

Article

Sustainable Outdoor Education: Organisations Connecting Children and Young People with Nature through the Arts

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Abstract: There is an increasing concern regarding the mental health and wellbeing of children and young people; as a result, schools are increasingly expected to provide support, but they have few resources to do so. As such, there is a need for establishing mechanisms for supporting the health and wellbeing of children and young people that are relatively easy and cost-effective and that can be embedded within the school day to ensure sustainability. The overarching aim of our Branching Out project was to understand how successful elements from one such programme that supports children's mental health through the art-in-nature-based practice can be expanded from school-based approaches that reach small numbers of children to include whole communities. This paper reports on one strand that examined the practice of organisations offering arts and/or nature-based activities outdoors in schools, either as part of the curriculum or as an extra-curricular activity. Survey questions served as an a priori thematic framework around the characteristics of arts-in-nature activities delivered; the perceived impacts of activities; working with volunteers, teachers, and schools; and barriers to expansion and sustainability. Despite extensive searching, identifying, and recruiting relevant arts organisations was difficult; however, respondents strongly supported the notion that the arts-in-nature practice has a positive impact on children and young people's connection to nature, supports their mental health and wellbeing, and engages them with their local environment. Yet, challenges were identified in engaging teachers and schools and funding such projects, suggesting a need for a multi-professional approach to creating more sustainable and impactful practice for children, young people, and communities.

Keywords: environmental and sustainability education; outdoors; nature; arts; wellbeing; mental health; school; children; volunteers; eco-capabilities



Citation: Walshe, N.; Bungay, H.; Dadswell, A. Sustainable Outdoor Education: Organisations Connecting Children and Young People with Nature through the Arts. *Sustainability* **2023**, *15*, 3941. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su15053941>

Academic Editor: Lotfi Aleya

Received: 22 January 2023

Revised: 17 February 2023

Accepted: 20 February 2023

Published: 21 February 2023



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1. Introduction

Although wellbeing is a complex term, it can be understood as a social model of health which places individual experience within social contexts, emphasizing the promotion of health rather than causes of illness [1]. Critically, within England, 18% of children and young people are diagnosed with a severe mental health illness [2], and yet, 70% of those who experience mental health problems do not receive suitable support at an adequately early age [3]. To combat these urgent problems, schools are increasingly expected to support mental health and wellbeing (e.g., [4]), but they receive few resources to do so [5]. School-based interventions to support children's mental health and wellbeing are an important avenue for addressing the challenges of provision to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS: [6,7]). This is reflected in government initiatives, such as *Promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools and colleges* [8], as well as third sector campaigns (e.g., *Mentally Healthy Schools*: [9]). However, Vostanis et al. [6] found that interventions to promote emotional wellbeing in England tended to be reactive rather than preventative and are delivered by school staff with little training or support. Further,

Herlitz et al. [10] identify challenges for schools sustaining health interventions, including staff motivation, difficulties integrating interventions into wider practice, and the frequently changing policy context for health promotion. As such, there is a need for establishing mechanisms for supporting the health and wellbeing of children and young people which are relatively easy to embed within the school day and use limited financial resources to ensure sustainability. The arts-in-nature practice has the potential to do just that.

1.1. Outdoor Education and Mental Wellbeing

Contact with nature can result in considerable benefits for wellbeing [11–13]; research exploring the impact of COVID-19 on children's mental health suggests that spending regular time outside leads to better mental health (e.g., [14,15]). The People and Nature Survey found that although COVID-19 had a negative impact on children's mental health, children who spent more time outside (and in doing so more time noticing nature) were more likely to report that 'being in nature makes me very happy' [16]. Further, inequity in greenness and park access (including urban nature) meant that those from lower income communities were disproportionately affected [17]. Despite this, sixty percent of children reported having spent less time outdoors since the beginning of COVID-19 [16], and the number of children regularly playing outdoors in the UK has fallen by 90% in the last 30 years [18].

In the UK and other 'western' societies, there is increasing concern that children are gaining fewer outdoor experiences and, therefore, are becoming disconnected from the natural environment (e.g., [19–21]). In some cases, this has led to the prescription of nature-based health interventions, or green prescribing (e.g., [22]), although evidence for its use is currently predominantly limited to adults. UK and EU policy initiatives also highlight the importance of nature-based interventions in developing policies that focus on the preparedness and capacity to respond to the impacts of climate change while also supporting the implementation of climate adaptation strategies at all levels of governance [23].

Research indicates that schools that promote children's engagement with nature have reported improvements in children's development [24], motor skills [25], and attention restoration [26]. Children have also reported fewer social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties [27] and higher academic engagement and achievements [28]. Indeed, the benefits are such that the concept of 'udeskole' (outdoor school) has developed in Denmark, whereby students spend regular time learning outside each week, irrespective of the weather [29]. Despite this evidence, opportunities for outdoor learning in England are diminishing due to staff confidence in outdoor teaching and high demands in delivering the curriculum [30]; for example, the Children's People and Nature Survey for England survey found that only 23% of children reported spending time outside during lessons on most days, with 39% stating they never went outside during lessons [31]. Similar concerns have been raised internationally, such as in Australia [32] and Canada [33]. Although simply providing accessible and good quality greenspace within communities may begin to address this, undertaking specific activities outdoors which supports children developing an affective relationship with nature through engaging in outdoor activities can bring benefits 'over and above' those expected from visiting nature alone [34]. Further, structured activities are also critical to social connectedness, which is linked to higher structural and social capital, both of which are key determinants of health and wellbeing [35]. One approach to addressing this is through arts and creative practice within nature.

