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Looking for hopeful purpose in England's environmental education policy: An analysis of the National Education Nature Park

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Abstract

The intertwined crises of climate change, biodiversity loss and environmental degradation represent profound global challenges. Education holds a unique role in enabling all young people to navigate uncertainty, participate meaningfully in decision-making and contribute to more just and sustainable ways of living. In 2022, the Department for Education in England published a sustainability and climate change strategy which included the *National Education Nature Park* (NENP) programme. Using Carol Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' (WPR) approach, we examined the first two years of the implementation of the NENP, analysing published materials ($n = 20$) to consider how the purposes of Environmental Education are understood, constructed and implemented. We identified three broad themes: (1) Science and/or STEM knowledge and skills are fundamental to engagement with nature, (2) Measurement is the 'signature pedagogy' of the NENP and (3) Nature Connectedness is broadly understood as individual and linked to personal wellbeing. These framings remain largely aligned with a neoliberal, measurement-driven logic that privileges scientific knowledge and quantifiable outcomes over broader educational purposes. However, there is much to be hopeful about. The whole-setting approach embedded in the NENP offers valuable scope for cultural and pedagogical change, and the planned broadening of curriculum-linked resources is promising as it signals a movement beyond a STEM-dominated model. Furthermore, the professional learning structures

afforded by the NENP represent a significant foundation for strengthening teacher confidence, skills and capacity across phases and disciplines. These are hopeful possibilities for strengthening school-based Environmental Education in England.

KEYWORDS
education policy, educational purpose, environmental education, schools

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

Using Carol Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?' (WPR) approach, we examined the first 2 years of the implementation of the England's National Education Nature Park (NENP) programme, analysing published materials ($n = 20$) to consider how the purposes of environmental education are understood, constructed and implemented.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

There is evidence that framings of educational purpose are aligned with neoliberal, measurement-driven logic that privileges scientific knowledge and quantifiable outcomes over broader educational purposes. Hopeful possibilities are present in the whole-setting approach and the professional learning structures which represent a significant foundation for strengthening teacher confidence, skills and capacity.

INTRODUCTION

In England, the role of school-based Environmental Education remains contested, despite the urgency of global climate and ecological crises (Reid, 2019). Environmental Education remains in the margins of the national curriculum, shaped by policy gaps and shifting political priorities. In 2022, the Department for Education's 'Sustainability & climate change: a strategy for the education & children's services systems' appeared to signal renewed attention on Environmental Education with three main programmes, the *National Education Nature Park* (NENP), *Sustainability Leadership* and the *Climate Leaders Award* (DfE, 2022). Yet the strategy's knowledge-driven, economically-framed approach raises questions about educational purpose. A recent review of the national curriculum in England, the 'Curriculum and Assessment Review' (DfE, 2025), signals further reform although its relationship to the DfE's (2022) strategy remains unclear.

In response to our guiding research question, 'what purposes of education are articulated in Environmental Education policy in England?', we explore one programme, the NENP, analysing published materials to consider how Environmental Education is understood, constructed and implemented. Using Carol Bacchi's 'What's the Problem Represented to Be?'

(WPR) approach, we move beyond policy 'solutions' to interrogate the problem framings, assumptions and silences embedded in NENP materials. By analysing how the NENP represents knowledge, pedagogy and nature connection, we explore the conditions shaping school-based Environmental Education in England and consider what forms of critique and hope might be realised. This research is timely as England and other parts of the UK are undergoing periods of review of their formal curriculum, underpinned by varied ideas of the purposes of education. At the same time, significant public investment in the NENP, combined with the contributions of educators, children and young people participating in related activities, makes it crucial to examine the educational purposes of the first substantial state-supported Environmental Education programme in England in decades. This research provides an important opportunity to understand the impact and potential of the NENP in England, alongside process evaluations (Cottrill et al., 2025). We begin by outlining how educational purposes can be understood, before considering the specific context of school-based Environmental Education in England.

Understanding the purpose of education

Educational purposes provide a theoretical framework through which to consider the aims and purposes of Environmental Education in England as articulated through the NENP. As Coelho et al. (2025) have recently underlined, Gert Biesta is perhaps the most prolific thinker in recent times who has furthered our understanding of educational purpose. For Biesta (2024, p. 3), understanding the purpose of education is both a fundamental and an essential first step, saying, 'it is only when we have a meaningful and justifiable answer to the question of what our educational endeavours are supposed to be *for* that we can begin to make decisions about content and relationships'. Biesta identifies three domains of education which have distinct educational purposes: qualification, socialisation and subjectification (Biesta, 2010). Each of these domains determines a young person's relationship with the world, with others and with themselves. *Qualification*, in simple terms, is the transmission and acquisition of knowledge, skills and understanding, a fundamental goal of (formal) education but, as Biesta (2022) has argued, selection of knowledge is not a neutral activity because it presents and re-presents information in a way that communicates, reinforces and creates value systems. *Socialisation* considers how people understand and relate to the traditions, cultures and practices of their context (Biesta, 2022), but also leads to the interiorisation of these norms. Through socialisation, we learn how education reproduces and/or challenges social structures and 'how the world works' (Coelho et al., 2025, p. 2539). Alongside qualification and socialisation, Biesta argues that the most important domain of purpose in education is what he terms *subjectification*, a process that allows young people 'to become more autonomous and independent in their thinking and acting' (Biesta, 2010, p. 21).[1] Biesta contends that developing a young person's capacity to be aware of themselves as subject of their own life 'is the core of all education' as it gives them 'orientation in the world and 'equipment' for living 'in and 'with' the world' (Biesta, 2022, p. 16). This positions the world as not merely a 'backdrop' to selfhood but as a 'complex network' (Biesta, 2020, p. 96) within which the self must exercise its freedoms without overreaching in order, as Biesta puts it, to balance the imperative of existence between self-destruction and world-destruction (Biesta, 2020, p. 97). Across these three domains tensions exist, most frequently visible in education systems which prioritise qualification over socialisation and subjectification, as part of a wider culture of performativity and excessive focus on high-stakes assessment outcomes (Biesta, 2015). Before examining how these educational purposes play out within the NENP, we situate the programme within the broader policy and curricular landscape that has shaped school-based Environmental Education in England.

