

Can Forest School Act as a Spur to Better Quality Outdoor Experiences?

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Introduction

Forest School is a particular way of working with children outdoors. I have been involved with Forest School for ten years now and seen the opportunities expand as more people train in how to enable children to have that experience. This is particularly true in the early years, where the greater flexibility and the impetus for outdoor play in the new *Early Years Foundation Stage* curriculum is helping practitioners to create time and space.

Recently I was working with a group of early years practitioners, giving them a taste of Forest School as part of a continuing professional development programme covering a range of ideas for use in early years settings. Some had encountered Forest School before, but for some it was new. We had worked through bits of theory and reading online and then met up for a day in the woods. They bravely overcame any trepidation about being wild in a wood in January. By the end of the session they were all very enthusiastic and could see the benefits for the children in their settings, but many of them felt that there are still barriers to overcome with colleagues for whom outdoor play is, even now, just for letting off steam in between the real activities of the day.

I have run similar courses before, but had always assumed that the enthusiasm of the participants was in some measure due to the fact that they were self-selecting. This was not true of this group, as the CPD programme is a requirement for them, and yet they were as equally enthusiastic as other groups. If one session in a wood (together with access to a range of supporting readings) can influence the way in which change agents like EYPs view their outdoor provision, then perhaps this is a way to promote quality in outdoor provision. Perhaps we can even move away from seeing outdoor play as just a release from other activities – although maybe the implied criticism of being indoors is one to reflect on, too.

What is Forest School?

What it is not is a school in the conventional sense of a building where adults are in control and children engage in formal tasks. When children set up camp in a wild space, preferably a wood, and spend time there away from the usual constraints of

'civilisation', they may be a part of a Forest School. That is not to say that it cannot be on their usual site, provided that it is different, separate, and somewhat wild.

Leaders spend a lot of preparatory time making risk assessments. This is so that once the children are there they can have the freedom to take risks. These may be emotional and social risks such as negotiating activities with peers, or emotional and physical risks such as climbing, balancing, tool-use, fire-lighting. Tim Gill (2007: 16) is one of those who identify reasons for giving children the chance to take risks. He also identifies the need for 'proportion and balance' (2007: 16), assessing risks in relation to particular situations and to particular children. That is why Forest School leaders spend a lot of preparatory time risk assessing.

Forest School happens over time. Children may spend a half a day once a week for ten weeks, or they may go for longer. Settings tend to start with the ten week model and then extend it as they see the benefits. Because the desired outcomes are to create long term benefits, the children need opportunities to repeat the experience and reinforce the learning.

The popular saying amongst leaders is that there is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing. Children attend in all weathers, learning that getting wet can be fun, and getting too hot or too cold can be managed. They do not go under trees in high winds, in case of falling branches, but that is the only concession to the elements.

Forest School for the early years is play-based and, as far as possible, child-initiated and child-led. Being out for two or more hours eases the time constraints on children and practitioners, enabling open-ended deep play. Where children explore and follow their own agenda, observers are always struck by the quality of the play, and of the interactions between the children, and between the children and the adults with them.

There is a recommendation shared by trainers, the Forestry Commission (www.foresteducation.org) and others that sessions are run by a trained Forest School leader. This is to preserve the ethos, and to ensure that risks are appropriate and 'safe enough'. They are assisted by others to ensure a ratio appropriate to the setting and the children.

Benefits for Children

Despite interest, and the emphasis of the EYFS on outdoor experiences, the amount of research on the impact of Forest School on children in the Foundation Stage has been quite limited so far. The Forestry Commission have commissioned qualitative studies on Forest Schools in Wales, south west England and Scotland (O'Brien and Murray 2004; 2005; 2006; 2007; Borradaile 2006; Hughes and Jenner 2007) using a methodology which I replicated in East Anglia (Knight 2009).

These studies indicate benefits under seven heading:

- Increased self-esteem and self-confidence;
- Improved social skills;
- The development of language and communication skills;
- Improved physical motor skills;
- Improved motivation and concentration;
- Increased knowledge and understanding of the environment;
- New perspectives for all involved.

The benefits were not just seen in the Forest School settings but seem to be imported back into the children's settings and homes. In terms of the last bullet point it is important to point out that this encompasses the strengthening of links with parents and families, in particular with male carers who seem to find this environment more congenial than indoor settings.

The benefits to the male of the species were also noted in a Norfolk study with KS1 children, in stimulating boys' engagement with literacy (Butwright *et al.* 2007). And anecdotally, it seems that the effects last over time – speaking to one head teacher, she reported that she could see who had been to Forest School in their foundation years when they were in Key Stage 2. (This is a claim that I intend to follow up on.)

Importing elements into settings

It will take time to find accessible wild spaces for every child in the Foundation Stage and to train enough leaders to take them there. In the meantime elements of Forest School-like play can be imported into most settings. In my book (Knight 2009) I make suggestions for practitioners to consider. In Warwickshire Jenny Doyle (2007) has developed something she calls 'Danish Gardens', to show practitioners ways of

making their spaces wilder and more adventurous. This has the added advantage of making it easier for under-threes to access.

There will be challenges in this process. If the magic of Forest School is to be preserved then mud, rain, wind, sun, and all the wilder aspects of the environment will have to be allowed their space in settings, without fuss and without tidiness. This requires communication and developing understanding. One practitioner reported to me that every time she brought an old drainpipe into her outdoor area it got cleared away by the next morning. Someone did not understand: someone was not communicating.

Conclusion

The EYFS recognises the importance of outdoor experiences. Those of us who have experienced Forest School will enthuse about its value to young children. Somehow those values need to be introduced to more of our practitioners so that they can offer rich outdoor experiences to the children in their care.

As well as the examples above, Tricia Maynard (2007) writes about the difficulties that some practitioners have with this way of working. In order to develop an appreciation and an understanding of the values of Forest School certain things need to happen. More research needs to take place, to support with tangible evidence the messages we are trying to get across. More explanatory materials need to be written, or made accessible (there are quite a lot of these). And more EYPs need to pull on their wellies and spend a day in the woods!

So ... what's your view of Forest School experiences for young children? Do you have experiences like these to share? Have you ever used 'wild spaces' with young children?

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