Self-esteem and successful interaction as part of the forest school project

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In this article Nick Swarbrick, Glynnis Eastwood and Kris Tutton highlight the importance of the outdoor environment as an educational resource, and explore the relationship between self-esteem and successful learning through the forest school project being run in Oxfordshire. It looks at the history and practice of forest school in England, and draws on recent research to suggest ways in which ‘alternative’ or non-traditional educational projects might be evaluated.

Key words: forest school, early years, self-esteem, outdoors.

Introduction

It is perhaps in the nature of educational change that something as useful as outdoors education for young children should be in continual need of reinvention. The new edition of Helen Bilton’s book Outdoor play in the early years: management and innovation (2002) highlights the need for young children to have access to an outdoors environment where imaginative play and vigorous exercise go together easily and naturally: ‘This is not only because there is more space, and noise is more easily dissipated outside, but also because there is a greater sense of freedom in the outdoors’ (p. 116). While outdoors education receives more attention than ever, and the forest school movement is gathering pace, little has yet to be presented in the academic press on the benefits of forest school.

This article introduces the history and practice of forest school, highlights, through anecdotal evidence, some of the recent successes of the project in the UK, and suggests possible ways forward in measuring quality in non-traditional educational projects. Such projects can have especial significance in the area of special needs, by broadening the curriculum and offering a wider range of contexts for learning. Use is also made of data from a recent questionnaire, sent out by one of the authors to forest school participants in Oxfordshire.

Origins

The forest school movement was initially Scandinavian (Bishops Wood Centre, 2003), although English sources differ in their descriptions of the origin of the movement and whether the first beginnings are to be found in Denmark or Sweden. It is clear that the Danish government, for example, used local woodland to help provide for an expansion of nursery places. The Bridgwater project, based at Bridgwater College in Somerset, began following a visit to Denmark in 1994 by nursery nursing students from the college.

Forest School began by taking small groups (6–8 children) onto the College sports field adjoining the Early Years Centre, on a frequent and regular basis. Lesson plans were prepared but, as they grew in confidence, the children started to prefer to lead their own experiences. Flexibility and responsiveness to the children’s thinking was found to be essential in order to make the most of the children’s involvement in their learning. It was found that the children responded very differently to working in the outdoor environment than in their familiar nursery surroundings and the staff leading the forest school activities found that they had to adapt accordingly.

(Bridgwater Forest School, 2003)

These emphases on outdoor education and on children’s independent choices have obvious resonance with central themes in the education and care of young children since early in the history of UK education. See Horn (1989) for examples of the Open Air Movement and, for a brief overview of early years pedagogy, see Bruce (1997), chapter 3, ‘Important influences on the development of free-flow play’.
The learning experience in forest school

Problem solving is also viewed as an important facet of forest school and is valued by practitioners. Forest school leaders allow children time and opportunity to solve problems of their own making. An example of this is when at one session children were involved in erecting a rope swing with the aid of the forest school leader who provided the rope and expertise for tying knots! Each suggestion offered by the group of four children for choosing the tree, fixing the rope, selecting a stick for the seat and measuring the swing to ensure it was the correct height was discussed and tried out by the children, who developed and extended ideas until the ‘problem’ was solved and each child was given the opportunity to have a go at swinging on the rope. This kind of practical activity with real relevance to children and adults generates high quality interactions, genuine open questioning, leading to a rich and diverse curriculum.

The present foundation stage curriculum (QCA, 2000) can thus be well represented within the forest school project, not necessarily through an obvious adult-led and structured system but in a way that engages children fully in the process. Continuing the theme over a number of sessions can ensure progression and a sense of achievement for children and adults alike. This is in line with the ethos highlighted by Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (1999, pp. 48 ff.), wherein the young child is seen, not as in need of education or care, nor yet as a being following biologically determined stages of development and learning, but as a ‘Co-constructor of knowledge, identity and culture’. Even from a more traditional point of view, Wilson (1995, p. 4) points out, ‘Experiences in the out-of-doors tend to be rich in opportunities for nurturing growth in all of the developmental domains.’ It also echoes the philosophy of the Reggio Emilia movement, where the quality of the interaction between adults and children, and among the children themselves, is seen as of the highest importance:

