

“In nature, students help each other and cooperate more than in the classroom”

Interview with
Élise Sergeant,
School teacher in Mancenans (Doubs),
Sarah Wauquiez,
Psychologist, author.

La Santé en action: What is “outdoor schooling”?

Élise Sergeant: Outdoor schooling has been growing over the past 20 years in various countries, including Denmark, Germany and Switzerland, whereas in France it is a recent phenomenon. The idea is to give lessons in nature, one half-day a week, during which we work on all the skills and fundamentals of the school curriculum: maths, literacy, etc. And what better way to learn about the natural sciences than in the living world? I’ve always been convinced that it’s difficult to teach children who are cooped up between four walls, sitting for six hours a day. How can we teach our pupils if we prevent them from using their bodies and senses? Along with four other school teachers, I took part in the action research project *Grandir avec la nature* (“Growing Up with Nature”)¹, launched in 2018 in the Burgundy-Franche-Comté region. Around 20 more teachers joined the project in subsequent years, despite the COVID-19 health crisis. Today, there are almost 200 of us practising outdoor schooling in the region, which means that approximately 4,000 pupils benefit from it.

S.A.: What are the benefits of teaching in nature?

Sarah Wauquiez: The report “Outdoor teaching in Burgundy-Franche-Comté”, which I coordinated, describes this project. It explains how this kind of practice can be delivered through state education in France and what it offers for children and school teachers. First and foremost, it has an impact on pupils’ physical and mental health. They learn with their bodies, they gain stamina, they assess their capabilities and their limits by moving, climbing, walking on uneven ground. Motor skills are crucial in childhood, and also play a part in mental health. Children also develop self-esteem, self-confidence and self-knowledge. This observation work also highlighted an improvement in the classroom atmosphere. In nature, the students help each other and cooperate more than in the classroom. They don’t necessarily stay with their usual friends. Other friendships are made, other leaders emerge: the children who are leaders in the classroom are not always the most comfortable outside.

E.S.: I started the outdoor school convinced that the children needed to be taken out into the nearby forest, but participatory research helped me to understand that the importance of this went beyond what I had imagined. The pupils love to learn by moving and playing, by being confronted with the natural elements; they show interest and curiosity. The rain, cold and snow don’t stop us from going out in the forest, only the wind does because there’s a risk of falling trees and

KEY POINTS

■ **Teaching lessons outside the classroom is not yet a widespread practice in France, although it has recently grown in popularity as a result of the COVID-19 health crisis. At a primary school in Mancenans (Doubs), several teachers spend one half-day a week giving lessons in the nearby forest, even in winter. According to the teachers and the parents questioned, this provides countless benefits for the children: improvements in well-being at school, self-esteem, independence, and in their ability to create and communicate. The teachers also benefit: they feel that their job has a new meaning.**

branches. The outdoor classroom means that pupils gain a full awareness of climate change; they see the state of the forest, the dryness of the land. We planted trees, three of which died in the summer due to lack of water. Being in contact with nature is what makes children want to take care of it. Taking the class outside also has the advantage of compensating for children’s lack of physical activity, because even in our country village, they are often cooped up at home in front of their screens.

S.A.: Do all children benefit from this practice?

E.S.: The pupils who use skills other than those considered to be highly academic procure the greatest

benefit. When we work on the concepts of perimeter or area in nature, with a stick in our hands, they feel more at ease. Their practical spirit is a source of good ideas that their friends don't necessarily have – and when we praise their contributions they regain their self-confidence. One of my pupils remembered the session where we worked on fractions with pieces of wood in the forest as soon as we broached the same subject in the classroom; he had understood something that day. Another child, who has autism, was able to speak in front of others for the first time; in the forest, he felt he had space and freedom to speak.

S.W.: There are no contraindications to outdoor schooling. However, as in all places of learning, some students love it, others enjoy it less. Some people don't like walking, they're not motivated because there's a long path to follow, they're scared, they don't feel at ease in nature. While some children feel better in the classroom, the opposite is true for others. It is important to change the learning environment to meet the needs of all children.