The context of school-based environmental education in England

Since the mid-20th century, Environmental Education has been broadly understood as part of increasing environmental awareness and consciousness and varied ways to understand relationships between people and the planet (Rushton, 2025). Following this, Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) came to prominence from the 1980s as part of international conferences and agreements which brought together ideas of sustainable development and Environmental Education. Most recently, Climate Change Education (CCE) has been prevalent, with understandings of CCE ranging from an emphasis on scientific knowledge to approaches that encompass socio-economic and political structures, networks and ethics (Rushton, 2025). We use the term Environmental Education to encompass the range of terms used in education-related policy in England, including 'green skills', 'nature connection' (DfE, 2022, n.p.), 'education on climate change and sustainability' (DfE, 2025, p. 34), 'climate education and sustainability' and 'climate science' (DfE, 2025 p. 40) and 'scientific knowledge and understanding of nature' (DfE, 2025, p. 112).

Before 2022, England demonstrated a lack of vision leaving Environmental Education peripheral in formal schooling (Glackin & King, 2018; Greer et al., 2023) leading some to characterise provision as inadequate (Gandolfi, 2024). This low profile has been reinforced by a period of policy silences and gaps (Dunlop & Rushton, 2022). Despite its promise to 'put climate change at the heart of education' (DfE, 2022), the new strategy mainly focused on supporting existing opportunities for teaching climate change and sustainability rather than implementing systemic change (Dunlop & Rushton, 2022), and included three programmes: (1) the *National Education Nature Park* (NENP), (2) *Climate Leaders Awards* and (3) *Sustainability Leadership*. Of the three, the NENP is the most substantial as a multi-year national programme, with up to £15 million of grants available during the period 2023–2027 (Cottrill et al., 2025). The aim of the NENP is to support education settings across England to embed nature-based learning in the existing curriculum and to improve on-site biodiversity, providing grant funding for settings 'in areas of green deprivation' (Cottrill et al., 2025, p. 2). In contrast, the other two programmes have been less visible in terms of implementation since 2023. In particular, the *Climate Leaders Award*, which aimed to provide a route through existing award schemes to recognise work to develop nature connection and children and celebrate young people's contributions to achieving sustainable futures, has seemingly not progressed and is not listed as part of the DfE strategy in the NENP evaluation (Cottrill et al., 2025). The third programme (DfE, 2022) was the *Sustainability Leadership* programme, with Climate Action Plans as a key mechanism through which settings identify, track and monitor their climate change and sustainability offer, including curricular and extra-curricular activities and operations (e.g. procurement, decarbonisation). While there is a clear expectation in the strategy and in related policy architecture (e.g. Department for Education Estate Management Standards) that by 2025 'all education settings will have nominated a sustainability lead and put in place a climate action plan' (DfE, 2022, n.p.), this is non-statutory guidance and, unlike the NENP, does not come with funding. Although the government announced that they were updating the strategy in 2025, no revisions have yet been released since its publication.

In England, the school curriculum and assessment framework are currently the focus of government reform, providing an opportunity to reconsider the purpose of formal education for children and young people aged up to 18 years (DfE, 2025). The publication of the Curriculum and Assessment Review (CAR) in 2025 (DfE, 2025) potentially marks a turning point for Environmental Education policy in England. While the 2022 strategy presented new programmes, it promised neither intent nor capacity to make significant inroads into curriculum change that might more fundamentally centre Environmental Education and deliver on the priorities and pedagogies that teachers and young people

favour. While it is unclear how the 2022 DfE strategy and 2025 CAR intersect, the CAR focuses on 'preparing learners for a changing world' with recommendations that position 'climate education and sustainability' as one of five 'applied knowledge areas' (DfE, 2025, p. 34). The CAR also seeks to 'bolster' the presence of climate education in those areas of the national curriculum where it is already present, as well as encouraging pedagogy which applies a 'climate lens to existing curriculum content' (DfE, 2025, p. 41). The CAR continues to foreground knowledge gain, while acknowledging the need to strengthen climate and sustainability content as well as recognising that teachers and young people place high priority on the role schools can play in supporting climate education and sustainability. The CAR does not explicitly engage with the challenging relationship between teaching climate change and sustainability and taking action or activism. Researchers have identified that the political nature of climate change activism causes difficulties for how teachers curate classroom discussions on this topic (Dunlop & Rushton, 2024). Furthermore, the development of young people as 'political subjects' with a 'youth activist subject position' creates 'tensions and contradictions' within the education system (McGimpsey et al., 2023, p. 1) that are hard to reconcile with the formal curriculum, with or without revision. In summary, the CAR signals a step forward in school-based Environmental Education policy, but it is too early to envisage whether the modest proposals for curriculum content reform will enable shifts in practice, nor how these proposals align with current programmes, such as the NENP.

We now outline our approach to analysis of the materials and resources published as part of the NENP.

Taking a 'problems' approach to analysis—'What's the problem represented to be'?

We employ Carol Bacchi's distinct lens for approaching policy analysis by adopting her 'What's the Problem Represented to Be'? (WPR) approach, where she encourages us to question how problems are constructed within policy discourses. Bacchi's approach shifts analysis away from a traditional 'problem-solving' model toward a 'problem-questioning' one (Bacchi, 2009, p. xvii) and prompts us to examine the assumptions and representations embedded in policy itself. Bacchi has developed a series of six interrelated questions to policy analysis. They are as follows:

1. What's the 'problem' … represented to be in a specific policy or policies?
2. What presuppositions and assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?
3. How has this representation of the 'problem' come about?
4. What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?
5. What effects are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
6. How/where is this representation of the 'problem' produced, disseminated and defended? How could it be questioned, disrupted and replaced?

Bacchi's (2009) questions have been employed with a range of policies and policy documents by authors (e.g. Meir, 2025; Tawell & McCluskey, 2022; Woo, 2023) where they have located their analysis within the broader context and conditions in which the policy was created (Bacchi, 2009). The WPR approach also expects us to consider our own positionality and to critically apply this self-reflection to both the policies under review and any recommendations that emerge from the analysis (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). As Tawell and McCluskey (2022) argue, WPR offers a structured and transparent method for interrogating

the assumptions embedded in policy, enabling analysts to (re)examine how policy interacts with discourse, context, and wider social dynamics.