Children demonstrate sudden flares of ideas, explicit or silent exchanges, and dialogues into which the adult is also drawn. Unanticipated port-holes of observation open for the adult. The adult discovers different ways in which children participate, choose, and proceed. (Malaguzzi, 1993, p. 11)

Self-esteem

An equally crucial strand to encouraging children’s independence through exploring an unfamiliar environment is the development of self-esteem. This is a theme to be found in the DfES Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage (QCA, 2000, p. 28), and in work on the teaching of young adults (Harkin, Turner and Dawn, 2001). It is interesting to note that Harkin et al. point out the futility of setting aside specific curriculum time to artificial self-esteem lessons:

They don’t need a class in raising self-esteem. Similarly decontextualised lessons in ‘problem solving’ or communication are likely to have little benefit, whereas taking a problem solving or communicative approach to learning, in which learning is based on ‘real’ situations and genuine personal engagement, is more likely to be beneficial. (p. 16)

It is the ‘reality’ of the work undertaken by the teenagers in the project that helps to anchor their learning and raise self-esteem. Anecdotal evidence suggests that those who participate – in Oxfordshire this is achieved in partner secondary schools mostly through the Bronze Youth Award – gain in self-esteem and bring their enthusiasm back into school.

For the younger participants in forest school, independent exploration needs careful nurturing. Separation from a significant adult in an unfamiliar environment can be difficult for children, and simple separation games are often used to give children opportunity to create and maintain a degree of distance if they feel comfortable with it. The best example, played at many forest school sessions, is a variant of a hide-and-seek game in which children hide from a seeker, who calls out ‘One, Two Three, Where Are You?’ All the children and adults hiding respond; being found is the goal of the game, and children develop increasing independence from their carers, safe in the knowledge that they are not abandoned, and that the activity is fun and safe.

Challenge of the unfamiliar

Engagement in the Oxfordshire forest school project is able to provide these real situations for both pre-school and older children. For younger children, the exploration of the environment is in itself a challenge. Moving beyond the school and the (frequently urban) home environment is a challenge in many ways: minibeasts, unfamiliar plants and animals, the route to the forest school site and, for some, even the physical challenge of walking on an uneven surface. During the course of the year, as they become more accustomed to the routines of the weekly or fortnightly outing, other challenges may be introduced, although risk is managed by pace and by the amount of adult input to the activity. Using tools, including knives and saws, has purpose as well as risk (Haesaerts, 2001). For young adults, the challenge of the unfamiliar is coupled with the real situation of setting up and maintaining the woodland for the younger children to use as a learning resource. This may involve using tools, communication and planning skills to fence the area, to build a semi-permanent shelter or to improve access.

Again, self-esteem is at the heart of the enterprise. This appears to have its roots in the personal belief of one of the most active founder members of the project nationally, Gordon Woodall, whose work in Bridgwater College...
centred for some time around working with disaffected young adults and taking into account the different learning styles of each student. Those who remain predominantly kinaesthetic learners into their adolescence often experience difficulties in a classroom situation, where more visual and auditory styles are expected and prevalent. As the young people begin to perceive themselves as poor learners, and are perceived as such by their peers, self-esteem plummets and can manifest itself as bad behaviour, poor attendance and low attainment. Roberts (1995) identifies this as being rooted in early experiences (pp. 114 ff.) and points out the importance of intrinsic motivation for learning (p. 96).

In a forest school environment there are more opportunities to learn in practical ways, and to demonstrate new and existing skills which are unlikely to be obvious in a classroom. In this context the young people rediscover their confidence in themselves as learners, enjoy increased respect from their peers and begin to rebuild their self-esteem. This in turn helps them to better manage their own behaviour, and to make more proactive life choices. Kolb’s theory of experiential learning aiding the development of a more mature person has resonance here (see Kolb, 1984, especially chapter 6).