1.2. Arts and Creative Practice for Connection with Nature

There is a growing consensus around the importance of arts and creativity for children in schools, with evidence suggesting that arts education can improve both mental health and social inclusion [36], as well as aiding cognitive, physical, linguistic, social and emotional development [37]. However, this has not always been reflected in education policy and practice. In the UK, Creative Partnerships was a flagship initiative established in 2002,

aiming to promote the development of children's creativity through artists' engagement with schools (e.g., [38]). While such work has continued, there is a suggestion that it has been increasingly squeezed out due to the demands of the curriculum [39].

Muhr [40] argues that arts-based activities provide a powerful way for children and young people to connect with nature because they evoke a visceral, embodied response that subsequently develops an emotional connection. Affective experiences of nature enable people to untangle their relationship with the world [41], thereby developing inner connections to nature based in what Ives et al. term emotional and philosophical realms [42]. Significantly, this provides evidence to suggest that connections with nature are positively related to pro-environmental behaviours [43]; consequently, developing nature-connection through the arts is important for environmental sustainability education [40].

Moula, Palmer and Walshe [44] undertook a systematic review that brought together evidence concerning the relationship between arts and nature, and their impact on the health and wellbeing of children and young people. The study suggested that arts in nature practice, which included visual arts, music-making and drama, increased their connection with nature but also made children and young people's relationship with nature more explicit; as a result, they increasingly perceived themselves as part of the environment and the environment as part of themselves. The arts-based activities also developed a better understanding of environmental issues, and in doing so led to a greater consideration for the environment [45].

The relationship between arts-and-nature practice and school children's wellbeing was emphasised within our Eco-Capabilities project, the overarching aim of which was to explore how the wellbeing of children can be supported through working with artists in outdoor spaces [45]. Eco-Capabilities focused on the nature-based interventions of arts and wellbeing charity, Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination (CCI), exploring the ways in which adventuring together with CCI artists for eight days across two months addressed the disenfranchisement of children aged 7–10 years in familiar, outdoor spaces and, thereby, supported their wellbeing. The results identified that arts-in-nature practice contributed towards eight eco-capabilities: spirituality; senses and imagination; relationality—human; relationality—non-human; mental and emotional wellbeing; individuality; bodily integrity and safety; and autonomy. These were developed through four pedagogical elements: extended and repeated arts-in-nature sessions; embodiment and engaging children affectively through the senses; slowness, which envelopes children with time and space to (re)connect; and thoughtful practice, which facilitates emotional expression [45].

However, despite the evidence for the benefits of arts-in-nature practice for both children's wellbeing and their nature-connectedness, it is important to consider their reach and sustainability. Such programmes are often stand alone or require significant funding for the long-term engagement of external creative practitioners and organisations. There is a need for greater sustainability, with implications for how creative practitioners delivering arts-in-nature practice engage and work with primary schools and how the practice is embedded in the school culture and ethos. Accordingly, this paper reports on the findings from a survey of creative practitioners delivering arts-in-nature practice with children to explore the following research questions:

RQ1. *What are the perceived impacts of the arts-in-nature practice undertaken by organisations?*

RQ2. *In what ways do organisations work with volunteers, teachers, and schools to make their arts-in-nature practice more sustainable?*

RQ3. *What are the barriers to greater reach and sustainability for organisations and practitioners in delivering arts-in-nature practices for children in schools?*

This is part of a wider *Branching Out* project to establish how successful elements from an established mental health art-in-nature programme can be scaled up from small, school-based approaches benefitting small numbers of children to whole school communities.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

This article reports on one aspect of an exploratory multi-level mixed methods approach [46]. The overall study explored how adults in the wider community can be activated as volunteers to support the practice and thus build capacity for wider implementation. To address the study questions, the research comprised two work streams: the first (reported here) was a survey of national arts organisations to identify arts organisations that have or are currently providing arts and/or nature-based activities in schools either as part of the curriculum or as an extra-curricular activity. Such organisations would be required to support the wider implementation of the Branching Out model described above. The second work stream included qualitative semi-structured interviews with teachers and artists involved in the Eco-Capabilities project and a Delphi Survey which was developed to test and refine the proposed Branching Out model.

The questions for the national arts organisation survey were developed following the interviews with the teachers and artists, and the survey was piloted on members of the partner organisation for face and content validity prior to dissemination. The survey mapped the types of programmes the arts organisations deliver or have delivered in the past and includes questions on the aims and mission of each organisation and their sustainability issues. A further aim of the survey was to gather contact details of interested organisations and thus develop a national network of organisations providing arts and/or nature-based activities for children and young people to enable future partnerships, to register interest in future involvement in the Community Artscapers project, and for dissemination purposes.

