**Early Years-Stage Programme Development: Final report**

Name of programme: **Natural Thinkers (with PSED element)**

Delivery team/s: **National Children’s Bureau**

Date of report: **February 2024**

**Introduction**

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| **Name of project** | **Natural Thinkers** |
| **Developer** | National Children’s Bureau |
| **Subject** | PSED in the early years including self-regulation outdoors |
| **Key Stage** | Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) |
| **No. of participating schools** | 12 schools/early years settings |
| **Delivery location (RSC region)** | Kent Stronger Practice Hub |
| **Area of evidence** | Development stage |

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| **Project description**  *Please use content from your initial programme description* | Natural Thinkers is a programme that supports practitioners in connecting  children with nature. The programme provides a clear framework for schools  and settings to work with whilst supporting the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) curriculum requirements focussing on the prime areas. Through its implementation, high quality outdoor learning will be enhanced and developed with every member of the staff team having a role in embedding the work.  The low cost/no cost activities and environmental changes addressed will  support the core capabilities children need. Activities will explore ways of  supporting children’s self-control, working memory and mental flexibility  through turn-taking and working as a team which will reinforce children’s self-regulation and executive function skills.  The programme will:  For practitioners – build knowledge and confidence in creating an outdoor environment that supports the Natural thinkers 10 commitments with a focus  on identifying children with low self-regulation skills and being  able to respond using strategies learned through the training.  For children - give an increased sense of well-being through a connection to  nature and the outdoors, provided through a range of strategies in which to practice executive function and self-regulation skills.  The programme has been designed by drawing on high-quality evidence and  the expertise of the team, originally from Lambeth Council that has been  further developed though Lambeth Early Action Partnership (LEAP) based at the National Children’s Bureau |
| **Delivery overview** | Natural Thinkers will provide a full day in-person training course to practitioners, followed up with a half day virtual course that will focus on the PSED and measures to be used as part of the evaluation.  1 day training - Face to face  Practitioners will:   * learn about the benefits of outdoor learning on children’s speech, language and communication, wellbeing, and personal, social and emotional development. * be encouraged to explore the perceived obstacles to   providing high quality learning outdoors and provide solutions.   * learn about the 10 commitments and how they can be implemented   into everyday practice.   * will take part in practical activities that they can use with the children   in their setting.   * explore the concept of mindfulness and ideas on how to engage children in this practice through using nature.   1 half day training – virtual  Practitioners will   * explore the significance of self-regulation skills to children’s development. * learn how Natural Thinkers activities can support the development.   of children’s self-regulation skills.   * consider how they can develop a self-regulation area for the children outdoors. * develop ideas on making the outdoor environment more sensory and calming.   1 virtual network meeting will be held for practitioners to share progress and  any challenges encountered.  Email and telephone support from the trainer for settings throughout the  length of the programme. |

