. Adaptive problem solving distinguishes competent participation from genuine leadership.

4. Embodied Knowledge

Embodied knowledge recognises that movement literacy, proprioceptive awareness, and environmental connection reflect cognitive depth (Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Students demonstrate understanding through how they move, how they position themselves within terrain, and how they regulate effort. Tacit knowledge (Polanyi, 1966) becomes visible in fluidity and anticipation.

These pillars do not operate in isolation. Together, they reveal whether learning has been internalised and can be enacted responsibly.



(Figure 1. D. Williams, 2026)

Preserving Academic Rigour Across Levels 2-7

In secondary NCEA Outdoor Education and tertiary programmes (Levels 2-7), academic expectations increase progressively. Students move from participation toward leadership, from skill acquisition toward programme design and facilitation.

Cognitive learning taxonomies help structure the progression of learning and provide a framework for aligning learning outcomes with increasing levels of complexity (Bloom, 1956). A commonly used model is Bloom's taxonomy, which identifies a hierarchy of cognitive processes including remembering, understanding, applying, analysing, evaluating, and creating (Ibid; Anderson & Krathwohl, 2001). Within the New Zealand Qualifications Framework (2024), this progression is often reflected through the verbs used in learning outcomes, such as demonstrate or identify at Level 2, demonstrate and evaluate at

Level 3, explain and apply at Level 4, analyse and adapt at Level 5, plan and reflect Level 6, and critically analyse or design at Level 7. However, the level of learning is not determined by verbs alone. The context, complexity, and degree of learner autonomy also increase across qualification levels. In Outdoor Education, this progression is particularly evident as students move from demonstrating practical skills in structured settings to planning, analysing, and critically evaluating experiences in dynamic outdoor environments, resulting in increasingly rigorous forms of practical intelligence.

Expanding the Definition of Academic Excellence

A commonly used phrase in education is that 'everybody is a genius, but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid'. Assessment should aspire to promote an environment where ākongā have opportunities to display *their* genius.

Deneen and Boud (2022) argue that assessment reform must focus on what truly matters for capability development. In Outdoor Education, what matters is whether students can safely and ethically perform their learning. Furthermore, in a context where written outputs may be artificially generated, live, situated assessments strengthen academic integrity (Gikopoulos & Smith, 2024). When students can both explain and enact their learning, academic rigour is strengthened.

Progression in assessment can be expressed by associating increasingly complex verbs aligned to cognitive learning taxonomies that enable the design of

practical assessments which capture the required depth of understanding from levels 2 to 7. Gardner (1999) argued that intelligence is multifaceted and Outdoor Education inherently makes this multiplicity visible. Importantly, practical intelligence does not eliminate reflective writing or theoretical analysis, rather, it confirms these skills through embodied, demonstrative reflective practice.

Moving forward, the four key competency pillars of practical intelligence could help to provide a framework for determining how ākonga demonstrate depth up understanding within practical assessment settings, ensuring that performance-based evidence reflects applied competence and level appropriate cognitive complexity.

Conclusion

Outdoor Education in Aotearoa New Zealand is a multifaceted and diverse field, deeply rooted in the country's unique cultural and environmental context (Irwin et al., 2014). Practical intelligence offers a coherent concept for assessing Outdoor Education in secondary schools and tertiary programmes levels 2-7, whilst aligning with our nation's bicultural context.

As educators we must be responsive to 'other ways' of knowing that differ from the Western dominant paradigm in which we may have been educated (Berryman, et. al, 2013). Drawing on Sternberg's applied reasoning, Polanyi's tacit dimension, Merleau-Ponty's embodied cognition, adaptive expertise theory, and Māori pedagogies of *akoranga ā-ringaringa*, this article positions practical intelligence to reframe what it means to academically excel in experiential education.

Practical intelligence aligns closely with established learning taxonomies; its four

pillars offer a clear pathway for assessment and rubric design. Outdoor education has always held a kaupapa (theme) lived in the doing, it affirms that action is not separate from intellect, but a way to express it. In a shifting educational landscape, recognising this is not just valuable, it is pertinent.

Mā te huruhuru ka rere te manu With feathers, the bird can fly.

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About the Author

David Williams is Programme Lead for the Bachelor of Sport and Exercise Science at Wintec in Aotearoa New Zealand. An experienced outdoor educator, his work focuses on experiential learning, practical intelligence, and authentic assessment. He is passionate about embedding mātauranga Māori within teaching practice and spends any spare time in, on, or under the ocean.

Support for Educators: Resources and Professional Learning

We're here to help you access relevant and effective resources, support and professional learning opportunities. Both EONZ and NZAEE receive funding through the Networks of Expertise initiative, with a focus on peer-to-peer delivery to build capability and support kaiako throughout Aotearoa.



In this section we outline and provide links to the support available from our organisations and highlight some recommended resources to read, watch and listen to.

