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# Guidelines for creative approaches to embedding Environmental and Sustainability Education in Primary Initial Teacher Education

## Guidance and Recommendations

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### About this briefing

This briefing provides an overview of findings from research led by Dr Walshe that looks at pedagogical approaches to teaching Environmental and Sustainability Education (ESE) within Initial Teacher Education (ITE), with a particular focus on primary teaching. The document is targeted at ITE providers and presents recommendations for how initial teacher educators and practitioners can embed ESE within primary curricula.

The most recent publication in this project is Walshe and Tait (2019): Making Connections: A conference approach to developing transformative environmental and sustainability education within initial teacher education, published in the Journal of Environmental Education Research (listed in the references section at the end if you would like more details).

### Background

ESE aims to help learners “develop the necessary knowledge, understanding, skills, values, capabilities and dispositions to respond to the complex socio-ecological issues of the 21st century” (ARIES, 2009, p3). However, there is more than one perspective on what ESE should be. It can be seen as merely a way of encouraging children to participate in pro-environmental behaviours, for example recycling and reducing their carbon footprint. However, it has more

### Why is this an important issue?

- Children today face significant challenges in response to living in a globalised world and the predicted environmental threats to the planet.
- As such, it has been suggested that there is increasing need for primary schools to have a global rather than merely local perspective and to cultivate in students a critical sense of environmental responsibility.
- However, the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals highlight that there is much still to do to achieve this (UN, 2015).
- By embedding ESE into ITE we can encourage the development of teachers who are well equipped to engage with their students on these topics.

recently been argued that ESE should develop children's critical understanding of sustainable development, thereby facilitating their critical thinking about sustainability issues, rather than simply telling them what to do. This latter approach requires more participatory and creative approaches to teaching and learning which are inherently student-centred. The briefing addresses this issue by providing recommendations and guidelines for ITE Providers on how to incorporate ESE into ITE. There is a focus on arts-based pedagogical approaches which appear particularly effective for inspiring and empowering trainee teachers to enter into schools and develop their own ESE practice as classroom teachers.

The research was a multi stage case study in the context of a Primary Education Studies undergraduate degree course in the UK. It included a conference for trainee teachers informed by critical, participatory and arts-based pedagogic approaches, data collected through questionnaires, focus groups and in-conference spoken reflection. The recommendations overleaf are drawn directly from the research findings.

### Contact the research team

We would love to hear feedback on this briefing and invite discussions with policy makers and practitioners in universities and organisations that work with ESE and ITE who are using the recommendations or who are interested in doing so.

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This Briefing Paper was developed by Hazel Price, Research Facilitator, Anglia Ruskin University, in consultation with ITE and ESE stakeholders.

## Recommendations for ESE in ITE

The research generated recommendations for both the structure and design of ESE programmes by ITE providers and effective pedagogical approaches.

### Approaches to curriculum design:

- ESE should ideally be embedded within ITE programmes. However standalone 'bolt on' interventions can still be effective in beginning the process towards deeper change.
- A one day conference format can bring specific benefits as a stimulating 'trigger' event by creating inspirational experiences for participants and providing them with a space to think deeply and holistically about sustainability.
- Ideally, this should be followed up with the creation of an embedded ESE programme supporting trainee teachers in a critical, participatory way.
- Developing an arts based pedagogies module as part of an ITE programme is a powerful way of signalling the importance of sustainability to students. It gives the opportunity to consolidate and transform learning over time.

### Approaches to ESE pedagogy and practice:

- Research suggests that both content and pedagogy need to be considered when developing ESE programmes.
- Gaining knowledge is important for empowering trainee teachers to teach ESE. It helps make ESE meaningful to them and can give them agency to develop their own practice. However it is crucial to critically reflect on what constitutes important knowledge within each educational context.
- Empowerment of trainee teachers is vital if they are going to take risks in the classroom, going out of their comfort zone and trying new approaches.
- Through deconstruction of prior perceptions of what ESE is, trainees can be encouraged to be braver in their approaches to it, resulting in a critical pedagogical approach which encourages risk-taking.
- Arts-based approaches like drama and art can be particularly effective in developing a transformative practice. They allow students to develop critical reflection skills and an emotional connection to learning within ESE.

The research highlights the importance of arts-based pedagogies - approaches to teaching and

learning in which an art form (for example drawing or sculpting, but also performing arts, such as music or drama) is integrated with another subject to support student learning. Here are three approaches which might be used to support understanding of sustainability.

- **Using drama to support ESE:** Drama and applied theatre approaches, including games, role-plays and improvisations can be enjoyable and dynamic techniques to encourage pupils to relate to ESE, for example thinking about the choices they have in the face of climate change. They provide experiential, affective approaches to learning, as well as opportunities to reflect critically on contemporary sustainability practice from a range of perspectives.
- **Walk and talk approaches:** Building on critical pedagogies of place; walk and talk methods take learners outside. This has the effect of deepening their empathetic connections with local places, as well as providing knowledge about their local environment that is grounded in first-hand, shared experience.
- **Creative adventuring:** Arts-based pedagogies for sustainability can be particularly effective when undertaken outside; for example, through the place-based practice of arts-based charity, [Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination](#) artists creatively adventure with children within their local environments. Engaging students with this practice outdoors encourages them to respect the natural world in both urban and rural locations, seeing, experiencing and 'being with' nature (Lee et al., 2018).

### References:

- Lee, E, Walshe, N., Sapsed R., & Holland, J. (2018). [Artists as emplaced pedagogues: how does thinking about children's nature relations influence pedagogy?](#) In A. Cutter-Mackenzie, K. Malone and E. Barratt Hacking (Eds) *Springer International Handbooks of Education. Research Handbook on ChildhoodNature: Assemblages of Childhood and Nature Research*.
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