



Alma Forest School

Winter Newsletter - January 2023

Students giving each other feedback during a writing workshop.

Happy New Year!

This newsletter is forward-looking. It aims to prepare you for the conversations you will have about Alma Forest with your families and friends. It is also full of thought-provoking ideas and advice from the realm of education that have implications for how you engage with your children, and finally, there are suggestions for books to read, chats to have with your children and places to visit.

Heading into our fourth year, Alma Forest's vision shines through all we do and the content of this newsletter speaks to our aim that our students will thrive in their discovery of self-knowledge, nature and ingenuity, applying their creativity and imagination as architects of a more resilient, collaborative and interconnected future.



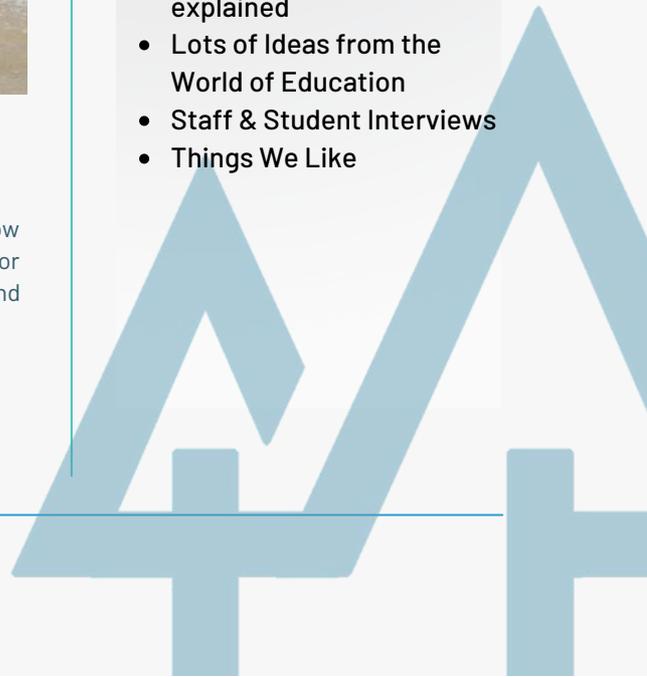
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- School News
- How to Explain Alma Forest to Family and Friends
- Updates from the Escuela Bosque and the Primary School
- Curriculum terminology explained
- Lots of Ideas from the World of Education
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- Things We Like



School News



We're excited to announce our association with LearningPlanet!

Launched by the Learning Planet Institute and UNESCO on the 24th of January 2020, Learning Planet is an open alliance with a cause, dedicated to learning stakeholders and communities. It is a long-term initiative with a mission to gather players from around the world in order to identify, celebrate, enhance and scale up innovative educational solutions towards sustainable futures that ensure the respect, well-being and fulfilment of oneself, others and the planet. Learning Planet defines itself as a middle-ground: it connects institutions with grassroots movements and innovators to scale up their ideas.

We are collaborating with the Learning Planet Alliance as part of their Teachers for the Planet programme and Alma Forest will feature as an educational model that inspires action. Working with the Aga Khan Foundation and Teach For All, this programme will culminate in an event at COP28.

Forest School Training



In the Spring of 2023 Alma Forest will be running its first Level 3 Forest School Leader training course. The course will be led by Jose, our Escuela Bosque team leader. We are opening this course to our school community and welcome parents to join. This is a wonderful opportunity to bring some of the methods and approaches we use at Alma into your homes.

The training will be split into two groups of 4 days and applicants will be awarded a Level 3 Forest Leader certificate by Cambium Sustainable upon completion. Training will take place from Monday 27 February 2023 to Friday, 3 March 2023 and Monday, 10 April 2023 to Friday, 14 April 2023. The cost of the course is typically EUR 900 but as parents of Alma, we are offering a subsidised rate of EUR 450. Please contact Sharyn if you are interested.

Open House

As part of the Learning Planet Festival, we are holding an Open House on the International Day of Education. Between January 24th-28th organizations around the world that form the Learning Planet Alliance are holding events as part of this festival to showcase their dedication to empowering young people and co-creating more sustainable ways of living. To find out more and to book your space [visit our website](#).