Our analysis of the NENP aligns well with the WPR approach to analysis, as it interrogates the ways in which assumptions and representations are embedded in the policy. Our aim is to find hopeful educational purpose in the policy documents surrounding the NENP but to do so by taking a critical stance, using Bacchi's questions to keep us focused on how the NENP is represented, what the context and discourses are surrounding Environmental Education in England and the extent to which the NENP offers an effective and innovative educational response to current environmental crises. Another reason for employing the WPR is that this encourages what Bacchi (2009, p. 20) refers to as a 'sceptical stance toward claims to 'knowledge' and aims to disrupt taken-for-granted 'givens' wherever they are found'. This is crucial to our analysis of how NENP materials centre 'important' knowledge as being key to understanding nature and the environment.

In what follows, we detail the materials and methods used in our analysis and highlight which of Bacchi's six questions we employed.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Firstly, we provide an overview of the data collection and data analysis process before then reflecting on the limitations of the research design and ethical considerations.

Data collection

Our approach to data collection was informed by the worked example provided by Tawell and McCluskey (2022). Author one (Robinson) led the selection of data for analysis following a review of all publicly available materials on the NENP website (www.educationnaturepark.org.uk) published before 1 October 2025. All individual texts and webpages were logged and downloaded to preserve the versions analysed. This process identified three broad types of materials: (1) Information and Guidance, (2) Resource Library of teaching and learning materials organised by subject and key stage and (3) News and Events. The types of collections of materials and resources available on the website are summarised in Tables 1–4. Consistent with Bacchi (2009, p. 20) we recognise that the selection of materials and resources is already an analytical and/or 'interpretative exercise'.

All authors reviewed and discussed the grouping and organisation of these materials. Following this discussion, we decided to focus the study on materials in groups one—Information and Guidance hosted on the website (Table 1) and group three—News and Events (Table 4) as these would provide detailed insights into the rationale, framing and

TABLE 1 Types of Information and Guidance available on the NENP website, distinct from Teaching and Learning Resources (Tables 2 and 3) and News and Events (Table 4).

Types of Information and Guidance	Number of items
How it works	20
Getting started	4
Supporting climate action plans	14
Annual reports	2
Snapshot reports	2
Total	38

TABLE 2 Overview of resources available on the NENP Resources Hub by key stage.

Teaching and learning resources grouped by key stage (age)	Number of items
Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (0–5 years)	80
Key Stage 1 (5–7 years)	81
Key Stage 2 (7–11 years)	94
Key Stage 3 (11–14 years)	85
Key Stage 4 (14–16 years)	89
Key Stage 5 (16–18 years)	30
Total by key stage	469

TABLE 3 Overview of resources available on the NENP Resources Hub by subject.

Teaching and learning resources grouped by subject	Number of items
Art and design	13
Biology	21
Chemistry	18
Citizenship	39
Computing	0
Design and technology	5
English	23
Geography	59
Maths	12
Music	0
Physics	2
Science <KS2	80
Total by subject	272

TABLE 4 Overview of News and Event items available on the NENP website.

Types of news and event items	Number of items
Blog posts written by NENP/NHM/DfE colleagues	31
Blog post written by external colleagues	4
Case studies—Primary settings	11
Case studies—Secondary settings	6
Events items	24
New items	17
Press release	5
Total	99

intent of the NENP across a range of types of resources (e.g. guidance, blog posts, Annual Reports, news items) for a broad audience, whereas the Teaching and Learning Resources were focused on a particular audience (teachers) and resource type. A selection of 20 items from a total of 137 were identified by author one (Robinson) from groups one and three. The Annual Reports were selected as they contained substantive reference to the strategic aims of the programme and its progress to date. Other items were selected as being

representative of each of the categories of material identified in Tables 1 and 4 (e.g. length, author, topic, balance of text/imagery). Texts that were excluded included those that seemed 'standalone' or less representative of the collection as a whole, or whose contents were very heavy on graphics. This sample was subsequently reviewed by authors two (Rushton) and three (Towers) to ensure that these provided fair coverage of the range of materials and resources that were publicly available on the website. The materials selected and analysed in this research are summarised in Table 5. Although some texts were more substantive than others, all texts were coded and material afforded equal weighting.

Data analysis

Initial data analysis took place by all authors using Bacchi's WPR approach (Bacchi, 2009) consistent with the example provided by Tawell and McCluskey (2022). Firstly, we discussed which questions of Bacchi's (2009) approach should guide our analysis. The WPR framework itself suggests that the 6 questions are interrelated and need not always be used exhaustively, and a selective approach can be justified when particular questions best address the study's analytical objectives (Bacchi, 2009). Following the review of Bacchi's questions (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016) and of previous literature (Dunlop & Rushton, 2022), we elected to focus on questions five, six and four (in that order):

- Question 5 What effects (discursive, subjectification, lived) are produced by this representation of the 'problem'?
- Question 6 How and where has this representation of the 'problem' been produced, disseminated and defended? How has it been and/or how can it be disrupted and replaced?
- Question 4 What is left unproblematic in this problem representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be conceptualised differently?

Our rationale for focusing on these questions stemmed from our aim of critically examining the consequences and limitations of the NENP. While questions 1–3 are primarily concerned with identifying and reconstructing the policy's problem representation, questions 5, 6 and 4 enabled us to interrogate its effects, explore the processes through which it is produced and maintained, and identify the silences and alternative understandings excluded from the policy text. For this reason, we chose to focus on these questions and in this order, beginning with the effects of the policy's problem representation, before examining how it is legitimised and sustained, and ultimately identifying the silences and alternative understandings excluded from the policy text.

Our approach included four broad phases of analysis, with phases one, two and three taking place over three months. Firstly, each author independently reviewed each of the 20 items, creating written notes which included the creation of tables which summarised findings against each of the three questions. These written notes were shared electronically and then discussed in a 90 min online meeting where we explored our representations, which was recorded and transcribed. Secondly, following the first online meeting, we identified three themes which guided our second phase of independent review of the 20 items. These were, (1) Knowledge, (2) Measurement and (3) Nature Connectedness (see Table 6). Again, we each wrote separate notes which identified examples against each theme and documented our individual reflections and interrogated and refined our interpretations and representations. We then held a second 90 min online meeting where we discussed our reflections and refined our themes. This meeting was also recorded and transcribed. Therefore, our data analysis drew on our individual written notes and reflections, two transcripts of online meetings between all authors and notes of conversations

TABLE 5 Overview of the types of 20 items selected for analysis.