2.2. Recruitment

This was an open call survey; we were not trying to achieve a representative sample but rather to access as many organisations or individual practitioners as possible that combine arts and nature in their practice with children and/or in schools in the UK. Therefore, due to the niche focus of study, it required targeted promotion to identify and invite appropriate respondents.

Initially, the survey was promoted through networks and umbrella organisations that held relevance to arts and/or nature practices, including the Culture, Health and Wellbeing Alliance and the Royal Society for Public Health: Arts, Health and Wellbeing Special Interest Group. A preliminary internet search further identified the Bridge Organisations funded by Arts Council England; these aim to connect the cultural and education sectors across ten regions to increase children and young people's access to arts and cultural opportunities and to provide a network of cultural provisions. Most of the Bridge Organisations shared the survey across their networks of cultural providers.

Despite the reach of these networks and umbrella organisations, responses to the survey were slow, and thus, a more directed internet search was required. This entailed combining search terms of "arts" and "nature" with "children" and/or "schools". Combining such terms in Google generated a huge number of hits; in the first instance, there were about 51 million results, which made it difficult to filter out relevant organisations. A further major issue in conducting these searches was the diverse ways in which this practice was framed and described, as well as the relatively obscure names of many of these organisations. In total, the survey was shared with over 160 networks, organisations, and practitioners via email, online forms on webpages, and Twitter. The latter was particularly successful in generating further targeted reach through tagging and re-tweets. The survey was open from February until August 2022; in this timeframe, the dissemination strategy generated '49' responses of which '47' were suitable for analysis. Inclusion criteria were the requirement of being UK-based, programmes which included at least some engagement with children, and a combination of arts (either explicitly or through activities, such as visual art or theatre) and nature or the environment.

2.3. Data Analysis

The majority of data collected was qualitative, but responses were generally short and concise, and content analysis informed by Bowling [47] was conducted in order to code and categorise this data. The survey questions served as an a priori thematic framework around the characteristics of arts-in-nature activities delivered; the aims and impacts of activities; working with volunteers, teachers, and schools; and barriers to greater reach and sustainability. Codes were identified under each theme to identify patterns within the data. Importantly, the frequency of a concept did not necessarily signify its importance [47], and therefore, the analysis involved critical reflection on the meaning within the context of responses.

3. Findings and Discussion

In this section, we will focus in particular on the work of the organisations in relation to outdoor learning. An overview of the organisations and practitioners that responded to the survey is presented first, before moving into the discussion of findings relating to the three research questions: the impacts of arts-in-nature practice; the ways in which organisations work with volunteers, teachers, and schools; and barriers to greater reach and sustainability of arts-in-nature practice.

3.1. Organisations and Practitioners Delivering Arts-in-Nature Practice

Of the 47 organisations who responded to the survey, 43 (93.5%) had provided their activities for ‘all children’ in the past 5 years, with 35 (76.1%) providing activities for children with special needs, such as SEND. Nearly 4/5ths (78.3%) had delivered ‘art activities’, whilst 82.6% had delivered art-in-nature activities. There was one organisation that specified that they had provided arts therapies (art, drama and music), and two others who had only worked with adults and local communities. We received responses from across all the regions of England, one from Northern Ireland, three from Scotland and four from Wales; one organisation’s current provision was digital, so it could be accessed from across the UK.

The range of activities that the different organisations provided or delivered was very broad and included the visual, performative, and literary arts, as well the creative therapies, repurposing and recycling of materials, outdoor learning, and digital activities. The visual art activities included drawing, ceramics, clay work sculpture, arts and crafts, and working with textiles. The performative arts mentioned were dance, music, drama/theatre, drumming, and puppetry. The literary arts listed included journalling and story-telling, with one organisation describing story walks in collaboration with local libraries. Respondents also described repurposing and recycling materials as part of their creative offer, using the inks made from plants and flowers, green woodwork and willow sculptures, frottage, wattle and daube, and natural art. Finally digital activities included film-making, photography, animations, and soundscapes. Outdoor learning included guided walks, pond dipping, land art, tree-themed art, nature journals food growing, and foraging.

Whilst most of the activities were delivered by artists (66.7%), both teachers (33%) and volunteers (33%) were also involved in the delivery. There was also a wide range of other staff involved in the delivery; for example, there were outdoor learning specialists, arts therapists and play therapists, a nurse/public health specialist, museum staff, etc. The activities took place in schools (inside 64.4%, outside 68.9%) and in community spaces (inside 68.9%, outside 86.7%); other venues included, amongst others, private homes, artist studios, art centres, and a farm. It was interesting to note that four organisations only worked inside and eleven worked outside only, whilst the remaining thirty-two (68.1%) used both outdoor and inside spaces.

The ages of the children and young people that the organisations had worked with included the whole range, from pre-school children 0–4 years old to key stage five ages 16–18 years old and also those 19+ years. Most worked with all age-groups, but one only worked with pre-school and reception-aged children, one only worked with post

19+, and four others only worked with children under the age of 11 years. The length of the programmes provided by the different organisations varied enormously and from project to project. Some provided half day or whole day one-off experiences, whilst others provide weekly programmes of 1.5, 2 or 3 h, with no set limit on the number of weeks, although some specified programmes of 6, 8 or 12 weeks. However, there appeared to be no set or favoured pattern for delivery. Funding for these programmes came from a range of sources, with external grants being the most common source of funding, and with 37 (82.2%) using funds from external sources to provide the delivery of their activity. Although 26 (57.8%) received funding from schools and 46.7% received funding from parents, other sources of funding included local authorities, commissions and the arts council or conservation organisations.

