

Why should we place emphasis on outdoor 'forest' learning?

An extract taken from 'A Study into the use of the Outdoor Learning Environment across the Foundation Stage and Key Stage 1 in the South of England', written by Anya Perkins, 2011, for her Master in Education, Cardiff Metropolitan University.

Over the course of this century it has become evident that opportunities for children to play outside independently have decreased considerably, with children in both rural and urban areas spending the majority of their time indoors (Fjortoft, 2004, Tovey, 2007). This has led to widespread concerns that this will have a detrimental effect on their development and well-being (Learning through Landscapes, 2005, p.11). Research has highlighted a number of factors which have inhibited children's access to the outdoor environment. Ouvry (2000), suggests that places where children can play and explore the outdoor environment have declined noticeably over the last decade. This decrease in access to outdoor areas is also paralleled with a rise in anxiety for children's safety (Furedi, 2002). Research argues that within the UK there is a national 'culture of fear' (Furedi, 2002) fed by the media (Maynard, 2007, p.11). They state that this has led to widespread parental concern for their child's safety, resulting in a pervasive effect on outdoor play. Among adult concerns reported, research indicates that fear of abduction and volumes of traffic have had the most detrimental effect on children's access to outdoor environments (Tovey, 2007). Research has also indicated that a rise in children's use of technology has led to them leading far more sedentary lifestyles (Goddard-Blythe,2000). This claim is further supported by Clements (2004) who believes that children are spending excessive amounts of time with computer games and watching television as opposed to partaking in physical 'real life' activities.

The implications of the reduction in children's use of outdoor areas have been found to not only be detrimental to their development but also research highlights very serious health

implications (Filer, 2008). Ebbeling, Pawlak and Ludwig (2002) go as far as claiming that the current lack of physical activity children are engaging in has resulted in a 'paediatric obesity epidemic'. Tovey (2007) adds additional support to this claim by highlighting figures from the Department of Health which show that 30 percent of children aged 2-10 years are overweight or obese. They claim that, '...a lack of spontaneous and vigorous outdoor play is one significant contributing factor' (Tovey, 2007, p.6). Bilton *et al.* (2005) also adds further support through stating that 50 percent of children do not take part in one hour of physical activity a day. However, research suggests regular outdoor provision could be all children require in order to fulfil a necessary level of physical activity in their routine (Dietz, 2001).

As previously drawn attention to, the Great Britain DfES (2007) has recently placed a greater emphasis on outdoor provision both in their Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum and 'The manifesto for learning outside the classroom' (Great Britain. DfES, 2006). As a result, the area has become heavily researched in recent years in terms of how increased use of the outdoor environment has impacted on children's learning and development.

Firstly, research argues that the outdoor environment offers greater opportunities for children to engage in meaningful and memorable experiences. The manifesto states that outdoor learning provides 'the most memorable learning experiences, help us to make sense of the world around us by making links between feelings and learning' (Great Britain. DfES, 2006, p.3). Waite (2007) provides further support by publishing findings that both children and adults described positive emotions associated with the outdoor provision they have experienced, which Phelps (2006) argues adds to memorability. Research also claims that effective and meaningful outdoor provision supports life-long learning (Great Britain. DfES, 2006) and helps children to learn within a past, present and future context (Berryman, 2000).

Secondly, it is claimed that the outdoor environment provides an inclusive curriculum for all children's learning styles, due to its naturally active and multi-sensory appeal. Reily (2000, p.193) stated that, 'Children learn most effectively about themselves, other people and the world when they are actively using all their senses and movement within a supportive outdoor environment'. In further support, Edgington (2002) found that children are more likely to learn outside. They claim this is especially true for those who favour kinaesthetic learning styles, due to the opportunities for more active hands on learning. Overall, this research by Edgington (2002) demonstrates that every curriculum subject can be enhanced and more accessible to children where outdoor provision is used effectively, promoting active involvement.

