

Impact and evaluation and their place in Outdoor Learning

Rosie Tudor is Research and Impact Manager at The Ernest Cook Trust, a UK educational charity funding and running Outdoor Learning programmes that improve nature connectedness, health & wellbeing, learning and environmental awareness

Impact and evaluation work can sometimes get a bad rap and feel like a burdensome 'add-on' to projects and programmes. At The Ernest Cook Trust we believe impact and evaluation should be central to our work and we are in the process of fully embedding it across our programme areas.

With the confluence of crises we now face it has never felt more important to ensure that we are maximising the societal and planetary impacts of our programmes and assets. 'Good' impact data allows us to refine our programme areas and also creates a credible and powerful voice to influence policymakers for wider system-change.

But what makes good impact data and how do you most effectively collect it? Here are ten things we have learnt from our impact and evaluation journey so far:

- 1) **Try not to feel overwhelmed** It's ok *not* to know everything and important to see your impact and evaluation work as an evolving process. A tool or metric others may have used successfully may not end up working with your audience or setting and it's ok for evaluation frameworks to evolve as you learn more from your experiences. We're currently trying to measure how our programmes impact on an individual's sense of nature connectedness – *a measurable psychological construct that moves beyond contact with nature to an individual's relationship with the natural world*. Through our evaluation we have learnt that some children and young people actually have very little concept of what we even mean by 'nature', rendering some of the nationally-recognised nature connection metrics more challenging for us to use effectively.
- 2) **Co-create your evaluation tools** When dealing with complex concepts and complex audiences it's very helpful if you can co-create your evaluation tools as much as possible, either with your end audiences, or those closest to them. This ensures you are asking the right questions and using the right language. We're trying to capture changes in wellbeing in some of our programmes, a concept which has been the subject of a long and lively debate. Through our initial experiences of using well-established wellbeing scales, we discovered elements of them were triggering for some of the children and young people we work with. This is something we would have been able to avoid had we co-created the metrics with the teachers closest to them at the outset.
- 3) **National metrics versus your own** With quantitative data collection there are often going to be trade-offs between using nationally-recognised metrics or creating your own more bespoke metrics. Nationally recognised metrics contribute to a larger evidence base, are directly comparable and are perceived by some as having more clout. However they may not work so well in capturing impact for your particular audience, so the data reliability can then be poor.
- 4) **Importance of qualitative data** When we think of impact data, we often think of numbers and surveys, but there is a huge role for qualitative approaches in impact work. We find qualitative approaches are great for measuring the fuzzier elements of change and capturing the *why* and *how* behind impacts. Qualitative approaches are also useful in shorter programmes, where metrics may be unlikely to shift dramatically, or can be harder to obtain. We are particularly championing the use of 'impact storytelling' in our qualitative approaches; *intentional, strategic storytelling designed to advance social impact goals*. Stories, unlike facts and logic, use emotion and engage the unconscious, where most decisions are made. They can be very powerful when trying to influence change-makers.
- 5) **Get creative with your data** Impact research can also involve poetry and art. In one of our programmes (The OWL Collaboration) the children have been writing Haiku poems and drawing pictures of nature before and after a residential outdoor week of learning. Through these sorts of activities we can see changes in the use of their language and in something known as their biodiversity perception, which is the level of nature/biodiversity that they

perceive to be out there. Biodiversity perception has been proven to be a very important predictor of improved mental wellbeing.

- 6) **Quality is more important than quantity** Good impact data is definitely quality over quantity. Too often we feel the need to collect everything and then get lost in what the true insights are. A small amount of really focused insight, telling a really good story, is much more helpful than a huge amount of data with little interpretation.
- 7) **Keep up to date** You need to be very agile in this space! We are living in tumultuous times and the landscape is constantly shifting at many levels. As new research emerges, new draft policy gets published or niche public issues become more mainstream, so too may the focus of your evaluation or the tools you use to collect impact data, particularly if you are wanting to influence policy. We believe in the importance of constantly feeding new research/thinking into the organisation to make sure we're focusing on the right things and collecting the right statistics or stories. We also believe in carving out time to sit in the 'big picture' space as often as we can and really live the questions we're trying to answer, and the issues we're trying to address, more deeply.
- 8) **Adopt a Theory of Change** We find in this agile and evolving space having a clear and focused Theory of Change is incredibly helpful. This can sound like a big laborious management tool but at its most simple it's just the *thinking* behind the change you want to see and can be as simple, or as complex, as you would like it to be. It really helps keep everyone focused on the programme end goals, particularly if there are a number of stakeholders involved. Our Theories of Change reflect the latest academic research and evidence and allow us to distinguish between the programme inputs, short-term outcomes and longer-term cumulative impacts.
- 9) **Remember, research is skewed** There is an unusual issue with academic research on nature and wellbeing – that is it's Western, educated, industrial, rich and democratic. From 2010 to 2021 a University of Vermont study¹ found that 95% of all studies looking at the links between nature and wellbeing were based on a small slice of humanity – white people from high-income Western nations It's important to be mindful of this when feeding academic evidence into Theories of Change or decision-making. At The Ernest Cook Trust, we specifically target minoritised ethnic groups in our work and realise there is still so much to contribute to this space from more diverse voices. In particular, people from different cultural backgrounds have very different perceptions of natural landscapes, and this is not well represented in research.
- 10) **Listen, collaborate, share** And finally, we gain so much from collaborating, listening and sharing. In The OWL Collaboration we have brought together a group of Outdoor Learning Centres from around the UK in a Community of Practice. We meet for monthly networking meeting and have learnt so much from their different approaches and experiences. We recognise the value of different approaches but all working towards the same shared outcome and evaluation frameworks are an important foundation of that. By working together in this way we hope to optimise Outdoor Learning provision so that it has a longer-lasting impact on children and young people's lives

We welcome opportunities to further our thinking in this space, share learnings or be a critical friend. Please get in touch with: rosie.tudor@ernestcooktrust.org.uk

For more information about The Ernest Cook Trust, visit <https://ernestcooktrust.org.uk/>.

¹CA Gallegos-Riofrio et al, May 2022, *Chronic deficiency of diversity and pluralism in research on nature's mental health effects: A planetary health problem*, Current Research in Environmental Sustainability