

An overview of outdoor learning in Estonia

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Outdoor learning is learning in a natural environment, using all our senses, making things by hands and sharing our knowledge with others (Sarv, 2006). Outdoor learning can be held in school yards and nearby parks/forests, but also at environmental education/nature centres and protected areas. Important is that learning outdoors through personal experiences help to develop children's affective relationships to the natural environment, their environmental sensitivity and outdoor behaviour, as well as their social relationships (Palmberg, Kuru; 2000). Since humans impact on our planet grows faster than concerns about our environment it is necessary to focus on educating environmentally literate citizens. One alternative is to begin from the grassroot level – to add and integrate environmental education into the national curriculum for kindergartens and elementary schools. By these actions children can take part in different environmental education programs (field trips, camps, adventure activities). The purpose of these outdoor activities is to give pupils out-of-classroom educational experiences involving direct contact with various environments (Palmberg, Kuru; 2000). The aim of this paper is to give an overview of the importance of outdoor learning, how it is held and managed in Estonia.

The term 'outdoor learning' has been used in Estonia for about 8 years, but essentially it has been practised much longer. Already at the beginning of the 20th century activity-based learning was introduced to teachers and written to curriculum. It helped to promote school gardens, conduct nature-based excursions and establish school forest districts. At the end of the century, over 85 schools in Estonia had its own forest to manage. Unfortunately in the 1990's school forests were eliminated due to reformations in forestry and privatization of the forest land.

According to Estonian national curriculum for elementary schools, every pupil must have an opportunity to attend at least once a year to some sort of outdoor learning activity (visit a museum or an exhibition, take a field trip to the nature or an excursion to nature centre, attend an environmental education program, etc). Overall Estonia there are about 80 different institutions that offer outdoor learning experience for children from kindergarten to gymnasium. Among them, there are small locally acting NGOs, national museums, botanical cardens, zoos/animal parks and different companies. Two of the biggest institutions that offer environmental education in every county are The State Forest Management Centre (RMK) and Environmental Board. RMK has 17 nature centres overall Estonia that offer different environmental education programs for schools and kindergartens. They also organize exhibitions, workshops and theme days. The Environmental Board has

developed different programs, which are held in local nature protection areas and also at schools/kindergartens.

Since the beginning of 2012 a research about outdoor learning is taken place in four counties in Estonia – Harjuma, Tartumaa, Ida-Virumaa and Pärnumaa. There are also one of the biggest cities – the capital city Tallinn, second biggest Tartu, third Narva, fourth Pärnu and fifth Kohtla-Järve. The purpose of the study is to gather information about how many schools from the cities mentioned above participate environmental education programs offered by different institutions. After that a survey will be held in the most active and inactive schools to study the purposes of participation, reasons for not attending programs, differences of environmental knowledge and attitudes toward nature.

In Harju county there are 11 different institutions that offer environmental education; five of them (Nõmme Nature House, Muraste Nature School, RMK Viimsi and Aegviidu Nature Centres, Environmental Board Environmental Education Department of Harju County) charge no fee from participation. Lists of participants from year 2009-2011 were gathered and analysed from all five institutions gathered above. Exemption was made with Environmental Board, whom lists are from 2010-2011 (the Board was established in February 2009). Only schools from Tallinn were taken into account. Altogether there are 81 schools in Tallinn (municipal, private, russian, english and finnish schools). First results from Harju county are shown in a following table (Table 1).

According to the table above within 3 years RMK Aegviidu centre was visited by approximately 26 % of the schools in Tallinn. RMK Viimsi centre was visited by 33 %, Muraste nature school 27 %, Nõmme nature house 25 % and Environmental Board by 12 % of the schools in Tallinn. Total number of schools visiting different environmental institutions were 42 in 2009 (52 %), 49 (60 %) in 2010 and 57 (70 %) in 2011. Differences between the numbers in the table and above are because many schools visited 2 or more institutions in a year.

First results of the study show that despite the different opportunities, there are schools in Tallinn that do not visit any of the environmental education institution in a year. Although the number of these schools decrease every year (from 48 % in 2009 to 30 % in 2011). The next step is to contact the most 'active' and 'inactive' schools in Tallinn and conduct surveys to find the reasons for not participating programs and differences between the environmental knowledge of the pupils from active/inactive schools.

Table 1. No of schools in Tallinn visiting environmental institutions in Harju county.

Institution/year	2009	2010	2011
RMK Aegviidu	20	17	25
RMK Viimsi	20	24	37
Muraste	15	24	21
Nõmme	22	27	10
Environmental Board	-	9	11