Summer Camp

Our summer camp registration opens soon. Spaces fill up quickly so make sure to check our social media and [website](#).

A few details upfront. The camp will run for three weeks from the 3rd of July and is open to children aged 3-9. There will be a sleepover option on one or two days each week. As always the days will be packed with outdoor activities, swimming and games. Campers will have the opportunity to design their own maker projects.



School News - Escuela Bosque

It's a Yurt!

We have a new addition to the school environment in the shape of a beautiful Yurt. This year we began to give our oldest children, Chan's Mega Sticks, additional sessions for phonics, literacy and maths. Having the yurt means that these sessions can be delivered in a comfortable calm setting. We also use this space for whole group activities, additional shelter and a quiet place for writing, reading and being creative during extreme weather conditions.



New Topics

There is always so much to look forward to, and after welcoming the children back from winter break we are excited to explore some new topics! Starting with the weather and hibernation we will link changing seasons to the behaviour of animals. Following this, we will be looking at vertebrates and invertebrates to gain a better understanding of how animals are classified.



Project Green Fingers Update

We are following the children, as well as the flow of the gardening season in terms of what is planted and when. The children are showing a lot of interest in the project; spontaneously planting seeds, transplanting the seedlings into the allotment, and volunteering themselves to help with daily gardening duties. We have built pea tee-pees and grown pea plants from seed. They are on their way, slowly climbing, and we are looking forward to eating these straight from the pod in late Spring!



Students Decide

Now that we have gotten to know each other and have settled into the space and routines we will hand over more decision-making to our students and give them the opportunity to decide the topics they wish to study. Our students are always free to choose which activities to engage in, but in the coming terms, we will involve them much more in the development of our curriculum.

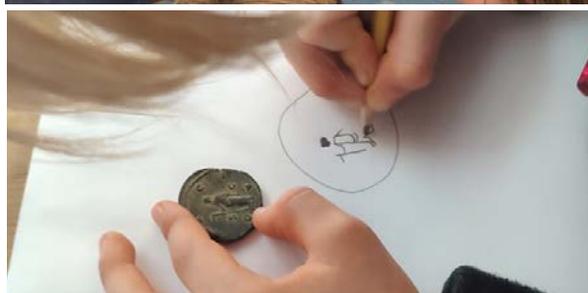
It may be that they want to look at a specific animal in more depth or learn how to build something. Maybe they will be inspired by previous topics or bring ideas from home. We look forward to the weird and wonderful ideas that will be discussed.

School News - Primary

Animal Exploration

Last term we completed our Universe & Black Holes Exploration and asked our students what they would like to investigate next. They came up with a long list of topics that we roughly grouped into the categories of Geography, Human Body, History and Animals. We then spent two to three days on each one giving the children a little taster of each topic. This way they could make an informed choice after having gained an understanding of what each Exploration could contain. On the last day of school, we came together, reviewed the taster sessions and voted on our next topic. It was a close call between History and Animals, with the latter making the cut.

Over the holidays, our team of teachers then decided on a few concepts that the Animal Exploration would be investigating. These will be the concepts of Connection and Change. Our Primary students will spend the next few months looking at interdependence in the animal kingdom and how animals are adapting to a changing world.



Exploration Tasters: exploring maps and Roman coins

Spring Residential

Looking ahead to the Spring, we are looking at new and interesting places to go for our three-day residential trip with the Primary School students. We explored two different locations in the Alcornocales Natural Park in the past and are now hoping to find a location close to the beach. This is always a highlight for our students and they always list it as the highlight of the year.

First Harvest

We recently added a large raised bed to the Primary School outdoor space and our students have been busy planting vegetables. We already had a scarecrow that a student made as a personal project and now it has some plants to protect. Unfortunately, the local slugs were not all that scared of it. Fortunately, they did not manage to stop our radishes from growing. Just before the winter holidays, we harvested the radishes and there were enough to go around.



Celebrating the first radishes.

Trip to Cadiz

Our students had a taste of university life when we visited the planetarium of the University of Cadiz. Walking through the packed cafeteria and eating on the lawn amongst the university students certainly amused our hosts.