Group	Sub-group	Focus	Title of item
One—Information and Guidance	How it works	Teacher guidance	How it works
			Planning your project
			Change grey to green
		Teaching activity	Hidden nature challenge
			Points of view
			Creative responses to a place
	Supporting climate action plans	Teacher guidance	Green skills
			Nature Park climate education framework
			ACTive Citizenship in KS4: A Nature Park Guide
		Teaching activity	Three ways to prioritise opportunities
	Getting started with the Nature Park	Teaching activity	Vision Statement
Three—News and Events	Blog post	News and information	Community science: five success stories to fuel your Nature Park journey
			How your Nature Park habitat maps are supporting global biodiversity research
			Science update: December 2024
	Case study		Fundraising to create spaces for nature at Central Park Primary School
	Case study		Creating wildlife corridors at Beaumont School
	Case study		Bringing students closer to nature at Ark Schools
	Case study		Students lead the way in mapping habitats at Reading School
	Report	News and events	Annual Report 2023–2024
			Annual Report 2024–2025

carried out via email. The fourth phase of our analysis continued through the process of writing and review of the research article, which took place over a further period of four months.

Research design limitations and ethical considerations

Our analysis did not include an exhaustive consideration of all materials published on the NENP, which were available up until the beginning of October 2025 but instead selected a representative sample of the published materials. Furthermore, we acknowledge that while the NENP is a substantial part of the DfE strategy, it is not the totality of the strategy (DfE, 2022). Therefore, our selection of materials necessarily only forms part of the available material which represents the realisation of the DfE (2022) strategy and analysis of other items and/or elements of the strategy might provide contrasting and/or alternative ideas and reflections. The materials selected provide a partial representation of the intention and orientation of the NENP, and interviews with key informants (e.g. NENP staff, schoolteachers involved in case studies) and observations in schools could have furthered our

TABLE 6 Summary of three thematic findings with indicative quotations.

Theme	Indicative quotations	Type of document/references
Science and/or STEM *knowledge and skills* are fundamental to engagement with nature.	'As well as an education programme, the Nature Park programme is a huge community science project… you become part of this huge team across the country working on this vital science… Without community scientists we would know far less about the natural world.'	News & Events item – Blog post. Sinclair, G. (2025). *Community science: five stories to fuel your Nature Park journey*. NENP Blog post 17 July 2025. Available at: https://www.educationnaturepark.org.uk/community-science-five-success-stories-fuel-your-nature-park-journey. Accessed on 3 January 2026
	'Collecting data and recording information doesn't have to feel scientific or mathematical, it can also be creative and fun…Using the creative prompts resources, learners can respond however they wish to the features and feelings of their site to make their own explorations and observations.'	Information and Guidance – How it works NENP (2025). *Creative responses to a place*. Available at: https://www.educationnaturepark.org.uk/resource/creative-responses. Accessed on 3 January 2026
	'Participation in the programme supports the development of six key green skills across all subjects: identification and ecology, recording data, interpreting data, creative thinking and decision making, environmental stewardship and horticulture, and communication. Over the past year, particular focus been given to foundational skills for younger learners, and to green careers and Geography.' (p. 15)	News & Events item – Reports NENP (2025). *NENP Annual Report 2024–2025*. Available at: https://www.educationnaturepark.org.uk/annual-report Accessed on 3 January 2026
Measurement is the 'signature pedagogy' of the NENP.	'Nature Park in Numbers: More than 7500 schools, nurseries and college registered…More than 13 million square metres of habitat mapped…Over £12 million in grants awarded to over 1250 schools and nurseries.' (p. 4) 'Teachers have been using its grounds to support curriculum learning to bring a range of subjects to life and collect real data on-site, providing powerful learning experiences while nurturing care for the local environment.' (p. 14)	News & Events item – Reports NENP (2025). *NENP Annual Report 2024–2025*. Available at: https://www.educationnaturepark.org.uk/annual-report Accessed on 3 January 2026
	'There are lots of skills that will be useful as you start to take action for your Nature Park – from plant and biodiversity knowledge as you make planting decisions and monitor improvements, to organising people and responsibilities as you make changes around your site. Skills in measuring and building can help if you plan on creating new structures in your outdoor space, and communication and marketing skills can help you raise awareness and share your story.' (p. 5)	Information and Guidance – Planning your project NENP (2025). *Planning your project*. Available at: https://www.educationnaturepark.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-10/Project%20Planning%20Guidance.pdf. Accessed on 3 January 2026

TABLE 6 (Continued)

Theme	Indicative quotations	Type of document/references
Nature Connectedness is broadly understood as individual and linked to personal wellbeing.	'Although sometimes viewed as a barrier, technology can also be a gateway to connection.' '…making us feel part of the solution rather than the problem…' '…nature is always there for you no matter how you are feeling…' '…help young people learn through active experiences of observing, exploring and investigating nature themselves…'	Information and Guidance – How it works NENP (2025). *Creative responses to a place*. Available at: https://www.educationnaturepark.org.uk/resource/creative-responses. Accessed on 3 January 2026
	'…build the skills and knowledge that will allow them to make decisions about, plan and carry out habitat enhancements to improve their site for nature.'	Information & Guidance – Supporting climate action plans NENP (2025). Green skills. Available at: https://www.educationnaturepark.org.uk/green-skills. Accessed on 3 January 2026
	'A core goal of the Nature Park is ensuring that all children and young people can take part and develop a meaningful connection with nature.' (p. 15)	News & Events item – Reports NENP (2025). *NENP Annual Report 2024–2025*. Available at: https://www.educationnaturepark.org.uk/annual-report. Accessed on 3 January 2026

understanding. In subsequent phases of research, we intend to explore the perspectives of such key informants.

