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Abstract of publication

**World School
World Neighbourhood:
working on
sustainability and
livability in the
neighbourhood**

**Effect evaluation of
activities around sustainability
at four primary schools
in Noord-Brabant,
the Netherlands**

LOUIS BOLK
I N S T I T U T E

Summary

During the school year 2013-2014 the World School World Neighbourhood (WSWN) project was conducted at four primary schools in the province of Noord-Brabant of the Netherlands. The participating schools, which were located in the towns of Haarsteeg, Zijtaart, Oisterwijk, and Sint Michielsgestel, organized a large number of activities around the theme of sustainability. The Louis Bolk Institute in Driebergen (NL) investigated the effect of these activities on sustainability awareness and behaviour among schoolchildren and local residents, on quality of life in the neighbourhoods around the schools, and on social partnerships between schools, schoolchildren, and local citizens, organizations and businesses.

Specifically, we investigated the effect of the WSWN project on:

1. Sustainability awareness and behaviour among schoolchildren: have children from participating schools become more aware of sustainability issues, and has this led to more sustainable behaviour and healthier lifestyles?
2. Social cohesion: has the project resulted in new and/or stronger partnerships between the schools and local citizens, organizations and businesses?
3. Quality of life in the neighbourhoods around the schools: to what extent did local residents participate in project activities, and have they noticed an effect of these activities on neighbourhood liveability?
4. Health and well-being, particularly of pre-school children: what are the incentives and impediments to introducing healthy, sustainable food in pre-school childcare?

We investigated these research questions using surveys, interviews and a literature review. For example, a questionnaire was distributed among various classes of the four participating schools and one 'control' school, both in the autumn of 2013 (start of the project) and 2014 (end of the project). In this questionnaire, children could indicate what they 'do', what they 'know' and what they 'would like to do' in terms of environmental and social sustainability. Similarly, both in 2013 and 2014 a survey was conducted among parents and local residents about their involvement in the neighbourhood and their view on sustainability and liveability issues. Furthermore, at the start and after one year interviews were held with the directors of the participating schools and managers of pre-school childcare facilities in the area.

Results

Knowledge, awareness and behaviour of schoolchildren. The questionnaire was completed by 298 children from 10 classes in 2013, and 179 children from 6 classes in 2014 (the same children as in 2013, minus the group who had moved on to secondary school). The participating children indicated that they had learned from the lessons about 'plastic soup', the 'repair school' and the 'E-waste race', as well as from the project's social activities such as meeting refugee children and people with disabilities. They also showed an increased awareness of waste and littering: compared to 2013, more children in 2014 indicated they would 'sometimes' or '(very) often' hold on to litter until they see a waste bin. In addition, the children gained a better understanding of the abstract concept of sustainability, with correct answers increasing from 37% in 2013 to 57% in 2014. The survey also showed that knowledge of energy-related issues had increased significantly among children of participating schools compared to their peers in the 'control' school. However, no significant knowledge differences were found with regard to the other project themes (environment, biodiversity,

local economy, nutrition), and no significant changes were found in behaviour and intentions towards sustainability. Interestingly, we found that girls were more positive about their neighbourhood and, both in terms of behaviour and intentions, were more committed to sustainability than boys, whereas boys scored higher than girls in terms of knowledge about sustainability.

Social cohesion within the neighbourhood. The WSWN project significantly strengthened social cohesion and local partnerships. The four participating schools organized a range of activities around the theme of sustainability, and developed many new (and sometimes unexpected) partnerships with local citizens, organizations and businesses. Two of the schools even doubled the number of partnerships during the project. These partnerships allowed schoolchildren to meet and interact with other people in society, including people with a disability (at a care farm in Haarsteeg), elderly people (in Haarsteeg and Zijtaart) and people from different cultural backgrounds (at the asylum seekers' centre in Oisterwijk). Many of these activities will be incorporated into the schools' permanent curricula and hence will positively contribute to lasting social partnerships in the school neighbourhoods.

Neighbourhood liveability. The questionnaire on neighbourhood liveability was completed by 100 respondents at the start of the project in 2013, and 135 respondents at the end of the project in 2014. In this survey, neighbourhood residents and other stakeholders rated their experiences and perceptions with regard to issues such as community safety and environmental quality. The results show that the project positively contributed to neighbourhood liveability, with higher scores in 2014 for sense of security, availability of children's play areas and quality of local green space. The number of respondents was too low to separately analyze individual locations.

Healthy, sustainable food for pre-school children. We also investigated how to promote healthy, sustainable food in the pre-school childcare centres that work together with the schools participating in the WSWN project. Childcare centres influence the daily diet of a large group of children and thus could play an important role in teaching children healthy and sustainable eating habits. A review of the literature shows that it is particularly important to promote adequate fruit and vegetable consumption, which can be achieved by early exposure to a wide range of fruits and vegetables to increase young children's familiarity with these foods. In addition, childcare staff could set the right example by eating healthy themselves, and involving children in vegetable gardening and food preparation where possible. Our interviews with childcare managers confirmed that the importance of children's fruit and vegetable consumption is widely recognized. Furthermore, we found that price considerations, staff perceptions and central procurement policies are determining factors in whether or not childcare centres will switch to more sustainable food products (local produce, organic products, etc).

Conclusion: As a result of the WSWN project, both schoolchildren and local residents gained more knowledge and awareness of sustainability issues. However, the project timeframe was too short (one year) to establish a statistically significant change in sustainability behaviour. All participating schools developed new partnerships with local citizens, organizations and businesses, while existing partnerships were strengthened. This resulted in a range of activities around the theme of sustainability, which will be maintained and repeated in the years to come. By boosting these initiatives, the WSWN project will have a lasting effect on social cohesion, neighbourhood liveability and quality of life in the province of Noord-Brabant.

Keywords

sustainability, neighbourhood, primary school children, partnerships, nature assisted health

Authors

Lucy van de Vijver, Miek Jong

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Contact

l.vandevijver@louisbolk.nl

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www.louisbolk.org