Mission statements provided by the respondents identified a clear focus on nature (29 responses, 64%); for some, this was as a mechanism to another outcome (e.g., wellbeing) or a more instrumental perception of nature—for example, *“to provide opportunities to connect children and young people with nature either to support the curriculum or for wellbeing”*. For others, organisations attributed a more instrumental value to the natural environment, such as through nature connectedness or sustainable behaviour: *“to engage young people in nature to support a hand, heart, mind attitude to the protection of our planet”*. Mission statements also highlighted the importance of arts or creativity (30 responses, 67%), either as a mechanism to achieving another outcome (e.g., *“to use art and creativity as tools for wider learning, development and fulfilment”*), or—occasionally—as an outcome in itself (e.g., *“Our mission is to educate and inspire children and communities, enhancing natural creativity and wellbeing, through environmental art.”* Other key themes in the mission statements included the improvement of wellbeing (17 responses, 38%), the development of skills and attributes (18 responses, 40%), and social justice (916 of 45 responses, 36%).

3.2. Impacts of Arts-in-Nature Practice

Of the 47 survey responses, 41 described the perceived impact of their arts and/or nature practice on children, young people, and (sometimes) their wider communities. The most common impact reported was the development of ‘skills or attributes’ (referenced in 22 out of 41 [54%] responses). For example: *“Increased self-esteem, emotional regulation, better communication skills and engagement in new projects, activities, hobbies etc.”* Out of these, 17 mentioned confidence—by far the most popular skill; the next most frequently mentioned was communication, with six mentions, and then generic skills, collaboration, resilience, and self-esteem. It is noteworthy that the skills and attributes mentioned are all linked with increased resilience and mental wellbeing (e.g., [48]).

The second most frequently mentioned impact was that of the positive influence on the ‘mental health and wellbeing’ of children and young people, with 15 out of 41 organisations (37%) highlighting this; for example, *“increased mental wellbeing”*. This category included reports that they made children happier; for example, one organisation stated that their work *“develops happy children”*. The impact of ‘increasing creativity or engagement with the arts’ was the third most mentioned impact that organisations identified, cited in 13 of the 41 statements (32%); for example, *“promotes creativity”* and *“enhanced creativity”*.

‘Nature or the environment’ was explicitly articulated by organisations describing the impact of their work, with 20 of the 41 (49%) impact statements including an element of the environment. Of these, 11 (27%) noted the impact was increased awareness of the environment; for example, *“more awareness of social and environmental issues”* and *“CYP [children and young people] have a greater understanding of their surroundings and nature”*. Conversely, nine (22%) described participants in their arts and nature practice becoming more connected to nature as a result; for example, *“improved confidence, nature connection and interest in nature, trees, bugs. Increased interest in being outside. Feel happier and excited for their time in the woods”*. One organisation responded:

"We can shine a spotlight on the district's outstanding natural environment for all to enjoy. It makes cultural activities accessible and a 'way of life', where everyone can enjoy culture in the outdoors, benefiting health and wellbeing."

Other impacts within the statements provided by the organisations were developing 'friendships or relationships with peers' (8 of 41 statements: 20%), for example *"peer support networks built"*, or *"build community and friendships"*. This impact on relationships at a community scale was also articulated by organisations in response to questions across the survey, as organisations articulated programmes as having an impact on community engagement and cohesion through improvements to shared or public spaces. For example, one stated *"Ultimately, we hope this project gives them ownership of their local shared spaces. We've already seen some benefits of this as engagement with our community partner has increased"*. Finally, 'inclusion' was identified as an impact by four of the organisations (10%); for example, *"SEN children were able to take an active role in sessions alongside their counterparts"*. Similarly, 'play' or 'fun' were also identified by four organisations, such as *"promotes creativity and play"* and *"confidence, education, understanding, fun"*.

3.3. Working with Volunteers, Teachers, and Schools

Within this section, we explore the ways in which arts-and-nature organisations articulate the challenges of working with schools and wider communities, particularly by helping them understand the value of the practice, engaging with teachers, and providing resources and training.

3.3.1. Schools Understanding the Value of Arts-in-Nature Practice

Delivering the curriculum has become the core focus of schools, to the detriment of both the arts and outdoor education. Cremin [49] asserted that opportunities to practice creativity are inevitably constrained in the context of curriculum controls and high stakes testing systems, wherein *"the relentless quest for higher standards may have fostered a mindset characterised more by compliance and conformity than curiosity and creativity"* (p. 354). The majority of respondents echoed this sentiment, with concern for the impact on the arts in particular:

"The main barrier is narrow focus in schools on academic achievement (and on literacy and numeracy in particular in primary schools) leaves little room for the things like this that really matter."