We recognise that the publicly available materials and resources are created and produced by professionals, drawing on their expertise, endeavours and partnerships. These materials also include the operationalisation of the DfE (2022) strategy through case studies and other professional contributions of teachers and educators. Therefore, as well as being consistent with Bacchi's approach (Bacchi, 2009; Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016), which requires us as researchers to have a detailed understanding of the policy context, including climate change and sustainability education and education policy in England (e.g. Dunlop & Rushton, 2022; Rushton & Walshe, 2025), we also have ethical responsibilities to consider these materials within the context in which they are created. Our approach was consistent with the British Educational Research Association guidelines for ethical research (BERA, 2024). In the design of the research, we were cognisant of our responsibilities to minimise any potential harm arising from the research, including distress associated with climate and/or ecological anxiety (BERA, 2024 paragraph 24). Our decision to focus on publicly available materials and not to require contributions of time and expertise from participants was consistent with this approach.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We present three thematic findings: (1) Science and/or STEM *knowledge and skills* are fundamental to engagement with nature, (2) *Measurement* is the 'signature pedagogy' (Shulman, 2005) of the NENP and (3) *Nature Connectedness* is broadly understood as individual and linked to personal wellbeing (Table 6). Having presented these findings, we consider the broader implications of these.

Science and/or STEM knowledge and skills are fundamental to engagement with nature

Throughout the resources, science and STEM knowledge and skills are positioned as the leading domain for knowledge about nature. For example, the NENP is described as both an education programme and also:

> …a huge community science project answering big questions about nature in England… children and young people…across England [are] collecting data… They can also steer the direction of the research, analyse data and share the results and research outcomes with others.
>
> (Burton & Jacklin, 2024, n.p.)

This frames participation in nature-related activities as a scientific endeavour with an underlying assumption that developing better scientific knowledge will bring the capacity to resolve and explain nature, rather than a framing of enjoying or experiencing nature. Children and young people are understood as community scientists who are developing research knowledge about nature as part of a wider programme of research focused on biodiversity (Burton & Jacklin, 2024). There are numerous examples of resources that showcase children and young people as community scientists, including school-based projects. For example, a blog post showcases five 'success stories to fuel your Nature Park journey' which draws on examples that illustrate how, 'when you get involved, you become part of this huge team across the country working on this vital science' (Sinclair, 2025, n.p.). Children are understood as being part of a science team, of being community scientists and contributing to research, rather than as changemakers or activists or creators. Where there is a framing that is beyond solely scientific knowledge, for example the focus on 'taking action' in the resources for citizenship for students aged 15–16 (NENP, n.d.-d), ideas of action are still framed through scientific research and measurement. For example, the NENP Citizenship guidance provides support to, 'carry out action informed by research' and to consider 'how impact can be measured in relation to both people (e.g. Do people enjoy the site more?) and nature (e.g. Has biodiversity increased?)' (NENP, n.d.-d).

While *The Climate Education Framework* includes 'critical and creative thinking', 'green skills' and 'social and emotional learning', the framework seems to be underpinned by Ofsted's curriculum design principles of intent, implementation and impact (Ofsted, 2025), which prioritises disciplinary or 'powerful knowledge' through three statements of 'to know', 'to do' and 'to be' (NENP, n.d.-a):

> To know: How can you ensure knowledge and skills from a range of disciplines are being developed so learners understand the natural world and their role in it?
>
> To do: How can you adopt the Nature Park process to support learners to make positive change together and sustain pro-environmental behaviour?
>
> To be: How can you support learners to build a positive connection with nature, a positive vision for the future and an increasing awareness of how to work towards it?

Turning to skills, the 'Green skills' guidance, outlines six specific skills which, 'provide opportunities to bring purpose to all aspects of the formal curriculum' (NENP, n.d.-b) and examples of subject-specific curriculum links are provided. Of these examples, STEM subjects

dominate, with a total of 13 examples covering five of the six skills. In comparison, geography has two examples, English has three examples and PSHE/Citizenship has four. The guidance notes the curriculum links are 'not exhaustive' and 'resources will be developed across a wide range of subject areas' (NENP, n.d.-b, p. 4), which in 2026 will include music and art, as well as computing and design and technology (NENP, 2025a). Nevertheless, from the outset, science, STEM and school subjects are the focus of activity. This is in tension with the NENP's own Climate Education Framework and the 'to know' statement which indicates 'a range of disciplines' (NENP, n.d.-a) and also, the claim in the 2023/24 Annual Report, 'putting climate and nature at the heart of the curriculum' (NENP, 2024b, p. 32) – can this really be achieved given the foregrounding of science and STEM knowledge and skills? Such an emphasis on science also shapes the value of how other subjects might be perceived. For example, one resource which explores 'Creative responses to a place' gives an example of an activity where, 'collecting data and recording information doesn't have to feel scientific or mathematical, it can also be creative and fun' (NENP, n.d.-c, n.p.). This could suggest that other subjects such as English or art can really be understood as a vehicle for teaching scientific knowledge about nature. Coupled with the wider emphasis on science and STEM, including the prevalence of resources in these disciplinary areas, suggests that scientific knowledge is the preeminent way of engaging nature, through recording, analysis and explanation.

Measurement is the 'signature pedagogy' of the National Education Nature Park

A consequence of the emphasis on scientific knowledge, community science and research in the NENP is that scientific measurement is visible as the characteristic form of teaching and learning, or 'signature pedagogy' (Shulman, 2005) of the educational programme. The 2023/2024 Annual Report foregrounds the framing of the value of biodiversity in economic terms and the quantification of the significance of the NENP through its size—as large as the West Midlands city of Birmingham. This focus on measurement underpins the activities which are central to the NENP. These activities include habitat mapping, sound mapping and biodiversity and pollinator counts which involve specific scientific skills (e.g., observation, classification, measurement, spatial analysis). For example, a case study of a school engagement with the NENP focuses on habitat mapping sharing:

> …learners can use flow charts to understand and map the habitats they see on their sites. Doing this gives learners and school staff evidence and information to help decide how to make the best changes for both nature and the school community on their sites…they took an approach which allowed students to take on as much responsibility for this as possible, emphasising a sense of independent exploration and agency, and developing their green, digital, and scientific skills.
>
> (Nagan, 2024, n.p.)