It is well documented that boys are disproportionately more likely to experience a range of difficulties at school, relative to girls. There is national concern about the perceived under-achievement of boys (see Smith, 2003; Martino and Berrill, 2003). It may be that frequent and regular opportunities to experience a broad and balanced curriculum, in an outdoor context and in ways which nurture the growth of self-esteem, will enable all children, but boys in particular, to reach their potential.

**Practice in Oxfordshire**

The Oxfordshire forest school project suggests that any woodland facility should be no more that a 15-minute walk or bus journey away from the early years setting. As the children go to the forest school site weekly or fortnightly, it is important that they spend the majority of their time engaged in woodland activities, not on long journeys.

The area chosen is usually in a private location free from public access. This ensures that children are safe to explore within the confines of the area and any work they commence will be secure until the next visit. Since the aim of the project is not specifically environmental education, the purely scientific interest of the site is not the prime consideration. Areas of woodland need to be assessed and chosen for their suitability to the forest school ethos and not because they provide a very different outdoor experience for children – although unfamiliarity and difference are important factors in providing the challenge to meet the untired and novel that in turn help bolster participants’ self-esteem (Northmoor Trust, 2003). At its most extreme this might mean that an area set aside for forest school actually has very few trees, but has ample space, varying kinds of locations and opportunities for risk-taking activities, is secure and could have a semi-permanent shelter erected on it. Local farmers are in general extremely supportive of the work, seeing it as a chance to use traditional small woods productively. Sites in Oxfordshire vary from woodland set aside at a local nature reserve, where woodland covers half the 100 hectares of the nature reserve and the forest school site is tucked discreetly into one corner (Northmoor Trust, 2003), to a corner of woodland on part-used allotments in Oxford City. Both have strengths.

**Evaluation of the project**

Research on the project is in its infancy. While anecdotal evidence from the longest-running projects, in Somerset, points to children going into the primary phase of schooling with increased confidence, and to older pupils learning skills they can use in other situations, whether back at college or in the workplace (already mirrored in the more recent Oxfordshire initiative and elsewhere), there is a need for longer-term work carried out at a remove from the participant forest school leaders.

Such research could well take the approach adopted by the Effective Provision of Pre-School Education (EPPE) team (EPPE Project, 2003) in looking at quality of provision and outcome. Some exploration of academic attainment and progress might go some way to explaining the effect of forest school on young people. Aubrey (2002, p. 82) states that, ‘There is no doubt that these children are at the nexus of power relations, policy concerns and value investments of home and school.’ A secure justification for forest school would need to include some measurement of progress and attainment in order to place the project firmly in the arena of measuring quality in ways that would justify investment on a national scale.

Similarly, the longitudinal work by Ferre Laevers (1993) and, in the UK, a similar approach under the title Effective Early Learning (EEL) (Effective Early Learning Programme, 2003) suggest alternative models for appraisal of quality early years education that ‘take into account the changes that really matter’ (Laevers, 1993, p. 67). Assessment of children’s involvement is seen as an excellent measure of the quality of the experience in early years settings, and EEL material (exemplified in Pascal and Bertram, 2001) might be used to evaluate the quality of children’s involvement and adult interaction with children on forest school visits. Our initial exploration of this method suggests that it could transfer well to long-term evaluation of non-traditional experiences such as forest school, as it has transferred its focus within the EEL project itself to beyond the immediate pre-school environment. For an example see Effective Early Learning Programme (2003). Since Laevers’ research interests – in brief, the quality of the child’s experience seen through interactions with adults and with the learning environment and taking into account the child’s self-esteem – are close to the ideals
of forest school, and to some extent inform it, the research would need to ensure that it went beyond the confirmatory.

A recent questionnaire sent to Oxfordshire schools, early years settings and individual workers using the forest school approach revealed that the project was viewed very favourably by participant adults. Of the 100 questionnaires sent to participating schools and providers 51 were returned and, of these, 29 were correctly completed. Although the other 22 were incomplete they did contain some relative data, which has been included. In response to the question, ‘Has the forest school changed your expectations of particular children?’, adults working within the foundation stage mentioned increased ability of quiet children to express themselves, an increase in confidence, and positive participation from disruptive children. There was some evidence for an increase over the year of forest school in speaking and listening skills. One response is particularly noteworthy:

A child who had severe language difficulties (i.e. needed to attend a speech unit for four sessions a week) was extremely quiet in the nursery environment and seldom initiated conversations with other children or adults. However in the Forest environment her speech was clearer and much louder! She also displayed more self-confidence and interacted with a wider circle of peers. In the nursery environment her interactions tended to be on a one-to-one basis.