New Zealand Association for Environmental Education

Visit our website www.nzaee.org.nz to find resources and support for teaching environmental and sustainability education including:

— Resource Catalogue

Find teaching resources for all levels, across a range of learning contexts, with a focus on environmental and sustainability teaching and learning in Aotearoa. You can search using keywords, or use the filters for education level, context and region.

— Professional Learning Resources

Access research, articles, webinars, books and guides to support your personal and professional learning. These are updated regularly and include collections related to current issues or priorities, such as local curriculum and climate education.



— Providers Database

With over 300 listings for organisations, programmes and groups around Aotearoa, you can filter by location and learning context to find support near you.

— Spotlights: Stories and Curated Collections

We also share inspiring stories and highlight providers and resources related to seasonal events and other relevant themes.

— Events

We have a dedicated space to promote events that are relevant for educators, including online and in person opportunities. Please get in touch if you'd like us to share your event (contact@nzaee.org.nz).

To stay in the loop about new content and upcoming webinars or networking events, you can sign up to our newsletter through our website or follow us on [Facebook](#)

Education Outdoors New Zealand (EONZ)



EONZ supports schools, kura, and educators across Aotearoa to provide meaningful, safe, and place-responsive learning beyond the classroom. Through resources, professional learning, advocacy, and practical support, EONZ works to strengthen Outdoor Education and Education Outside the Classroom (EOTC) for all ākonga.

Visit www.eonz.org.nz to access resources, explore PLD opportunities, and find out more about how EONZ can support your school or organisation.

Resources and Curriculum Support

The EONZ website hosts a growing range of free resources to support educators working in Outdoor Education and EOTC contexts. This includes practical teaching resources, research, curriculum support materials, case studies, videos, and examples of good practice from across Aotearoa.

Resources support areas such as local curriculum design, place-responsive learning, Te Ao Māori and mātauranga Māori, school camps, outdoor learning, and experiential approaches to teaching and learning.

— EOTC Safety Management

EONZ provides extensive support for schools in developing and strengthening EOTC safety management systems. This includes toolkits, templates, guidance documents, self-review tools, and practical examples designed to help schools build effective and workable systems that align with good practice.

— Professional Learning and Development (PLD)

EONZ offers a range of PLD opportunities for schools, kura, and organisations. Workshops and support are available across areas, including Outdoor Education pedagogy, EOTC safety management, local curriculum development, school camps, place-responsive practice, and weaving mātauranga Māori into programmes.

— Teaching and Learning Support

EONZ supports educators and school leaders with curriculum and programme development, helping schools design learning that is engaging, authentic, locally grounded, and connected to the aspirations of Te Mātaiaho and their local communities.

— EOTC Management Support

EONZ works alongside schools and kura to strengthen EOTC systems and processes. Support may include reviewing documentation, refining systems, strengthening planning processes, and helping schools embed sustainable good practice across their organisation.

— Tailored Review and Support

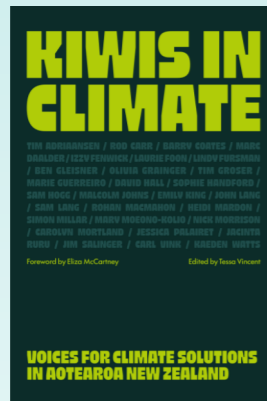
Schools and organisations can access tailored support and review processes specific to their context and needs. This may include support with programme development, curriculum integration, EOTC systems, school camp revisioning, strategic planning, or strengthening confidence and capability within staff teams.

What We're Reading...

Kiwis in Climate

Voices for climate solutions in Aotearoa NZ

The book brings together bold and practical visions for Aotearoa to lead on climate solutions. Leading scientists, politicians, CEOs and citizens demonstrate what we are doing now – and what we must do – to mitigate and adapt to the impacts of climate change. This inspiring collection from over 30 New Zealanders explains how climate solutions can improve our lives, from cheaper energy to job creation and healthier communities. Where progress on climate is happening, efficiency is improving, costs are coming down and innovation is rising.



Students learn some of their most important lessons outside

Rod McNaughton

Newsroom article published March 19, 2026
Outdoor education is not just about where it leads, but what it develops – teamwork and problem-solving skills, resilience, and self-awareness.

Let the Rivers Speak

Dan Hikuroa

E-Tangata article published April 12, 2026
Our rivers need more space to be themselves, says earth systems scientist Dan Hikuroa, both to reduce the risks to people and infrastructure, and for their own health and vitality.

What We're Listening to...

Beyond the Bin: Reimagining Waste through Atua, Whakapapa, and Interconnection

L'Rey Renata (Ngāpuhi, Tainui, Ngai Te Rangī)
keynote from Zero Waste Aotearoa 2025 Hui

This kōrero explores how mātauranga Māori and our relationships with Atua can guide a more meaningful response to waste – one that goes beyond systems and strategy, and instead centres mauri, whakapapa, and responsibility to the generations to come. It's a gentle challenge to shift from managing waste to restoring balance – in ourselves, our communities, and our environments.