How do I explain Alma Forest to my Family and Friends?

A GUIDE

Why?

Alma Forest is a school that does not easily fit into the common categories of schools most people are familiar with. We do not adhere to Waldorf or Montessori formats and differ significantly from traditional school settings. While an international school, we incorporate progressive and alternative approaches. All this makes it harder to explain what we do so we thought it might be useful to provide our community with a few bite-sized explanations and responses to common questions.

Alma Forest At A Glance

- 65 Students
- 23 Nationalities
- Maximum Class size: 15
- Ages 3-14

A few FAQs

- **Are there lessons at Alma Forest?**
 - Yes, our students have numeracy and literacy workshops very similar to those in other international schools. Other subjects such as Science, History and Geography are part of our transdisciplinary Explorations and are taught through activities linked to the current topic.
- **How do you know how the children are doing if you don't have assessments?**
 - Our small class sizes enable our teachers to have a good grasp of our students' abilities and needs. On top of that, we use leveled curriculum resources that enable our teachers to gauge how our students are doing compared to their peers in other schools.
- **What if a student has to change schools and join a more traditional school after having been at Alma Forest?**
 - We teach to the same standards as other international schools and much of our Explorations involve concepts and knowledge well above what students would usually encounter in traditional schools.

What is Alma Forest?

Alma Forest:

- is a progressive international school inspired by various approaches. We combine the best of international education curricula with aspects of outdoor, democratic and self-directed education.
- is fully accredited by the Spanish government and NABSS. Our accreditation inspection by NABSS resulted in the maximum accreditation period, quite unusual for new schools, and the extension of our accreditation to more students and a wider age range than initially applied for. The inspectors, heads of other international schools in Spain, said that they wished their own children would have been able to attend a school like Alma Forest.
- allows children to form positive attitudes towards education by following an unhurried approach. This means that we do not use punishments and rewards to motivate students but give them the space and time to become intrinsically motivated.
- is committed to bringing children closer to nature and encouraging our students and families to lead more sustainable lives. As part of this, we are members of the [Eco Schools](#) and [Learning Planet](#) networks.
- is a tribe where students and educators can explore the world together as peers and colleagues. It is a tribe that nourishes everyone's individual interests and passions, eschewing comparisons as a way of measuring achievement or success.



Curriculum Spotlight

TERMS EXPLAINED

Concept-Based Learning

In a concept-based curriculum (quickly becoming the standard in top-tier international schools), students are introduced to concepts and conceptual understandings as they engage in knowledge and skill learning. This creates a three-dimensional curriculum with intellectual depth that asks students to consider the “So what?” of their learning.

A concept is a mental construct drawn from a topic or a process that transfers across time, place and situation. A concept has the following features: it is timeless, universal, abstract, can be represented by one or two words, and its examples share common attributes.

When we teach students concepts, we give them a powerful sense-making tool that allows them to understand new contexts they encounter. The power of a concept-based curriculum is that it allows students to transfer their understanding to new contexts and situations. Each time students encounter a new context, they build on and deepen their understandings around each concept.

Teaching to the conceptual level also enables us to work flexibly with the curriculum. Because concepts transfer across situations, our teachers can invite students to explore a conceptual understanding by introducing examples that resonate best with them.

In practice, this means that our students choose the context of their transdisciplinary Explorations and our teachers use this context to convey an understanding of concepts such as Change, Connection, Causation, Form, Perspective and Function.

To find out more about what this looks like at Alma Forest, have a look at this [Curriculum Outline](#).



Escuela Bosque investigating connections between their home lives and other cultures around the world.



Planning and drafting a piece of writing.

Writing Workshop

The writing workshop as we use it was developed by the [Reading and Writing Project](#) at Columbia University and we have adapted it to the needs of our community. Students begin the writing workshop in their last year of our Escuela Bosque.

Writing workshop is a student-centered framework for teaching writing that is based on the idea that students learn to write best when they write frequently, for extended periods of time, on topics of their own choosing.