Such an approach can embed measurement into pedagogy and underlines that engagement with nature is mediated through technical and analytical practices that build knowledge about nature. Updates provided by the Nature Park science team through blog posts are also very focused on communicating the practices of measurement, for example:

> …you amazing community scientists have mapped 3km^3 of habitat, including 91km of habitat lines including 3.7km of hedges and 751 microhabitats including 409 trees, 40 insect hotels and five bat boxes!
>
> (NENP, 2024a, n.p.)

The quantity of the scientific data collection is underlined through the NENP communications and resources, but so too is the quality of the data collection—the extent to which the educational programme is built on scientific measurement includes the degree to which the students effectively operate as community scientists, for example the accuracy of their insect identifications as part of pollinator counts.

The scope and impact of the NENP is also frequently articulated in numerical and scientific measurements and achievements, including in the Annual Reports (NENP, 2024b; 2025b; Table 6), which document success through the numbers of participating schools, children and young people, activities completed and areas of habitats mapped. The NENP Annual Report 2024/2025 (p. 27) also makes a clear link between the scientific measurements and achievements of the NENP and children's wellbeing:

> Across the country, children and young people are transforming urban school sites into nature havens…These student-led improvements have boosted wellbeing, enriched outdoor learning, encouraged pupil responsibility and provided real-life context for curriculum subjects.

Measurement also includes 'wellbeing' itself, which is one of the three key principles of the NENP: in the Annual Report 2024/2025, it states, 'researchers are developing measures of the programme's wellbeing impact, including potential links to attendance and attainment.' (NENP, 2025b, p. 19).

The focus of the NENP on scientific knowledge, coupled with a signature pedagogy of measurement (observation, identification, recording, analysis), continues to be articulated, including foregrounding key activities of habitat mapping, pollinator counts and exploring the digital Nature Park Map (NENP, 2025a). This underlines a curriculum orientation of academic rationalism, where the central purpose of education is to induct students into scientific disciplinary knowledge, including the concepts and methods of inquiry (Deng, 2020). What is less clear is the educational purpose of measurement beyond the numbers of schools involved, area of habitat mapped and school sites 'greened' – what comes next for children, young people and teachers? Similarly, ideas of wellbeing are not explained or problematised beyond an implicit assumption that being in nature equates to better wellbeing and complexities such as cultural differences, accessibility or structural barriers are not considered in detail.

Having considered the ways in which measurement is the 'signature pedagogy' of the NENP, we now consider the ways in which nature connection is understood.

Nature connectedness is broadly understood as individual, accessed through the school estate and linked to personal wellbeing

Core to the NENP aims is 'developing a nature connection' for all children and young people (NENP, 2025b, p. 9). The 2024/2025 Annual Report focuses on the individual relationship a person has with nature, developed through noticing, which can enhance their personal wellbeing, saying:

> All activities are designed to enhance the bond between nature and young people. A deeper connection with nature benefits both people and planet: it's proven to have both mental and physical wellbeing benefits, alongside developing care for nature and the environment.
>
> (NENP, 2025b, p. 19)

Here, the authors of the NENP Annual Report draw on the model of Nature Connection developed at the University of Derby, specifically the pathways to nature connection (Lumber et al., 2017). In this model, nature connection is understood as the strength of an individual's emotional and psychological connections to the rest of the natural world (Richardson & Butler, 2022). Research with adults in the UK underlines that nature connection is developed through 'contact, emotion, meaning, and compassion, with the latter mediated by engagement with natural beauty,' and that these 'were predictors of connection with nature, yet knowledge-based activities were not' (Lumber et al., 2017, p. 1). While the NENP Annual Report foregrounds examples of creativity and creative approaches in the resources provided, the strong emphasis on science and STEM knowledge as well as measurement as a signature pedagogy seems to run counter to a definition of nature connection which moves beyond knowledge and where connection is understood as 'much more than just being in nature, it is how we interact with it that is most important' (Richardson & Butler, 2022, p. 6).

One school case study provides an example of on-site mapping and planting to respond to potential eco-anxiety (Bomphrey, 2024). Feedback from students and staff underlines how the activities have reduced eco-anxiety and enabled students to develop new skills. Relatedly, another case study showcases how schools can support children to develop nature connection through site-based initiatives such as allotments, gardening clubs and outdoor classrooms (Ark Schools, 2024). While these examples represent commendable work by school staff and children, they present science-based activities and skills as the framework through which to develop nature connection, with little if any focus on dimensions such as the emotions, which are core to nature connection as set out by Miles Richardson and colleagues in the 'Derby model' (e.g. Lumber et al., 2017; Richardson & Butler, 2022). Such a focus on building skills and knowledge is consistent with the approach of the NENP, where children and young people will learn to observe, analyse and make decisions about the nature on their school site. Such a relationship is also wholly consistent with one where humans are interventionist, rather than in community with nature. Relatedly, we reflect on what the effect is of framing the idea of nature connection through children's individual relationship with nature, which enhances their personal well-being and that this opportunity for connection is accessed through the school estate. In many of the examples provided by the NENP, the school site becomes the entry point for children and young people's connection with nature. Little is evident, even implicitly, that children and young people might engage in worlds beyond school where they develop their own understanding of and relationship to nature.

Across these three findings we observe that a consequence of the focus on science and STEM knowledge and skills, with measurement as a signature pedagogy of the NENP, is that the ideas presented of nature connection are understood through such a lens—as something which is rooted in knowledge and can be measured.

IMPLICATIONS

Neoliberal logic, measurement and outcomes

It is clear from the NENP materials analysed that the programme proceeds from an unquestioning commitment to make a rapid difference in a curriculum environment that has long been infertile. Yet Bacchi's questions reveal a policy articulation that remains rooted in neoliberal logic and architecture. That articulation, voiced through the discourse of measurement and (self)governed by publication of annual reports, updates on *progress* and evidence of doing and acting *at pace*, resonates with the performative culture that has shaped the education sphere in recent decades (Biesta, 2022; Sahlberg, 2007, 2010). Here,

measurement is linked to the science-focused character of the activities on offer within the NENP. Scientific endeavour, supported by measurement, lends an air of authenticity and virtue to the curriculum work undertaken within the auspices of the programme and reinforces the sense that students are adding to an important body of knowledge. However, the collation of biodiversity evidence, the counting and measuring—while of unquestioned utility in and of themselves as activities—is not contextualised within the broader scope of the NENP programme: what *values* underpin these endeavours and what is the ultimate educative direction of such projects?