The Land Loves You Back - Robin Wall Kimmerer

The Nature Of podcast with Willow Defebaugh

Willow sits down with Robin Wall Kimmerer, beloved scientist, author of Braiding Sweetgrass, and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation. They explore the shift from learning about to learning from nature, understanding that the land loves us back, and Robin's new Plant Baby Plant initiative. Robin invites us to step back into belonging, and to see the natural world not as something separate from us, but as a generous teacher offering guidance every single day. This conversation is full of wonder and clarity, and it just might change the way you walk outside.

tuiā ki tawhiti

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For registrations, programme updates, and conference information:

www.tuiakitawhiti.org.nz

Research News

Check out some of the latest cutting-edge research and news from the *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*.

Another huge 4 months in global outdoor education research and some great, free articles below that are worth checking out. In this issue from JAEOL we explore post COVID provision of outdoor education in Denmark, teacher professional development in outdoor learning from the Slovak Republic, and perspectives on Friluftsliv in higher education from Norway. From JOEE, you can read about menstruation in outdoor settings from the UK, participant preparation for outdoor programs from Australia, and the growing tension between technology and children's connection with nature from Spain. Together, these papers highlight the diverse global conversations currently shaping outdoor education research and practice. In the next issue we will have red hot updates from the International Outdoor Education Research Conference in Norway which is due for its biggest year yet so make sure you get a copy of this magazine to stay up to date

The impact of an innovative continuing professional development programme for teachers on self-efficacy and outcome expectancy in the context of outdoor education

Michael Fuchs, Elena Čipková and Jozef Kahan, Slovak Republic

This study highlights how targeted professional development can increase primary teachers' confidence and belief in the value of outdoor education for science learning. The findings suggest that well-designed training programs may help more teachers feel capable of implementing outdoor learning experiences and encourage wider use of outdoor education in schools.

Sustained or increased? Post-COVID provision of education outside the classroom in Denmark

Karen S. Barfod, Michelle Stahlhut, Ulrich Dettweiler and Mads Bølling, Denmark

This study from Denmark highlights a significant increase in Education Outside the Classroom (EOTC) following the COVID-19 pandemic, suggesting that many schools continued using outdoor teaching practices introduced during this time. The findings reinforce the value of outdoor learning for student engagement and wellbeing, while also highlighting the importance of teacher training and access to nearby green spaces to support regular implementation in schools.

Lost in the digital forest? Rethinking childhood between screens and nature

Judith Martín-Lucas, Rosalynn Argelia Campos-Ortuño, Gabriel Álvarez-López & Alberto Sánchez-Rojo, Spain

This study explores the growing tension between children's increasing use of technology and their decreasing engagement with nature, showing that connection to nature tends to decline as children get older. The findings suggest that schools and outdoor educators can play an important role in creating learning experiences that better balance digital technology and nature to support children's wellbeing, development, and environmental connection.

Wild periods: learning from individual stories to better support communal experiences in the outdoors and beyond

Morgan Cheyenne Ludington, UK

This study shares the experiences of people managing menstruation in outdoor settings, highlighting the physical, emotional, and practical challenges that can arise during outdoor programs and adventures. The findings encourage outdoor educators and leaders to create more inclusive, supportive, and open environments by considering issues such as privacy, comfort, equipment, communication, and psychological safety in the field.

Emerging friluftsliv in higher education: voices and perspectives

Dag Erik Wold, Helga Synnevåg Løvoll, Norway

This article explores how the Scandinavian concept of friluftsliv developed within Norwegian higher education and how it sought to combine outdoor skills, leadership, ecological awareness, and personal growth through meaningful experiences in nature. The study encourages outdoor educators to think critically about balancing idealistic goals with practical realities, while recognising the importance of creating deep and lasting connections between learners and the natural world.

Are they ready? A narrative literature review of pre-program physical and social-emotional preparation for adolescent outdoor education participants, Australia

Michael Down, Evalena Lowe, Ashley Cripps, Ben Piggott, Andrew Sortwell & Brock Freeman, Australia

This review explores how outdoor education providers prepare participants physically and socially before programs begin, highlighting strategies that can improve readiness, confidence, wellbeing, and overall program outcomes. The article provides practical ideas for educators looking to strengthen pre-program preparation and emphasises that effective preparation can play an important role in supporting both learning and participant safety in outdoor settings.

*The Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning (Taylor & Francis) and the Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education (Springer) are leading international journals that publish rigorous research in this dynamic field. Both journals foster scholarship that not only advances academic understanding but also supports educators, researchers, and policymakers in promoting effective and transformative outdoor educational practices worldwide. Thinking of publishing an article in 2025? Check out the author guidelines for the *JAEOL* and *JOEE* and stay in touch with us for all of the latest research. Written by [Dr David Hills](#)*

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TITLE



Te Whakatika (formerly known as Out and About) describes the start of a journey (to set out), but also means to make correct (to amend and prepare).

ISSN 2624-0513 (Print) ISSN 2624-0512 (Online) is published by Education Outdoors New Zealand (EONZ)