To develop skills as a writer, students need three things: ownership of their own writing, guidance from an experienced writer, and support from a community of fellow learners. The writing workshop framework meets these needs and streamlines instruction in order to meet the most important objective: giving kids time to write. The workshop setting supports children in taking their writing seriously and viewing themselves as writers. There is a strong focus on the joy of writing and sharing work. Students spend time planning and drafting pieces of writing and regularly seek feedback from peers and teachers.

This allows students to develop positive attitudes toward writing. Through writing, children have voice and agency – a way to express their ideas. This can be a deep source of satisfaction. They come to see themselves as capable authors writing for an audience beyond their teacher.

The World of Education

THOUGHTS AND INSPIRATION

Resilience, the road to happiness

"Do I want my kids to experience happiness? Without a doubt, yes. I want them to feel happiness as kids and as adults; this is why I'm so focused on building resilience. Resilience, in many ways, is our ability to experience a wide range of emotions and still feel like ourselves. Resilience helps us bounce back from the stress, failure, mistakes, and adversity in our lives. Resilience allows for the emergence of happiness."

Resilience should not be confused with 'toughening up' children or making them suppress emotions, it is all about developing a strong sense of self and acquiring a toolset to overcome challenges and adversities. At Alma Forest, we support our students in learning how to fail well, and develop a positive sense of self that is not founded on a comparison with others.

[Rear or listen to the full article on Big Think.](#)



Playing and conflict resolution are child-led at Alma Forest.

Autonomy and Independence

"Psychologists have directly connected a lack of resilience and independence to the growth of mental health problems and psychiatric disorders in young adults and say that short cycles of stress or conflict are not only *not harmful*, they are essential to human development. But modern childhood, for a variety of reasons, provides few opportunities for kids to practice those skills.

While it's hard to point to a single cause, experts say a confluence of factors – including more time spent on smartphones and social media, less time for free play, a culture that prizes safety at the expense of building other characteristics, a fear of child kidnapping, and more adult-directed activities – together have created a culture that keeps kids far away from the kinds of experiences that build resilience."

[Read the full article on KQED](#)



Those Really, Really Big Questions

Parents and those working with children already know that children are constantly asking questions. Turns out that they are the same questions that the most brilliant philosophers across human history have been grappling with. So why not sit down with your 7-year-old and talk about the meaning of life and leave Descartes on the bedside table?

At Alma Forest, we regularly engage in informal and formal philosophical discussions with our students and each other. The clarity of insight and willingness to question any assumption that children bring to the table is remarkable.

Below are a few tips when it comes to doing philosophy with children. [Read the full article on Psyche.co](#)

Follow the leader. The first step is simply to notice when a child has a philosophical question.

Ask questions, and question answers. The goal is to get children to make arguments – to defend their views – and to question them, too.

Do philosophy, don't teach. Grownups and children bring different talents to these conversations, and many philosophical conversations will present you with opportunities for collaboration.

Push, but not too hard. If you want to sustain children's interest in philosophy, it has to be fun. So pick your topics and your moments carefully.

Keep going. As your children get older, you'll need to come at things a little obliquely. There are some terrific games and activities to help with this.

The World of Education cont.

THOUGHTS AND INSPIRATION

Boys will be *caring*.

"From sexual harassment and gender-based violence, to the gender pay gap and relationship breakdown, the attitudes and behaviour of boys and men are hugely influential.

"So, we need to raise a generation of boys who are able to build and sustain healthy, respectful, caring relationships with people of all genders, and not be influenced by restrictive gender stereotypes."

David Bartlett

Upon walking into Alma Forest, you will notice how non-gendered play is. We avoid stereotypes and tropes associated with gender and encourage all our students to lead full emotional lives.

To find out more about how to help boys break free from harmful gender stereotypes, have a look at the [Global Booyhood Initiative](#).



A student relaxing with one of the dogs at school.

Posthumanist Education

"Taking a "posthuman turn" in education, therefore, involves a shift from learning-as-cognition to a focus on connections between humans and non-human others; a move from the primacy of the written and spoken word to the re-emergence of the embodied self; and a recognition that other-than-human agents are always present in processes of learning."

A slightly longer read that highlights what underpins curriculum development at Alma Forest. We strive to empower our students to find agency in their connection with others, both human and non-human.