Research also suggests that children are intrinsically motivated by outdoor activities (Boniface, 2000). They found that children can become extremely absorbed in outdoor activities and find intrinsic incentives from the challenge. In our society it is widely recognised that girls are outperforming boys academically (Duffy, 2002), with some academics claiming this is a result of a 'feminization' of teaching (Maynard, 2007). However, current research into outdoor learning suggests that a curriculum based outdoors is far more accessible for boys and that they would be more likely to succeed if such provision were developed (Bilton, 1998 and Fabian, 2005). The outdoor environment has also been found to improve children's attitudes and behaviour (Maynard and Waters, 2007). Researchers argue that children feel less restricted in the outdoors and therefore show less signs of confrontation, frustration and lack of cooperation (Ouvry, 2003).

White (2008, p.89) argues that 'The nature of outdoors gives children opportunities to engage in creative play in ways not really possible indoors'. Maynard and Waters (2007, p.262) report a '...cultural resistance to the perceived discomforts of the outdoor environment and a concern to protect children'. In addition, Waite (2009, p.1) claims that this, '...turn to nature

may rather be perceived as unnatural for some children and teachers'. In contrast to society's resilience to risk taking, Stephenson (2002) argues that encouraging children's physical risk taking in the outdoors increases their self-confidence and disposition to manage risks.

Many researchers argue that providing children with frequent contact to nature is crucial for their holistic development and for them to develop an innate sensitivity to their environment. Kahn and Kellert (2002) have developed the 'nine values of nature' and believe that children have an innate attachment to nature both physically, emotionally and intellectually. As a result of these findings Wilson (2008) states that outdoor provision should take place in natural woodland and forest areas, claiming that that they offer more enriching learning environments which cater for all learning styles. This has led to Maynard (2007) claiming that the term 'outdoor provision' when referred to within curriculum documents should be expanded upon for clarity and to encourage practitioners' use of natural environments.

When developing an outdoor environment, Tovey (2007, p.56) argues the process should be 'a collaborative venture with educators, landscape architects, gardeners, children, parents and the local community engaged in a dialogue about what makes an effective space for play and learning'. This is further emphasised by the findings of Richardson (2006) who states that children can provide a valuable input into developing a school's grounds and its outdoor provision.

The Forest School Initiative

Research suggests that the Forest School initiative is a very current approach to outdoor learning which originated from the success of Scandinavian teaching methods, particularly within Danish forest kindergartens (Waite, 2007). A key researcher within the field of outdoor learning in Denmark argues that these 'forest nurseries' provide children with the opportunity to understand and appreciate the natural environment (Williams-Seigfredsen,

2005). The concept of 'Forest Schools', which provide opportunities for children to learn in naturally occurring woodlands, was introduced to the United Kingdom by students from the Bridgewater College in the 1990s (Maynard, 2007). With the approach increasing rapidly in popularity over the past 20 years there are currently over 140 Forest School establishments set up in Britain (O'Brien, 2007). This offers schemes to schools usually involving primary children taking part in 'one session per week over a 6-10-week programme' (Waite, 2007, p345).

The instigators of the Forest School network have defined the approach as an, 'inspirational process that offers children, young people and adults regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands on learning experiences in a woodland environment' (Forest Education Initiative, 2007, p.5). In support to this claim, Waters and Begley (2007) found strong evidence that the Forest School scheme can dramatically enhance children's holistic development and sensitivity for their natural environment.

For a more in-depth investigation into the impact Forest Schools can have on children's development, the Forest Commission Wales (Jenner and Hughes, 2006) conducted research within a number of mainstream primary schools in Wales. They found the children in their study to have made a noticeable development in their self-confidence, motivation, social skills and physical motor ability.

Further support comes from research from (Swarbrick, Eastwood and Tutton, 2004, p.144) who found when taking part in a Forest School programme, '...young people rediscover their confidence in themselves as learners, enjoy increased respect from their peers and begin to rebuild their self-esteem'.

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