Government policy on education was identified as a barrier by 37.8% of the respondents, and this was often compounded by the ramifications of the COVID-19 pandemic, as one respondent stated that schools were *"focusing on 'catch-up' curriculum in core subjects"*. Addressing some of these issues, a few respondents worked with teachers to find ways of incorporating arts-in-nature into the curriculum or Arts Award requirements to ensure the value for schools:

"When working in schools we will discuss requirements and what outcomes they want also and see how we fit in with their curriculum delivery. They sometimes will like the project idea and then base their terms learning around the project."

This aligns with the programme theory from Pearson et al. [50] that reciprocity is crucial when preparing to deliver a health promotion programme in schools. They suggested that programmes are more likely to be successful when there is concordance with current school activities, priorities, and ethos. Respondents seemed to be aware of this and emphasised the need to support schools in *"understanding on how and why it is so important"* and demonstrate the value of engaging in arts-in-nature practice:

"Schools are busy places with lots of pressures on them. However, they need to understand that our natural environment can support and enhance their work rather than being a hindrance."

As the last comment suggests, this appeal may take an instrumental approach in terms of supporting the curriculum or enhancing mental health. For example, research has demonstrated how both outdoor education and the arts can support teachers and children in working towards curriculum goals (e.g., [51,52]). However, through the process of engaging and collaborating with creative practitioners, schools and teachers may also realise the intrinsic value of the arts-in-nature practice, as well as its contribution to environmental sustainability education.

3.3.2. Engaging and Collaborating with Teachers

Engaging and building relationships with schools and teachers is crucial for delivering arts-in-nature practice, and some respondents shared their active approaches to doing so, including newsletters, membership of professional organisations, and dissemination of practice through conferences. However, many saw this as a key barrier to their work (48.9% for schools, 42.2% for teachers). One stated that schools *“rarely reply to emails or efforts to engage them”*, and another felt that they *“have no time for community activities or arts”*. The context that prevented engagement, including teacher workload and priorities, was also acknowledged: *“teacher workload also makes communication very slow, often our programmes aren’t teacher priorities as they have other assessment goals to meet”*.

This is perhaps unsurprising given the wide range of initiatives and interventions aimed at schools, which are often experienced by teachers as an additional responsibility and can lead to ‘initiative fatigue’ [52,53]. However, teachers are more likely to devote their time and energy to nature and/or arts initiatives if they see reciprocal benefits such as professional development, job satisfaction, health and wellbeing, and a positive impact on pedagogy [54]. Practical and educational support for teachers is also essential [50], which was pertinent for our respondents, as one suggested that *“teachers [were] not confident/well-trained in delivering”* (explored further in Section 3.3.3).

Once schools were engaged, respondents described different ways of working with teachers, ranging from communicating or meeting beforehand and agreeing to needs and approaches, to teachers supporting sessions particularly with the supervision of children, to teachers working “alongside” creative practitioners co-designing and delivering arts-in-nature activities: *“Completely collaborative, treating them as experts in their own world just as any other collaborator, e.g., young people, artists”*. The importance of the relationship between creative practitioners and teachers has been established by research that reflects on initiatives such as Creative Partnerships (e.g., [55,56]). Thomson and Hall [57] outline how artists bring with them ‘signature pedagogies’ that draw on their creative practice underpinned by ways of being, thinking, and acting that could be characterised as ‘slow’ and ‘deep’. When working together with teachers, this encouraged pedagogies that were inclusive, collaborative, exploratory, de- and reconstructive, and disruptive, with the potential to resist and challenge the routine structures and test-oriented learning of neoliberalised schooling.

3.3.3. Resources and Training

Through working collaboratively with creative practitioners, respondents reflected how teachers *“learn skills in outdoor classroom art and nature activities”*. This was sometimes simply by observing and participating in the sessions, but thirteen respondents also referred to delivering training and continuing professional development (CPD) opportunities for teachers: *“We run CPD and twilight sessions to build teachers confidence and skills”*, or *“I’m often commissioned to facilitate CPD with primary/secondary teachers, based on the skills in my participatory practice”*. Certainly, valuable professional development was a key outcome for the Creative Partnerships initiative, with teachers and teaching assistants gaining new skills and confidence in leading or supporting creative activities; this sometimes contributed to greater support for creative learning within the school ethos and culture [35]. However, one respondent mentioned the cost of training and development as a barrier: *“Cost of CPD and cover for staff attending training is prohibitive to schools.”*

When supporting teachers with STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths) practice, Boice et al. [58] found practice considerably more successful when working with multiple teachers within each school to enable peer support and a collaborative approach. However, this was only effective when common planning time was given to support teachers to undertake collaborative work, and even the most enthusiastic of teachers reported that it was very difficult to engage the wider staff. Despite this, where appropriate, training and financial support was provided—they suggested this supported teachers' self-efficacy and, thereby, improved the sustainability of the practice in schools.

To counter these costs and support teachers engaging in creative practice, many respondents in our survey (31 of 47, 68.9%) had developed resources that were either bespoke to go alongside specific programmes or more general to support the delivery of arts-in-nature activities. These were often guides or resource packs often linked to the curriculum, including things such as activity templates and worksheets, PowerPoint presentations with notes for teachers, YouTube clips, arts and crafts ideas, fact files, tree/bird identification booklets, and logbooks. However, these fell short of the more extensive training programmes suggested that might be most likely to fully embed the practice into schools.