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| **RESEARCH QUESTION** | **ANSWER**  **(INDICATOR)** | **DATA COLLECTION**  **METHOD** | **KEY FINDINGS** | **OPTIONAL – DATA APPENDICES** |
| 1. Is the programme being delivered as intended? | 1. Practitioners attend 1 day in-person training and half day virtual training.  2. Practitioners draft the development and action plan for their setting.  3. Practitioners share 10 Natural Thinkers Commitments with whole staff team and begin to implement the plan.  4. Children spend at least 25% of time in the outdoor environment. | 1. Register of attendance at training sessions.  2. Draft of development and action plan agreed with SLT and shared with trainer either virtually or at the setting visit.  3. Trainer checks in with setting staff to verify if 10 Commitments are being incorporated into practice through planning.  4. Practitioner survey | All 12 settings sent at least 1 practitioner to the 1 day in person training and half day virtual training. 2 settings were able to send 3 practitioners to both parts of the training. 1 setting closed for the day so that all staff could attend the 1 day in person training.  All 12 settings devised a development plan to implement the Natural thinkers 10 commitments and a plan for a self-regulation area outdoors. These was shared with the trainer via email with feedback given and suggestions made for additions where required.  Through 2 virtual network meetings, settings demonstrated how they were developing their practice through sharing photographic evidence and discussions.  Trainer also had regular email contact with the settings where they would give further updates. Settings were offered a visit by the trainer of which 11 of them took up this offer (one visit didn’t take place as the lead practitioner was on sick leave). Progress made was clear to see and that their whole team was involved in the changes being made. Exemplary practice by 1 setting in particular for engaging the parents in the programme – regular newsletters were sent out demonstrating different commitments the setting was working on and how parents can support them.  All settings reported that the children spend at least 25% of time in their outdoor environment. 45% said children now spend more time outdoors as a result of participating in the programme. In the other settings the children were already spending a lot of time outdoors, but they reported that they have developed the quality of experiences they offer the children. | Development and self-regulation plans  Powerpoint from network meetings |
| 2. Is the programme suitable and acceptable to schools/education settings? | 1. Practitioners find the training sessions valuable and that tools and materials provided are useful for developing their outdoor activities.  2. Draft development and action plan that incorporates how settings will incorporate the 10 NT commitments is supported by SLT and implemented.  3. Practitioners would recommend the programme to another setting or colleague.  4. SLT report that there is a need for the programme at their school/setting.  5. SLT report a change in practitioner behaviour towards outdoor learning. | 1. Training questionnaire to gauge impact of training and the usefulness of the resources provided as part of the training.  2. Draft development and action plan with SLT sign off.  3. Training questionnaire  4. SLT interview (following structured questions)  5. SLT interview (following structured questions) | 47% of Senior Leadership Teams (SLT) and practitioners indicated on the post training questionnaire that all/most of the content was new to them, and 53% said some of the content was new. Some of the comments made: having the linked theory to practice was really helpful; how you can make so different activities using natural materials; how simple outdoor learning can be. Where it wasn’t new it had reenergised them and refreshed their memories of what could be done and at the same time confirmed what they were doing was effective practice. Through discussions it was apparent that having the practical session after the theory in the morning on the face-to-face training day helped significantly to their understanding on how to implement the programme in their settings and to come away feeling enthused. 100% of SLT and practitioners interviewed at the end of the programme strongly agreed that the programme materials that were provided were useful. Comments included that “the folder of ideas has become a bit of a holy bible!”; “the activity folder supports our planning”; “there is now no excuse for not knowing what to do”; “the booklet on self-regulation gave us plenty of information to reflect on and ideas to put into practice that we hadn’t considered”.  Except for 1 setting at least one member of the SLT had participated in the training so took the lead on drafting the development plan with the team stated above development plans were devised and within the short time span of the project all have made progress which has been shown in photos shared at network meetings and discussions with practitioners. Trainer also visited 10 of the settings and was able to see first-hand the changes implemented. When the trainer spoke to staff that had not attended the training it was evident that the information has been passed on as they could talk about their involvement in implementing the programme. SLT have regular meetings with the team to discuss the programme and review the development plans. 100% of SLT and practitioners found the development plans useful to guide their thinking when considering actions required to develop their practice. In a good proportion of settings, children were also consulted about how they wanted to develop certain areas.  95% of practitioners were highly likely to recommend the programme with  100% of SLT interviewed at the end of the programme saying they would also recommend the programme to other settings/schools.  100% of SLT interviewed reported how important this programme is for them which is why they would also recommend it to other settings/schools. Feedback included:  “It’s a really good programme. It’s a whole new way of thinking for some settings/staff.”  “I would recommend it both for the activities/inspiration and for the opportunities to discuss the ideas with the other settings and inspire each other. I can see from visiting other settings what a difference has been made to practice from being part of the programme.”  “It helps to improve practice and gives you new ideas, more tools to do things differently and help engage the children. “  “We have been telling everyone about it because we love it. We think it should really be part of mandatory training, having a better outlook regarding outdoor learning.”  “It makes you think outside the box and break out of stagnation.”  100% of SLT reported that the programme has been valuable and beneficial to their setting. It has had positive effects on staff and children. 100% of SLT said staff have shown more interest and enjoyment in being outdoors and see how the children are learning as they have become involved in their play. Comments included that they now go out in all weathers; they are more knowledgeable and confident with planning activities and engaging effectively with the children outdoors; some have been surprised by the rewards from some of the simple things they have changed which in turn has motivated them to do more; all have the same motivation to change the garden; staff have increased knowledge and confidence to use basic natural materials have been really beneficial. It’s given the staff more confidence; the team are more confident in what they do and in having ideas and now appreciate opportunities presented by the outdoors. |  |
| 3. Can the programme be accommodated by education settings? | 1. Practitioners report that meeting the 10 commitments is achievable.  2. Practitioners find the frequency and amount of training manageable.  3. Practitioners report that children are able to go outside at least 25% of their time at the setting. | 1. Draft development and action plan showing evidence of implementation.  2. Attendance list/ practitioner training feedback.  3. Draft development and action plan showing evidence of implementation. | Development plans and discussions with practitioners showed that meeting the 10 commitments is achievable. When talking with staff they reported that it was relatively easy to implement the 10 commitments but need more time to fully meet them all and will be continuing to work on them post the formal end of the programme. SLT have said that having 10 commitments have been helpful for clarifying direction; it has helped focus them; it’s been really easy to link what we do with the commitments. In a few settings staff have been assigned different commitments to take the lead on.  84% of practitioners felt the training was spread over the right amount of time with 94% reporting that that the amount of sessions was about right.  Practitioners that attended both the 1 day face to face training and half day virtual training said there was an appropriate balance between practical and theory. One did report that they would have preferred the second part to have been face to face but understood with settings time constraints and being able to release staff this would have been difficult to put into place. This is now in place for all settings. The trainer saw it in place when she carried out site visits. |  |
| 4. Do different education settings/ participants have different experiences of delivery? What factors influence this? | 1. Size of outdoor space/green areas available and amount of available resources.  2. Quality and experience of teachers/practitioners (especially knowledge and understanding of outdoor learning).  3. Level of SLT support and appetite for change. | 1. Draft development and action plan and pre-training questionnaire.  2. Pre-training questionnaire (for training attendees), anecdotal conversations with other practitioners in settings (where visits take place); SLT Interview  3. SLT interview. | Although all settings have been able to show the changes, they have made following the training, it has been more challenging for settings with small areas without natural elements. However, they are working to overcome obstacles by reaching out to the local community for donations of natural resources. One setting indicated that she needed some of the funding at the start of the programme to purchase much needed resources. As this was not possible it has delayed her making changes.  One lead practitioner though who was less experienced felt that they have not progressed as much as they had wanted to as they need to learn to delegate more and give ownership to the team. Where there has been staff turnover this has slowed down progress.  It has been great to see that the majority of settings sent at least 1 SLT to the training which has demonstrated the value they saw in this programme. This has enabled them to cascade the information and be the driving force behind it. When the SLT are onboard it ensures the programme can be implemented. They have been able to support less enthusiastic and experienced members of the team. 72.73% of SLT said the team benefitted from their support and role modelling. A couple of smaller settings with less experienced staff said that due to time constraints because of other management responsibilities it has slowed down implementation of ideas as they have needed to lead the way. |  |

