

Mount Kelly School (secondary school)

Rural private school in Devon

Whole school implementation of nature connection activities in form time and in teaching

Supported with funding from the Duke of Bedford to run a project exploring the potential of nature engagement for wellbeing and attainment

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This practice-led case study is part of a research project looking at Nature-based programmes in secondary schools for mental health and wellbeing. Four case studies were produced in August 2025 with secondary school teachers which use nature-based programmes.

Mount Kelly is a co-educational independent day and boarding school for pupils aged 4-18, situated in a rural setting on the edge of Dartmoor National Park. The school, which currently has approximately 550 pupils, has been rated “excellent” by the Independent Schools Inspectorate (ISI).

Nature impact on grades and wellbeing

Following an analysis of the impact of outdoor activities on pupil’s GCSE and A’level grades, which had been carried out to investigate a perception by some parents that time away from the classroom may have a negative impact, Mount Kelly now integrates the use of nature in education as a whole school approach, entwined within the school’s strategic plan. Initially driven by the Head Master, who regularly references nature in his whole-school assemblies, the use of green spaces and nature for education and wellbeing has now garnered support from almost all staff and pupils, including grounds, administration, and housekeeping teams. Support and funding from the Duke of Bedford has enabled the establishment of a “Nature Connection Programme” across the school.

The school has extensive and well-managed green and blue spaces within its own grounds, including plentiful natural biodiversity and stunning views. While pupils have always had open access to the grounds, within safety boundaries, and the school has long used its grounds and the wider environment for a variety of organised outdoor activities, green spaces and nature are now well integrated into education and wellbeing in the school.

Staff are increasingly taking lessons outside the classroom, particularly during tutor time, to immerse pupils in their surroundings and nurture an appreciation for their environment. Tutor groups are encouraged to take nature walks, engage in scavenger hunts, and simply find quiet spaces for reflection, and are deeply involved in the Nature Connection Programme, managing plots of land for growing, and participating in activities such as a sunflower competition, photography competitions and more.

Nature integration is being incorporated into mental health action plans for pupils and staff, with green spaces being used for pupil regulation instead of small, enclosed rooms. A “biome” in the woods serves as a wellbeing and self-regulation space for pupils and staff, and staff are actively encouraged to take wellbeing walks during their free time or lunch breaks.

Measuring impacts on wellbeing, learning and skills development

Significant positive changes have been observed within the school. Staff wellbeing and connectivity have improved, leading to more open discussions, resource sharing, and a greater appreciation for the value nature brings to teaching and personal wellbeing. Pupils report feeling calmer and more focused in lessons after spending time in nature, and teachers observe increased participation in class discussions.

The school has conducted its own study, measuring and recording the impact of nature on individuals and groups using the Nature Connection Index (NCI) devised at Derby University, which is showing that pupils demonstrate increased engagement and environmental awareness, actively participating in outdoor activities. Cross-curricular connections are emerging, with a Year 9 class linking nature reflections to their biology studies on diffusion.



The study has also highlighted holistic development, enhancing metacognition, creative, and critical thinking skills. Pupils are themselves recognising the positive impact of nature connection on their wellbeing, which, in turn, influences their academic engagement. These early results suggest a strong positive correlation between nature connection and pupil development.

Supporting teachers in nature education

Mount Kelly has invested in a programme to identify pupil wellbeing issues, which will inform the creation of nature action plans to foster nature connection. The school supports and trains staff in using nature for education and wellbeing through various methods. A key focus has been to integrate nature connectivity

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into school with minimal cost and time demands on busy teaching staff. Regular INSET sessions provide programme overviews and implementation guidance. Clear, easy-to-follow activity cards offer ideas for integrating nature into tutor time. A “Staff Nature [online] Chat” facilitates the sharing of nature resources, photos, ideas, and sightings, building staff confidence in using diverse techniques. Good examples are celebrated and acknowledged.

Advocating for the benefits of nature connection in schools

Looking ahead, the school has plans to increase educational provision with the introduction of the new GCSE in Natural History and A-level courses. Funding has enabled a new project to support nature connection in local primary schools and measure its impact, working with researchers at Oxford University. It is also ambitious in working to encourage the integration of nature engagement into other schools, state funded and independent, collaborating with Natural England and the University of Derby.

Methodology

This case study has been developed in a semi-structured interview and follow up discussions to clarify points. It has been signed off by the Head Teacher. This case study is a descriptive example based primarily on interviews and stakeholder discussions. It offers an illustrative, practice-led snapshot of school-based nature initiatives. This study received ethics approval from the Medical Sciences Interdivisional Research Ethics Committee (MS IDREC 688330).



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<https://www.agile-initiative.ox.ac.uk/sprints/is-nature-a-policy-solution-to-mental-health-in-schools/>



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