

Soundscapes Outdoors



University
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Curriculum Links

- Language & Literacy: Listening, speaking, and reflecting on sensory experiences.
- Arts & Creativity: Exploring sound, rhythm, and expression through music, movement, or visual representation.
- Science & Environment: Observing natural and human-made sounds in different habitats and times of day.
- Technology: Using digital tools to record, store, and share sounds.
- Health & Wellbeing: Developing awareness of how sound affects mood, focus, and relaxation.
- Social Studies / Geography: Understanding place through sensory mapping and comparing environments.

Key Concept

Every place has its own unique soundscape, and by listening carefully we can understand more about our environment, our community, and ourselves.



Background

Learners explore the idea of soundscapes — the soundtrack of a place. By recording, mapping, and reflecting on sounds around their school or local environment, they will gain a deeper awareness of their surroundings. They will compare how soundscapes shift across different times of day and locations, and reflect on how sound influences their feelings and behaviours.

Resources

- Clipboards, paper, or sketchbooks for sound maps
- Pencils, crayons, or markers
- Recording devices (tablets, phones, or handheld recorders — optional)
- Outdoor space with a variety of sound sources (trees, playground, open space, near buildings/fences)

Wider Skills

- Observation and questioning
- Listening and attention
- Creativity and expression
- Communication and collaboration
- Curiosity and sense-making

Metaskills

- Curiosity – Exploration: Learners listen carefully and notice new details.
- Sense-Making – Holistic Thinking: Learners connect sound to place, time, and feeling.
- Creativity – Maker Mentality: Learners represent sounds visually, verbally, or physically.
- Collaboration – Communication: Learners share recordings or maps with peers.
- Critical Thinking – Problem Solving: Learners compare soundscapes and consider how they change.

Lesson

Introduction (10 minutes)

Gather at your garden space outdoors.

- Ask: “What is a soundscape? What sounds can you hear right now?”
- Explain that a soundscape is like the soundtrack of a place. It changes depending on time of day, weather, and who or what is around.

Silent Listening Game.

- Everyone closes their eyes for 30 seconds.
- Afterward, children share what they heard. Encourage detail: “Was it near or far away? Loud or quiet? Natural or human-made?”
- Repeat, with children listening specifically for Biophony – sounds made by living things (birds singing, insects buzzing, dogs barking, children playing). What do the children notice.
- Now listen for Geophony – natural, non-living sounds (wind in the trees, rain, rivers, waves, thunder, footsteps on gravel).
- Finally, listen for Anthrophony – human-made sounds (traffic, voices, machinery, music, airplanes).

Describing Qualities of Sound

- Pitch – how high or low a sound is (birdsong vs. rumbling lorry).
- Volume / Amplitude – how loud or quiet it is.
- Tempo – how fast or slow the sound pattern is.
- Rhythm – repeating patterns (dripping water, hammering).
- Timbre – the “texture” or quality of a sound (rustling leaves vs. a clear whistle).
- Duration – how long the sound lasts (a clap vs. ongoing traffic hum).
- Directionality – where it comes from (left, right, above, behind).

Main Activity – Exploring Soundscapes (30–35 minutes)

Step 1: Exploring Different Spaces (if you have more than 1 garden area. If you only have 1 you may choose to explore it at different times of day).

- Divide the class into small groups.
- Assign or let groups choose different locations around the garden(s).
- At each location, learners pause for 2–3 minutes to listen carefully.
- Optional: Use a timer to build focus.

Step 2: Recording the Soundscape

- Learners record sounds in one of two ways:
 - Digital recording – use a tablet/phone/recorder to capture 1–2 minutes of sound.
 - While this is happening, you may ask the children to create sound maps – draw a circle for themselves and place symbols, words, or pictures around it to show where sounds came from and what they were.
Teacher prompt: “Draw the bird on the side it came from. If a sound is loud, draw it bigger. If it is far away, draw it smaller.”

Step 3: Repeat in a Second Location/Time

- Move to a contrasting space (e.g. quiet corner vs. busy playground).
- Repeat recording or mapping.
- Encourage learners to notice differences: “What is the same? What is new? Which sounds have disappeared?”

Step 4: Optional Extensions During the Session

- Add a movement activity: children act out sounds they hear (e.g. flap like a bird, stomp like playground feet).
- Collect a “sound poem” together: each child says one sound they noticed, teacher writes in sequence to create a group poem.
- Older learners can categorise sounds as natural (birds, wind, rustling leaves) or human-made (voices, traffic, footsteps).