3.4. Reach and Sustainability

Participants reflected on the reach of the arts-in-nature organisations in their survey responses; in this section, we explore the barriers to their work and the ways in which the practice might become more sustainable.

3.4.1. Arts-in-Nature and Scarcity of Funding

Perhaps unsurprisingly, 41 of the 47 respondents (91.1%) identified funding as the greatest barrier to the wider implementation of arts-in-nature activities and programmes:

"Funding is a broad barrier that affects our ability to be more ambitious, secure more suitable premises, market our services more, employ further facilitators and generally think bigger."

This has been emphasised in the literature. For example, Bidwell [59] identified that unless there is long-term public investment to support the arts, programmes are vulnerable to uncertainties in funding. Indeed, some respondents referred to wider socioeconomic factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost of living, and the challenges of delivering this practice in areas of deprivation and disadvantage:

"We struggle to generate the funds needed. The cost of artists is high and we work in an area of high deprivation and so many families cannot afford to give a donation."

"Socio-economic deprivation in our region is extreme and worsening. Children live in poverty and this impacts families' ability to engage."

This has important implications in terms of the unequal access to arts and nature [24, 60], and it demonstrates the need for the ongoing funding for the arts-in-nature practice. There were also additional concerns for creative practitioners who were freelance or self-funded:

"Funding is the main barrier for me as a freelance practitioner. Often, people who aren't freelance don't realise that they're not just paying for the hour they visibly see you working but it's all the time behind the scenes (e.g., meetings, admin, applying for bids, session prep etc.) which makes that visible hour happen and therefore needs to be covered."

The COVID-19 pandemic presented immense challenges for the cultural and creative sector. Doustaly and Roy [61] demonstrated how the government's recovery plan disproportionately benefitted organisations, while individual practitioners "fell through the cracks" (p.14). Certainly, this was also a key concern for respondents, with one stating: *"We envisage funding for the arts will be cut especially now with the cost of living crisis."*

In terms of increasing the sustainability, respondents identified broader structural issues in the nature of short-term funding cycles that prevent ongoing or follow-up work:

“Once a project has finished or funding ended, most funders then insist on only funding new projects or ideas”. This undoubtedly adds to the precarity of working in the cultural and creative sector [59,61], but it also has negative consequences for the children and schools. For example, Bidwell [59] noted that participants who are experiencing improved mental health and wellbeing can feel frustrated and let down when arts programmes are stopped.

One respondent linked funding issues to the need for research to establish the evidence base for this work and subsequently influence funders and policy, a concern which has been raised in the literature (e.g., [62]). One respondent suggested that *“programmes need joined up thinking, better multi-agency communication and the necessary training”*, which may lay the foundations for developing the ideas and arguments for policy.

3.4.2. Using Artists and Volunteers

In terms of delivering arts-in-nature activities, having trained artists or professionals to lead the programmes was considered a barrier by 26.7% of respondents:

“The artists we use have special qualities which make them ideal to run workshops as well as being a talented artist. These artists are fewer around as you would imagine. They have to be interested in nature and marine species too.”

Certainly, combining arts with nature and delivering successful activities in primary schools requires a specific set of skills and passion. Furthermore, research has demonstrated the unique approach of creative practitioners as distinct from that of teachers, particularly in treating children as co-learners, using different questioning strategies, managing risks whilst retaining the challenge within activities, and responding to misbehaviour with understanding [55].

Other respondents mentioned a lack of time, space, and capacity, lack of support staff or volunteers, and the need for the ongoing training of volunteers: *“If delivering a commissioned or funded session I now struggle to get volunteers to assist.”* Volunteers are an irreplaceable human resource and essential for sustaining the sports and cultural sectors [63]. Furthermore, volunteers are critical for the realisation of many local community arts and cultural programmes beyond solely being a source of labour [64]. A total of 27 respondents (57%) suggested they had an established practice of working with volunteers in the delivery of arts-in-nature activities. Generally, this was in a supporting role, for example in the preparation of resources and venues, offering pastoral or one-to-one support to individual children and practical support as “helpers” to paid staff or facilitators delivering the activities. Meanwhile, three of the twenty-seven suggested a more substantial role for volunteers in their work:

“Volunteers are key to our organisation. From the volunteer trustees to the parent helpers that help with refreshments and cleaning—then everything in-between. Volunteers are offered the same training and support as paid staff, attend our team activities and are made to feel like part of the organisation.”

Another respondent saw a role for certain volunteers in delivering a programme, though specified that they would need *“adequate support and experience”*. The literature suggests that volunteers need training in developing a person-centred approach to establish a trusting relationship with the people they are working with, and targeted support for volunteers is essential for the sustainability of volunteering as a community resource [65]. In the arts sector, volunteers act as both producers and consumers of art [64,66], pointing towards benefits not only in relation to the act of volunteering, but also from engaging in the arts-in-nature activities themselves. For Elkins et al. [64], recognising this dual position of volunteers as both producer and consumer *“enables a better appreciation of their contribution”* (p. 2). However, across the responses, some concerns were raised, including appropriate training and support for volunteers, the need for specialist skills and knowledge, and the importance of recognition and payment: *“volunteers cannot give the same regular commitment to sessions, so a paid worker is needed for consistency”*.