**Delivery team reflections**

From interviews with staff, email conversations and site visits, the implementation strategies, intermediate outcomes (practitioners), teaching and learning behaviours and intermediate outcomes (pupils) from the Natural Thinkers Theory of Change have been met. With 100% of SLT indicating that they will continue carrying on with the programme will ensure that changes made will be embedded and development will continue. Some of the settings have indicated that they would like to be Natural Thinkers accredited which demonstrates their commitment to the programme. All settings will continue to use the resources given out on training.

The SLT and practitioners have found the programme overall easy to implement. Comments included:

“It’s been great that it’s so simple to deliver with so many good simple activities.”

“It’s been really easy; we have everything at our disposal. It made us really appreciate how good our garden space already was.”

“It’s accessible for everybody. It involves all the staff, not down to just one person to do it.”

“It’s very stimulating and gets staff to use their initiate to make things change.”

“It really is important for reluctant staff.”

“Very easy to deliver. 10 commitments really helped and it’s been really easy to link what we do with the commitments.”

The practitioners found the network meetings very useful to gain ideas from other settings and with support in working with reluctant staff, limited resources and parents. They appreciated that the trainer was available by phone or via emails throughout the programme to give advice and support.

The only thing SLT and practitioners came up with that they would change about the programme is its length – would have liked the support from the trainer to be over the year.

**The educational challenge trying to be solved by the programme**: Children are disconnected to nature and missing out on the benefits of outdoor environment that nature provides – specifically aspects of social and emotional development including executive function and self- regulation skills.

With EEF funding the Natural Thinkers programme developed a half day training and resources on children’s self- regulation and the outdoors. From the feedback given it is evident that the programme has had a positive impact and made a difference overall to the children involved.