Measurement contributes to the pervasive discourse of 'school effectiveness' and resonates with the force of what Sahlberg termed the global educational reform movement (2007, 2010) where measurable knowledge overrides all other educational purposes in 'knowledge-society learning' (Sahlberg, 2010, p. 47). Measurement underpins the neoliberal landscape's 'ongoing obsession with generating evidence' (Biesta, 2022) and has come to be seen as an accepted *good* within education. Where outcomes can be tangibly and visibly enumerated, there is an accepted sense of that educative practice being in some way effective. What outcomes or purposes, then, appear to be in play: what are young people learning '*for*' in the NENP? (Biesta, 2024). Furthermore, beyond it lending authenticity and legitimacy, the measurement embedded within the activities encouraged by the NENP framework is not overtly—or evidently—contextualised beyond the individual tasks that are mapped and measured. The relational nature of 'improvements in biodiversity' and 'nature recovery' appears to be missing from the measurement framework: what progress targets for biodiversity and recovery inform the NENP and what might 'success' look like? Have starting points been measured and are endpoint targets identifiable? As yet, there is no demonstrable increase in biodiversity or nature recovery reported in the NENP documentation and it is not clear how such progress will be measured in the context of the programme.

Understanding the educational purposes of the NENP

Qualification

The NENP's emphasis on scientific knowledge reflects the dominance of *qualification* as its main educational purpose (Biesta, 2020). The framing of the NENP through the lens of scientific enquiry values that enquiry above other knowledges: the factual, evidential, countable and emotionally neutral are valued above the activist, the experiential, the social and the affective, thereby sidelining the broader set of knowledges and skills we know to be a necessary part of human response to environmental and climate crisis. The NENP is engaged in critical work by curating young people's first or earliest engagements with nature-related activities. By mediating these engagements through a lens that prioritises scientific endeavour, the NENP is signalling to young people how we should value the natural world and constructing a relationship to it that separates human endeavour—enquiring, observational, resourcist—apart from the natural world, rather than understanding humans as part of their context. This positioning centres the discourse that humans can change and affect nature (to protect, control, re-wild) as an exterior object, rather than shaping a discourse that centres on necessary human change. Qualification prepares young people to be the future workforce, underpinning green economy arguments that require climate change education - or its counterparts - to contribute to economic capital, irrespective of the contribution of consumptive behaviours to the crisis, and is overtly expressed in the original strategy's intent to support job creation (DfE, 2022). The NENP appears to reinforce this educational purpose: while the NENP's 'Green Skills' framework aims to help children and young people find meaning and relevance in nature, the skills identified (e.g. identification,

recording data, interpreting data) are predominantly rooted in a scientific framing consistent with qualification.

However, the whole-school approach within the NENP, which is multidisciplinary and all phases is to be welcomed. While our analysis of resources identified a strong focus on scientific and geographical approaches, there is a stated intent to broaden curriculum-linked resources to include more 'arts-based subjects, aligned with the outcomes of the government's curriculum review' (NENP, 2025, p. 37). The expansion of the Early Years Foundation Stage offering will embed nature encounters in young people's earliest experiences and enable a shift in the NENP from the extra-curricular, voluntary and volunteer-led sphere to becoming a greater part of the fabric of the daily curriculum. Further reframing of the resources to extend beyond the pedagogy of measurement could introduce a more expansive, justice-oriented 'signature pedagogy'. Rather than centring on scientific knowledges, an education rooted in learning for justice, for equity and for compassion could generate a more rounded future workforce of young people not only versed in the facts of climate change but also skilled in the human relationships and behaviours required to challenge and address the causes of biodiversity loss.

The organisation of the resources maps closely with existing curriculum architecture, which we know will not fundamentally change as a result of the CAR (DfE, 2025). This facilitates policy enactment for teaching staff unfamiliar with Environmental Education as a construct who, rather than encountering the national curriculum as a barrier (Rushton & Walshe, 2025) may be able to engage through familiar subject disciplinary pedagogies, supported by collegial approaches to professional learning within and beyond subject departments in communities of practice, and supported by external expertise (Greer et al., 2025). External expertise is integral to the NENP, including through the Regional Officers, who support clusters of schools in geographic regions, and the leadership of the programme by the Natural History Museum with the Royal Horticultural Society. Continuing to leverage this trusted expertise to enhance teachers' confidence to integrate climate change and sustainability into their classrooms is a significant source of hope.

Socialisation

The socialisation practices at work in the NENP appear to centre around a project-based structure, with a sense of community and relation to others developed through groupwork and shared endeavours that tend to be less prominent in an education trajectory that aims for credentialisation. Young people participating in the NENP are part of both local and national communities linked by shared value systems centred on environmental engagement and nurture. The structure of the over-arching mapping programme is a very overt way of situating participants in relation to each other. The roles that are prioritised and the values that are encouraged in the NENP through the dominance of the community science framing are those that position humans as separate from nature, as scientist and as solutions. While a necessary purpose of education, socialisation reproduces human framings of their positioning in relation to the natural world, just as it presents an opportunity to engage with others in actively challenging these norms.

What is missing from the social practices of the NENP which are currently visible is any strong sense of a social reconstructionist agenda. The foregrounding of scientific enquiry minimises consideration of the social problems or behaviours that have created environmental crisis, and while there is a generalised orientation for 'making change', and a 'transformation' agenda in terms of the school estate, there is no strong sense of social reform. A social reconstructionist perspective would foreground the issues of inequality and justice and be 'instrumental in equipping individuals for the challenges created by economic and

cultural globalisation' (Deng, 2020) but the NENP documentation is largely silent in relation to the root causes of biodiversity loss, fossil fuel use or resource scarcity. There is, for example, brief reference to the impact housing issues and need have on access to green space in the Ark Schools (2024) case study, but no sense of how this relates to broader issues of justice. Scientific framing and encouraging reliance on scientific solutions has the effect of holding these social issues at arm's length and dampens young people's opportunity to question their own and others' behaviours.