S.A.: Do you encounter any obstacles to teaching class in the forest?

E.S.: In our school, we ask parents to donate clothes that their children no longer use. We have a large stock of boots, ski trousers, gloves and anoraks that we can lend to students from less well-off families. Other schools use money from school fundraising to buy suitable clothing. Compared with other school projects, teaching a class in nature costs nothing. A number of our colleagues have a problem with support staff. It's not easy to find available parents every week. In our school, we have extended the invitation to grandparents. Now retired, they are delighted to go into the forest with their grandchildren to share their knowledge.

S.W.: In Switzerland, it's not mandatory to bring chaperones with you on class trips. In France, it is more complicated. And sometimes the teacher doesn't feel very comfortable teaching while someone from outside the school is present.

S.A.: Are parents in favour of this way of teaching classes?

E.S.: Over the last six years, I've seen nothing but convinced parents who have become partners in the project. However, we are doing a great deal of work to inform them and explain the process. We can now present them with the results of the action research project. While some may be reluctant at the outset, their reservations fade away when their child's academic results improve over the year and they see their child is happy to go to school.

S.W.: We sent out a questionnaire to all the parents as part of the action research. Their feedback has been very positive. More than 60% of them noticed their children progressing in terms of concentration, communication, cooperation, self-confidence, motor skills, independence, creativity and, of course, their connection with the environment; progress that they attribute to the forest school.

S.A.: Does the French Education Ministry support teachers who want to deliver outdoor schooling?

E.S.: It's a complicated subject. If we want to take training courses that interest us and meet our needs, it's often on our own time. During the action research, we had the support of environmental educators from the Burgundy-Franche-Comté Group for Support and Initiation in Nature and the Environment (GRAINE). A number of regional education departments, including Besançon, are now offering training courses backed by the National Education Department. It's a first step. The situation has changed since the COVID-19 crisis, which introduced many teachers to the experience of teaching outside the four walls of the classroom. In May 2023, the first international conference on outdoor classrooms was held in Poitiers, bringing together teachers and educational advisors.

S.W.: Beyond Burgundy-Franche-Comté, participatory research has been carried out in other regions including Brittany, Ardèche and Lozère. The idea is to draw up a meta-analysis of the data collected and publish a national report for the public authorities.

S.A.: Do the teachers benefit as much as the pupils?

E.S.: Teaching outdoors is a breath of fresh air for many people. The colleagues I have met say that this educational approach, which involves thinking outside the box, gives new meaning to their work. Drowning in administrative pressures, we tend to lose sight of the objective: to teach our pupils to grow up, to think critically and to be a part of society. This way of teaching brings us back to the core relationship with our pupils. On top of this, spending three hours outside in nature, walking, breathing in the fresh air, feeling the rays of sunshine or drops of rain, seeing the first anemones grow and hearing the birds sing, does us as much good as it does them. ■

Interview by Joëlle Maraschin, journalist.

1. The *Grandir avec la Nature* participatory action research, coordinated by the French Network for Nature and Environment Education (FRENE), looks at the effects of nature-based education on children's development. It was carried out in around 50 nursery and primary schools in mainland France. Online: <https://www.openscience.fr/La-RAP-Grandir-avec-la-nature-vers-un-partenariat-apprenant-d-education-et-de>

For more information

- S. Wauquiez, N. Barras, M. Henzi. *L'École à ciel ouvert*. Neuchâtel: Éditions de la Salamandre, 2019: 303 p.
- S. Wauquiez. *Enseigner dehors en Bourgogne-Franche-Comté*. [Regional report on the participatory action research *Grandir avec la Nature*.] Besançon: GRAINE BFC, 2022. Online: <https://www.graine-bourgogne-franche-comte.fr/notices/enseigner-dehors-en-bfc-rapport-integral-grandir-en-nature/>
- D. Schlosser. *La forêt, c'est la classe!* [Documentary], Faites un vœu, Seppia, France Télévision, 2024: 80 min. Online: <https://www.focusfilms.fr/catalogue/la-foret-cest-la-classe/>