**Impact on children**

In the post training questionnaire percentage 89% of practitioners strongly agreed that the virtual half day training has developed and enhanced their understanding about self-regulation and how they can support children’s self-regulation skills outdoors.

In the senior leads/managers post course interview 100% agreed that the Natural Thinkers approach has been useful in developing children’s executive function and self-regulation skills. Comments included:

* “It’s been helpful, opened up more options.”
* “It’s been hugely useful. We used to send them indoors if they were behaving inappropriately (in a punitive way) but now we support them to self-regulate outdoors.
* “By really focussing on self-regulation we have seen a bigger direct impact on the children than we had expected.”
* “From the training around this have introduced strategies which has really helped the children’s development.”
* “It’s been amazing. When they are out there it’s so different. It’s calm, they interact and work and play together. We have created a self-regulation area with cushions near the fencing by the water and children now move them around to make their own area to chill out. Sitting here helps them to self-regulate.”
* “From understanding more about self-regulation, we have realised just how important the garden is to support children to self-regulate.”
* “It’s been extremely useful. Breathing techniques have been very beneficial and children have even them of their own volition.”
* “It’s been fantastic. More focus in the natural environment has had a calming effect and is more conducive to self-regulation.”

Practitioners also reported the impact the programme has had on children’s personal, social and emotional development (PSED) and communication, language and literacy (CLL). 100% of SLT’s and practitioners said that children demonstrated higher levels of well-being and involvement when engaged in activities shared at the training and form the ideas implemented from the resource packs they received. Feedback included:

* “Our children are demonstrating extremely high levels of well-being and involvement. Even those who previously didn’t want to go outside are doing now.”
* “Noticed increased descriptive language from children.”
* “Children are using more expressive language.”
* “There’s a lot more communication from the children.”
* “Children have learnt so much, for e.g. to behave respectfully with sticks, not hitting each other. They are also being more respectful to insects etc.”
* “Children have been getting excited about the way we’re developing the garden with them. It has supported their PSED and CLL.”

**Data collection reflections**

100% of senior leads/managers felt that what was required for them to complete for the programme was achievable. When the questionnaires were devised for the senior leads/managers and practitioners it was not expected that the senior managers would be attending the training so some of the questions were repetitive or very similar.

Pre- questionnaire and post training questionnaire

* As the pre- and post-training questionnaire was anonymous it was not possible to follow up on any of the responses and difficult to tally it with post training questionnaires. As they were also completed online there were a few people that did not respond but although emails were sent out reminding them to complete them it was not possible to identify who had not done them. One setting where all the team attended the 1st day didn’t attend the 2nd session so the questionnaire couldn’t be fully completed. This also occurred the other way round with another setting where the head came on the first day, but another senior lead came on the 2nd session.
* In the pre-questionnaire for practitioners’ questions were asked about pupil premium and percentage of children working below the expected level of development but was never followed up as there was no data being collected on specific children.
* Questions around their setting’s outdoor space, their practice, and their children as well as what they wanted from the course was established through day 1 of the training as these were discussion points which the trainer could then address throughout the day and on subsequent online session/meetings.
* On the post training questionnaire, a question was asked around recommending Natural Thinkers to a colleague which was then asked again at the post course interview so should have avoided this duplication.

Pre-course interview with senior leads/managers

* The interviews pre-course with senior leads/managers were the most insightful and supported the trainer in ensuring the delivery would meet their needs.

End of programme interviews with senior leads/managers and practitioners

* The post interviews with senior leads/managers and practitioners where their responses to closed questions could be discussed were most helpful in establishing how the programme had been received, changes implemented and any difficulties faced.

Reflection on data documents

* For analysis it would have been beneficial to have the link between the theory of change and questionnaires and interviews to be more explicit

**Adaptation/s during delivery**

* The training went as planned.

Addition of a Network meeting

* Following discussions from the first network meeting in November the practitioners all indicated that they would appreciate another one to continue to share ideas and support each other if there were any further challenges encountered. Another successful network meeting was held in February.

Addition of site visits

* From anecdotal feedback settings expressed an interest in having the trainer to visit their setting to show their progress and offer more advice. These took place in January.

**Other reflections on feedback**

* It has been encouraging that the Natural Thinkers programme has been received so positively.