There is, however, evidence that the community science research agenda has the potential to re-examine the relationship between people and science. While the NENP community science construct appears to follow a science-led rather than community-led model for its activities, there is enormous scope within the project to follow more inclusive framings such as a 'Core Collaborative Community Science' framework (Derrien et al., 2024) which prioritises community needs and centres on the dynamics of power, equity, and justice to address social and environmental injustices. Engaging students in project frameworks which actively question the relationships between those within and beyond their communities and how policy and system change might serve their communities more closely would be a valuable undertaking, reinforcing the concept of school as hub or 'community connector' (Sim & Elliot Major, 2025).

Subjectification

The NENP encouragement to students to embody a sense of self as community scientists can reinforce the socialising norms and values of scientific knowledge and roles. It also neatly avoids the development of 'youth activist subject positions', which McGimpsey et al. (2023) have identified as creating tensions and contradictions within the education system. This view of students as nascent community scientists can narrow the potential for 'self-formation' that Deng argues is lost in the curriculum discourses that 'prepare young people for their future role as active, responsible and productive citizens in a democratic society' (Deng, 2020, p. 26). Without educating children and young people to achieve agency, curriculum 'ignores the development of capacities for practical, moral and ethical reasoning and dispositions or virtues such as caring, empathy, compassion and social responsibility' (Deng, 2020, p. 39). There is some evidence in the NENP case studies analysed in this study of students beginning to develop activist, autonomous subjectivity and student voice, but opportunities to challenge and question social structures are not overt. The balance between qualification, socialisation and subjectification seems currently to be skewed to a focus on qualification.

If qualification, socialisation and subjectification are the ways we can view a young person's relation to world, community and the self, then the relationship to nature - through what is termed 'nature connectedness' - could be argued to contribute to an educational purpose of subjectification, a relational dimension within the NENP. However, the focus on '*developing* a nature connection' embedded in the NENP implies a starting position of separation between nature and human subjects, in turn reinforcing the dominant/subservient relation of knowledge-centred/nature-focused activities. Furthermore, without a clear definition of nature connectedness, the NENP appears to understand its aims primarily through individual wellbeing. Broader benefits that generate compassion and advocacy for nature and meaning for humanity are less visible. Framing nature connectedness through an individual relationship with nature continues to frame nature as a resource to be drawn on rather than an integral element of selfhood. It acts in a transactional way to 'feed' the individual. Supported by prevalent discourses of mental wellness and self-care, nature is commodified as a solution to individual need. Indeed, a project that is so rooted in the school campus is potentially

a limiting tool. Such a framing locates nature connection within a formal learning context, with all the limitations of such (real and metaphorical) architecture. The 'Derby model' of nature connection (Lumber et al., 2017) is clear that merely 'being in' nature is insufficient: meaningful nature connectedness that values 'contact, emotion, meaning, and compassion' needs curriculum architectures that can facilitate such behaviours and outcomes.

However, the centrality of Nature Connectedness to the NENP is cause for much hope: there is scope to refine the framing of nature connection so that it moves beyond the focus on individual and wellbeing and more closely reflects the 'Derby model' (Lumber et al., 2017). For example, many of the activities offer the opportunity for the noticing, tuning in and sensing elements of the Derby Pathways to Nature (Lumber et al., 2017). Expanding focus to the meaning and compassion pathways would extend the nature connected 'self' beyond internal considerations of mental wellbeing to external considerations of the self as an integral element of nature. Rather than being merely *subject to* the balm that nature can offer, the nature connected subject would appreciate the interconnected relationship between its own thriving and the thriving of nature, generating greater capacity for pro-environmental behaviours and authentically realising nature connectedness as part of an educational purpose of socialisation.

CONCLUSION

We have highlighted a series of significant challenges within the early implementation of the NENP, including a framing which remains largely aligned with a neoliberal, measurement-driven logic that privileges scientific knowledge and quantifiable outcomes over broader educational purposes. This emphasis not only narrows our understanding of Environmental Education but also potentially limits opportunities for socialisation, subjectification, and justice-oriented engagement, all dimensions essential to meaningful responses to global environmental crises.

However, alongside these challenges, there is much to be hopeful about. The whole-setting approach embedded in the NENP offers valuable scope for cultural and pedagogical change, expanding Environmental Education beyond discrete actions and into the daily activities of school life. The planned broadening of curriculum-linked resources is promising as it signals a movement beyond a STEM-dominated model. Furthermore, the professional learning structures afforded by the NENP, particularly the expertise and support offered by Regional Officers and partner organisations, represent a significant foundation for strengthening teacher confidence, skills and capacity across phases and disciplines. This paper has focused primarily on published materials from the first two years of the NENP's implementation. As such, our analysis is limited to how the NENP represents itself through policy texts, guidance and publicly-available resources. Future research is needed to deepen understanding of the NENP's intentions, enactments and impacts by engaging directly with policy-makers, NENP staff, participating schools, and other stakeholders. For example, interviews and ethnographic inquiry would enable a richer exploration of how the NENP is interpreted and experienced in practice, and the extent to which its stated purposes align with lived realities of those working within it. We contend that at a time of curricular reform and environmental urgency, examining the purposes and practices of programmes like the NENP is essential. Despite the policy tensions and challenges we have discussed, the NENP offers hopeful possibilities for strengthening school-based Environmental Education in England.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Julie Robinson: Conceptualization; data curation; formal analysis; investigation; writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; methodology; validation; project administration.

Emma Towers: Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; methodology; formal analysis; validation. **Elizabeth A.C. Rushton:** Writing – original draft; writing – review and editing; formal analysis; supervision; methodology; validation.

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The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in National Education Nature Park at https://www.educationnaturepark.org.uk/.

ETHICS STATEMENT
The data used in this research are publicly available, and the research design and approach were consistent with the BERA Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (fifth edition).

AI DECLARATION STATEMENT
No artificial intelligence tools were used at any stage in the production of this manuscript.

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Endnote
[1] For clarity, we note that in this paper, we engage with the term 'subjectification' in two distinct ways. Firstly, Biesta's (2010) concept of 'subjectification', which concerns young people becoming subjects capable of responsible agency. Secondly, Bacchi's (2009) concept of subjectification effects, which is concerned with how policy produces subject positions.

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