Discussion & Reflection (10–15 minutes)

- Sharing Back:
 - Gather groups and listen to recordings or look at sound maps.
 - Invite each group to describe their location’s soundscape.
- Guided Questions:
 - Which place was the noisiest? Which was the quietest?
 - Did the sounds make you feel calm, excited, or distracted?
 - What would the soundscape be like early in the morning or at night?
 - Which sounds do you think are helpful for learning? Which make it harder to concentrate?
- Class Soundscape Story:
 - Option A: Layer recordings together to create one long “sound journey” around the grounds.
 - Option B: On a large shared map of the school, each group adds their sound symbols/words.

Assessment

- Observation: Watch how learners engage during listening times. Do they pause, attend, and notice details? Are they able to represent sounds in maps, drawings, or recordings?
- Discussion: Use questioning in groups and as a class. Can learners describe what they heard using descriptive vocabulary (quiet, loud, high, low) or more advanced terms (biophony, geophony, anthrophony)?
- Practical participation: Do learners explore multiple locations/times and attempt to compare differences in soundscapes?
- Follow-up evidence: Learners may create sound maps, poems, drawings, or sound collages. Older learners may produce labelled diagrams, reflective writing, or digital presentations.
- Peer feedback: In pairs, learners share their sound maps/recordings and check if their partner can “read” or understand the soundscape story.

Notes

- Noise sensitivity: Some learners may find certain sounds (sirens, shouting, machinery) overwhelming. Offer ear defenders, allow them to observe quietly from a distance, or provide shorter listening times.
- Weather matters: Soundscapes change in wind, rain, and different temperatures. Use this as a teaching point — but also be prepared that wind may make it harder to hear or record quieter sounds.
- Behaviour management outdoors: Choose listening locations with safety in mind. Remind learners that listening requires stillness and quiet, which may be challenging in a group — use games (e.g. “statues” or “silent countdown”) to set the tone.
- Cultural sensitivity: Some children may come from noisier/quiet households or communities — avoid judging their perceptions of what counts as “normal” sound.
- Link back to wellbeing: Make the connection explicit that some soundscapes feel calming (birds, rustling leaves), while others may feel stressful (traffic, alarms). Encourage learners to think about where they feel most comfortable and why.
- Inclusion: For children with hearing impairments, adapt by using vibration (e.g. feel the fence when traffic passes), visual cues (watching leaves move in wind), or creating group art inspired by others’ descriptions.

Supporting a Range of Learners

Exploring Learners

(Typically includes those in early years, nursery, or working at early developmental levels)

- Focus on simply noticing and naming sounds: birds, cars, wind, voices.
- Use movement and play — learners can act out sounds (flapping like a bird, stomping like footsteps).
- Adults model sensory words (loud, quiet, soft, booming, rustling).
- Provide ready-made picture cards (bird, car, tree) to place on simple sound maps.

Beginning Learners

(Often early primary or those starting to work more independently with structured tasks)

- Use simple sound maps with circles and symbols.
- Match sounds to locations (e.g. tree = birds, playground = children's voices).
- Start short group discussions: "Which sound was closest? Which was furthest away?"
- Introduce categories of natural vs. human-made sounds.

Expanding Learners

(Mid-primary or those developing confidence and curiosity with support)

- Record short notes or sketches on clipboards.
- Compare two different soundscapes (e.g. playground vs. quiet garden).
- Begin using technical terms like pitch (high/low) and volume (loud/quiet).
- Create a group "sound poem" by sequencing the sounds they've noticed.

Deepening Learners

(Upper primary or those increasingly working with independence and reflection)

- Analyse sounds in terms of biophony (living things), geophony (natural non-living), and anthrophony (human-made).
- Reflect on how soundscapes affect mood and behaviour: "Which spaces help us feel calm or focused?"
- Create extended responses such as poems, drawings, or short sound collages using recordings.
- Compare how soundscapes change at different times of day or in different weather.

Emerging Leaders

(Early secondary or those ready to take initiative, make connections, and think critically)

- Lead younger groups in soundscape recording or mapping.
- Use digital tools to edit sound recordings into a “sound journey” or presentation.
- Investigate environmental themes: How do traffic, construction, or biodiversity affect the soundscape?
- Present findings on how soundscapes connect to wellbeing, community identity, or sustainability.
- Take initiative by designing and leading their own follow-up soundscape project (poetry slam, sound art, or a comparative study).