[Read the full article at EuropeNow](#)



Working on a personal projects using real tools.

Five dangerous things every school should do

In this TEDx talk, Gever Tully, the founder of Brightworks in San Francisco outlines some important factors that ensure schools remain relevant.

Brightworks is one of the schools that has inspired our curriculum and we completely agree with Gever on these five points.

1. Let children be co-authors of their own education.
2. Trust children. (They should not need permission to go use a bathroom).
3. Say yes more often to children.
4. Focus on habits and character (not grades)
5. Let's agree that everything is "interesting". Let children follow their curiosity and do projects which they find interesting.

[Watch the video.](#)

Student & Staff Interviews

Student Interview: Torsten

Torsten has been at Alma Forest from the very beginning. He started in the Escuela Bosque and is now in Grade 2.



Building a Pringle Ringle as part of a Maths activity.

What is your favourite place in the school?

The woods, because the woods are giant and you can explore them. And sometimes there are cool things you find, but it's a gamble because sometimes you don't.

How has the school changed since you started?

When I first started it was one big group and then when Covid happened we had to split into smaller groups. A small change was when personal projects changed from three afternoons per week to two half days a week.

How was the Escuela Bosque different from being in the Primary School?

It changed from playing a lot to more working, playing and building.

What is something that you enjoyed learning about?

I enjoyed learning about space. I like learning things that I know something about already. I also like maths because I like challenging myself with hard maths.

What is one personal project that you are proud of?

I am most proud of the dog house I made. Making a carpet was very hard. I thought it would be easy but I realized it was really hard. I am proud because it was stressful cutting the wood. That wasn't the nicest.

Did anything fun recently happen?

My personal project helium balloon test because it was something we don't usually do and it was something the Escuela Bosque saw as well. It looked a bit like an animal, a big ball with a little tail.



Testing balloons on a fishing string that will eventually carry a camera.

What is the best part of being a student at Alma Forest?

The forest is the best part. And we aren't a school that just sits down. In some schools, you just sit down and have a desk. How we do it is way different. We also go outside more.

How could we make Alma Forest even better?

It would be nice if at snack or lunch break we could go to the forest if a group wants to.

Anything else you want to add?

It's a really fun place.

Student & Staff Interviews

Staff Interview: Nina

Nina is the Lead Teacher of our Grade 3/4 group and recently joined us from Cyprus, where she was the Head of Infants at Silverline Private School.



Conducting a Science experiment as part of the Space & Universe Exploration

Fun fact about you.

I got married in a cave!

How do you make your classroom a home?

Making mistakes, keeping a sense of humour, and being open and honest about pretty much everything.

What is your favourite way to spend time with children?

Chatting – I love moments when the kids open up about their experiences outside school or learning something about their families or lives. I always enjoy when they ask me questions too and show a genuine interest in learning about the lives of those around them. Reading or singing by the fire has also been a lovely addition to the cooler mornings!

What would you like to get better at?

Carpentry and DIY in general. And speaking Spanish!

What past experiences best prepared you for teaching at Alma Forest?

I was fortunate to have had a really positive childhood with endless hours outside and lots of very glamorous rainy Irish camping holidays. This was good preparation for many of the environmental aspects of working at Alma.

My parents are in their 70s now but have always had a very open-minded outlook on life. Of course, I learned a lot through teacher training and my previous teaching experience, but my upbringing definitely planted the seeds for exploration, play, adventure and enjoying a bit of chaos.

Is there anything you had to unlearn at Alma Forest?

Children writing learning objects at the top of every page serves absolutely no purpose.

Share a little anecdote of life at Alma Forest with us.

One of my favourite moments so far was during our first beach trip of the year. I was very excited about my first trip with Alma, but also a little apprehensive about 'keeping them busy' for a full day at the shore. Trips had historically for me come with a colossal amount of paperwork, budget justifications, itineraries and schedules organizing the children's time to the minute.

I remember at about 1pm I looked around the beach and every single child was fully engaged in one thing or another. They were all busy, purposeful, happy and safe. Beach equipment and tools were dotted about and adults were intermingled with kids of different ages playing and working together. At snack time the kids enjoyed swapping sandy pieces of mango, apple and crackers.