3.4.3. Striving for Sustainability

Though few respondents stated that their activities were not designed to continue beyond the programme, most suggested a desire for sustainability and continued impact. Some talked about continued engagement through repeat bookings and further funding, with one highlighting their approach as a community-based organisation that “keeps delivering”: *“We try to run long-term, sustainable, embedded programmes which don’t ‘end’.”* However, significant barriers were identified in terms of pressures on curriculum time and resource, including both teacher expertise and development and financial support. One respondent stated, *“Maintaining any kind of creative input is always challenging”*, with significant barriers as *“Often teachers have intentions to maintain activities but find themselves stretched and have to prioritise other things”*; another emphasised that this was dependent on *“a keen member of staff in school to continue provision”*. A further barrier was identified around the confidence of teachers and staff in schools to continue arts-in-nature activities without support, as there are *“limited opportunities for schools to allow teachers to skill up and feel more confident leading sessions outdoors”*. It has been suggested that working with creative practitioners can result in renewed confidence and agency for teachers through engaging in novel ways of working and discovering new paradigms that support their values and purpose within education (e.g., [56]); however, this requires time, resources, and creative practitioners who understand the complexities of pedagogies within education. Pearson et al. [50] found that the evidence for embedding the practice into schools comprises only the perspectives of teachers regarding factors that they think would help, such as senior leadership support. They go on to suggest that the fact that teachers and managers had themselves to propose suggestions as to how to embed programmes into schools indicates that considerations of sustainability were not included in programme design.

Despite the barriers identified, seventeen respondents reported that some of their activities had been maintained or integrated into the school or community after the programme had been completed:

“We have seen teachers embedding approaches they developed through our programmes, whole school ethos being shaped by programmes we have collaborated on and artists strengthening and honing their offer.”

Indeed, in relation to schools and artists working together to develop creative learning environments, Davies et al. [67] stated that “the careful creation and management of such partnerships are crucial to ensure sharing of practice and creation of knowledge for longer-term impact” (p. 87). Of particular note is that most survey respondents emphasised that this sustainability was only possible through long-term relationships with schools that incorporate the training and development of teachers and staff:

“I worked with a school for 2 years to support them to embed outdoor learning and this has continued. Much of this happened as the work focused as much on a programme of staff CPD as work with the children. The school also ensured that outdoor space (a wood on the school site) was well resourced . . . which meant that resources were always accessible and easy to get for school staff.”

“Embedding teacher CPD into programmes that is supported by school leadership making a commitment to embed the work into the school timetable beyond the project. Potential involvement of families as advocates and leaders of activity.”

These quotes, taken from different organisations, both draw attention to the importance of engagement from senior leadership in schools, resonating with findings from Pearson et al. [50] that suggest that active support from the senior leadership within a school is critical. However, Pearson et al. [50] go on to argue that this support must extend beyond simply written policies such that the mechanisms by which these policies will be implemented also need to be defined. This is because the delivery of programmes that promote health and wellbeing can be perceived by teachers as being an additional responsibility, for which they are, therefore, unlikely to want to ‘go the extra mile for’ if doing so is perceived as being potentially damaging for their personal wellbeing or work-life balance.

When asked what support would be useful in maintaining activities in schools and communities, thirteen respondents said training for teachers (and sometimes parents/carers), twelve said toolkits or resources, and nine said funding (though the latter was also often implied in their response). Pearson et al. [50] argue that the need for bespoke professional development for teachers is dependent on whether those delivering the programme are teachers or other professionals working within a school; for example, teachers may need support with specific pedagogical approaches as part of the programme, whereas outside professionals delivering the programme may need skills and confidence in behaviour management. Within survey responses, it was consistently reported that a named co-ordinator was important for initiating and sustaining programme delivery. The profession or status of this person, and whether they were a school employee, was far less important than their willingness to co-ordinate, their skills and capacity to do so, and their ability to exert influence within the school.

4. Conclusions

Despite extensive efforts to identify and recruit respondents to complete this survey, the final number of completed responses comprised 47 organisations providing arts and/or nature-based activities for children and communities across the UK, but predominantly in England. There may be other organisations and individual practitioners delivering similar activities that were not contacted using this sampling strategy; however, we are confident that within the time frame and means available, the data provides a good indication of current practice across England. We recommend future research which considers international practice in relation to arts and/or nature-based activities would be of value. The organisations reported providing a broad range of activities across visual and performative arts, engaging with or through nature in a variety of ways. However, for all, the combination of arts and nature was significant in providing a mechanism through which to connect children, young people, and their families to nature, empower them to have a positive impact on their local environment, and support their mental health and wellbeing. While most of the activities were delivered by artists, there was involvement from both teachers and volunteers. Although engagement by teachers was a preferred model of practice as it opened up opportunities for a more collaborative and sustainable way of working between organisations and schools, it was identified as being challenging to facilitate because of a lack of pedagogical expertise on the part of teachers and a limited amount of resources and opportunities to support their training. This was often underpinned by a lack of support by the senior leadership within the schools, exacerbated by a policy context of a crowded curriculum and accountability regime based on pupil achievement in a narrow range of subjects, and a lack of understanding as to how arts-in-nature practice might contribute to improved educational standards, as well as more broadly to children's mental health and wellbeing and environmental and sustainability education.