Similar positive responses from adults working with students at Key Stages 3 and 4 were received, with one respondent noting that ‘students who struggle in a classroom setting often prove to be inventive and organised in directing their own learning whilst at Forest School’.

Anecdotes testify to elective mute children with a first language other than English speaking clearly and confidently on forest school outings but not at nursery school, and bored, withdrawn teenagers finding the confidence to lead whole-year presentations on the project. Certainly, observations we have done both formally and informally back this up and suggest there is enormous potential for improving children’s learning within the forest school project.

**Implications for future development**

However, although the forest school approach has been taken up nationally in Wales, and is enjoying increasing support in the rest of the UK, it is not without its difficulties. Location, and the need to set physical challenges for all children, have meant that access for wheelchair users and those with restricted mobility can be seen as problematic in some cases. This is an area of work needing further investigation by the projects, with the balance between challenge and access for all also needing to be further explored. Sometimes, the first challenge can be questioning an overprotective ethos within a special school, for example, or supporting parents to see the value of such experiences.

Staffing issues need to be considered, both in terms of finding enough staff to cover both the trip out and the rest of the children in the setting, and in providing training for leaders and assistants. Bridgwater College suggests that the ratio in the Foundation Stage should be approximately 1:4 with a supernumerary forest school leader. Similarly, observation of forest school sessions have sometimes highlighted the need for all staff to be enthusiastic and well trained: spending a morning or afternoon outside can be a challenge for adults as well as children and managers need to recognise this. In Bridgewater, the ready supply of nursery nursing students has been a useful source of staff cover, while allowing students to gain experience and an extra qualification (the leaders’ award is B.Tech equivalent). The long-term goal nationally might be to persuade CACHE courses such as relevant Foundation Degrees and early years teaching courses countrywide to include a forest school module in their course programmes.

Respondents to the question, ‘In your opinion would the forest school experience be of benefit to every child?’, gave overall positive answers, but mixed with some reservations. These centred on the challenge of getting children outside and children’s reluctance to get dirty. One person highlighted the cost of the project. Although in the arrangement through Oxfordshire County Council and the Northmoor Trust the forest school leaders are paid from sources outside the school’s budget, transport and staff time can constitute major expenditure over the course of a year. It should be emphasised, however, that the majority of responses were positive, and acknowledged the impact of the frequent and regular forest school experiences on children’s learning.

Again, in Oxfordshire, the high adult ratios are maintained partly by engaging parent volunteers. Practitioners have noted that there has been an increase in the number of parents, particularly fathers, willing to participate in forest school sessions. Staff at the Northmoor Trust have also noted increased use of their nature reserve at weekends by families, the children of which have attended forest school during the week. They see this as an important trend, which will contribute to healthier lifestyles for adults and children alike, and encourage a greater interest in the natural environment and its conservation.

**Conclusion**

As Margaret Donaldson (1978) states, ‘the experience [of schooling] becomes wretched at present largely because it is a wretched thing to be compelled to do something at which you consistently fail’ (p. 124). The ‘small achievable steps’ that are at the heart of the forest school approach ensure that failure is less likely to occur. And a good (if potentially expensive) ratio of adults to children allows for flexibility, spontaneous exploration and for the resulting learning to be observed, assessed and recorded.
The Executive Summary of Excellence and Enjoyment (DfES, 2003) states that, 'Primary education is about children experiencing the joy of discovery, solving problems, being creative, developing self confidence as learners and maturing socially and emotionally' – all central themes in forest school projects. Schools are now encouraged to 'take a fresh look at their curriculum, their timetable and their organisation' and 'think actively about how they would like to develop and enrich the experience they offer their children' (p. 3). Projects such as forest school are well placed to deliver this enjoyment, which can have far-reaching effects on the success of the educational system.

References


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