At pick-up time no parents seemed concerned about the bucketloads of sand entering their cars, or the random dead animal bones in pockets, or the disheveled staff caring for their kids. There was a feeling of genuine trust all around.

It was the best school trip I had been on as a teacher, and the following weeks were much of the same.



Noteworthy

A Place to Visit - Lego in Malaga

"The biggest Lego exhibition in Europe is now in Malaga, and will remain at Malaga Factory until 8 October 2023. It consists of nearly 100 models containing over five million pieces and covers an area of 1,500 square metres. There is also a fun park and 3D Trick Gallery, with the largest exhibition of interactive 3D photos in Spain."



Photo and Text credit: [Sur Online](#)

If it's going to be Youtube, then...

The world is a fascinating place and sometimes videos are the best way to convey knowledge and ideas. *The Kid Should See This* is a great website that curates fun and enlightening videos from across the internet. The videos that can be found there educate, inspire to find out more and provide instructions for how to do things.

This is a favourite place for teachers to find inspiration as well and it surely beats parking your children in front of the Netflix kids zone.

Head to the website by clicking the image below.

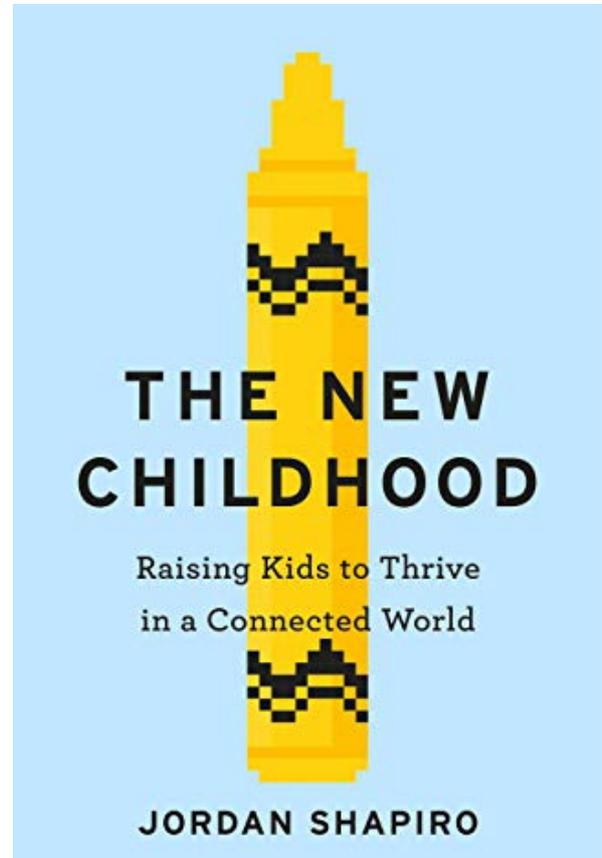


Do you know of a book, place, film or website worth sharing?

Tell us about it!

info@almaforestschool.com

Books on our Horizon



"In *The New Childhood*, Jordan Shapiro provides a hopeful counterpoint to the fearful hand-wringing that has come to define our narrative around children and technology. Drawing on groundbreaking research in economics, psychology, philosophy, and education, *The New Childhood* shows how technology is guiding humanity toward a bright future in which our children will be able to create new, better models of global citizenship, connection, and community."

We have read this book and it certainly provides some valuable insights that help us approach the topic of children and technology without fear. There are useful tips for both educators and parents.

The core message that we take from this book is that technology is not evil per se, but the fact that children engage with it in isolation is the real problem. So watch and play *with* rather than prohibit access. Conversations about these shared experiences empower children to competently navigate the digital world.

Photo Roundup



They built their own toolboxes and wrote in a tree.



Pyjamas and cookies on the last day of school in 2022.



A guest cello and a visiting guinepig.



Celebrating the rain with a mud fight.



Exploring the ravine.



A story by the fire.



Turning the classroom into a giant fort.



A mind is like a parachute.
It doesn't work if it is not open.
- Frank Zappa