Further challenges were faced by organisations with a focus on the arts in what was identified as a context of marginalisation of the arts in school curricula, with decreasing emphasis on arts and creativity and with an inevitable associated reduction in financial resources to support this approach within school and community contexts. Similarly, in the context of England, an historic lack of policy around outdoor education [68] and environmental and sustainability education in particular [69] has resulted in an associated lack of funding for outdoor learning for its own sake in the context of schools and communities. While outdoor learning is encouraged within some curriculum areas through field trips (in particular geography and science), this often lacks the affective or embodied approach to engaging with outdoor environments that is supported by arts-in-nature practice. While this wider context made engagement with schools a challenge, it did appear to provide additional justification for the work of arts-in-nature organisations, particularly with children and young people in more disadvantaged areas. However, it also forced many organisations to turn to external sources of funding for their work, which were

frequently short-term and limited longer-term engagements with schools. Applications for such sources necessarily appeared to shift organisations to frame mission statements around a more instrumental value of the arts or nature, with the aim of developing skills (for learning) or improving mental health and wellbeing, and in doing so perhaps losing acknowledgement of the intrinsic value of arts-in-nature experiences. The focus on mental health and wellbeing also risks the arts-in-nature practice becoming an intervention to ‘treat’ children already experiencing poor mental health and wellbeing, rather than something which is beneficial (and potentially preventative) for all.

Several recommendations for future policy or practice emerge from the findings of this research. Firstly, teachers should be supported to understand the importance and possibilities of using outdoor environments, not just as outdoor classrooms, but as part of the embodied learning experience themselves (seeing the intrinsic value of nature and the outdoors). This could be achieved through access to more and better professional development around the process of arts-in-nature practice provided for **teachers**, including by artists (including through initial teacher education and for practicing teachers). Professional development for teachers should also provide guidance on the intersections of the arts-and-nature practice with both children’s mental health and wellbeing, and environmental sustainability education. Moreover, further research might help us to better understand the types of professional development that might be most impactful on practice. Understanding this practice can address requirements set out in government policy in these areas (e.g., *Promoting and supporting mental health and wellbeing in schools and colleges* [8], and *Sustainability and Climate Change: A strategy for the education and children’s services systems* [70]); this is important in providing a wider justification of the practice, as well as a more holistic approach to supporting the academic and pastoral requirements for schools.

A second recommendation is in relation to **community volunteers** as a mechanism for adding capacity and supporting the sustainability of the impact of the arts-in-nature practice. Repeated concerns were raised by participants as to the challenges of longer-term engagement with schools because of concerns around a lack of teacher (and school) capacity and funding; working with volunteers was identified as one mechanism for addressing this, in doing so adding capacity and supporting the arts-in-nature practice in schools. However, challenges were identified with using volunteers, not least with regard to the frequent lack of co-ordinated work within and between settings and organisations, and the reliance on “*energetic committed individuals who get it up and running*”. For this reason, there is a need for further research to understand how community volunteers might be engaged by both schools and individual organisations in a more sustainable way to support more sustainable approaches to embedding the arts-in-nature practice in schools to reach more children and young people.

Finally, beyond a focus on simply teachers and school contexts, there should be greater attention paid to **multi-agency level working** to support embedding the arts-and-nature practice into schools and communities at scale. Davies et al. [63] argue that it is necessary to provide schools with guidance on how to establish and maintain partnerships with arts-based or other community organisations to support professional development for teachers in order to facilitate the partnerships having a longer-term impact on practice. To our knowledge, no such guidance yet exists, but meeting the support needs of children and young people currently in the UK (with the well documented pressures on mental health services) will require an ambitious and innovative approach. Our recommendation is that such an approach should extend beyond schools to include local authorities, the health and social care sector, and other agencies within the new Integrated Care Systems, thus taking a multi-professional approach to supporting children and young people’s mental health. Larger-scale partnerships, where professionals work together to create more coordinated approaches to embedding the arts-in-nature practice into schools and communities, have the potential to create more sustainable and impactful practices for the benefit of children and young people and the communities within which they live.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, N.W., H.B. and A.D.; methodology, N.W., H.B. and A.D.; validation, N.W., H.B. and A.D.; formal analysis, N.W., H.B. and A.D.; investigation, N.W., H.B. and A.D.; data curation, N.W., H.B. and A.D.; writing—original draft preparation, N.W., H.B. and A.D.; writing—review and editing, N.W. and H.B.; supervision, N.W. and H.B.; project administration, N.W., H.B. and A.D.; funding acquisition, N.W. and H.B. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This work was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council under Grant AH/W007819/1.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of IOE, UCL's Faculty of Education and Society (protocol code REC1583, date of approval 3 February 2022).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data available on request due to restrictions e.g., privacy or ethical. The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available to maintain anonymity for participants.

Acknowledgments: We would like to thank the children, artists, teachers, and headteachers who worked with us throughout the Branching Out project; without their enthusiastic participation, this work would not have been possible.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest. The funders had no role in the design of the study; in the collection, analyses, or interpretation of data; in the writing of the manuscript, or in the decision to publish the results.

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