



Parents Newsletter – March 2008

Dear Parents,

As I write the sun is shining brightly. It is so lovely to see the sun again.

It is wonderful to see the children in the garden playing, thinking for themselves, making the most use of their vigorous, spontaneous initiative. As adults we can provide all the stimulation a child can use, but while we ensure the water supply, the horses must do their own drinking.



Curriculum Evening

Thank you to everyone who attended the curriculum event. It was lovely to see so many parents there.

Jenny from Forest Schools said she will send her presentation to us and when she does Amie will add it to the parents' forum. Lian very kindly wrote a 'Hot Questions' handout for parents. This is available to anyone who did not manage along. Just let me know. We will prepare a questionnaire to explore the successful parts of the evening and what we can do to improve.

HMIE / Care Commission

Our inspection report is due to be published on the 19th March. Your children were, as usual, little shining stars. From speaking to the children the inspectors discovered that the children think for themselves, and they are not too easily coercible i.e., the children responded to the inspectors confidently explaining exactly why they do what they do. The inspectors praised the children as they demonstrated democratic citizenship and correlative social duties, which, argued the inspectors, can only be embedded in a child when the ethos fosters responsibility and co-operation.

Library

Amie is introducing a new system this week, whereby Amie will collect the child and take them to the library to choose a book. The previous system was not working efficiently late on in the day. Amie did introduce an afternoon slot too, but this did not seem to suit everyone. So...if you would like your child to be a member of the library let Amie know. What will happen after that is...

1. *In the morning you will need to put the book fee in your child's library bag (this will let Amie know that the child is changing his / her book on that particular day).*
2. *Amie will collect a small group of members and take them to the library to change their book.*
3. *When you collect your child a newly chosen book will be in their library bag.*

Simple really...

Hamodi

Hamodi's parents very kindly came in to the centre and presented a power point presentation to Hamodi's friends. The presentation was all about Hamodi's wonderful culture. Karen asked Hamodi's parents for some words from Hamodi's home language that we may use with Hamodi. The family suggested the following words that we can use (Karen informed me this is how they sound – they are clearly not written in Arabic, apologies, we are going to try to write them too...but in the meantime...)

Heloa – nice

Shokran – thank you

Hodi – take it

El abi – play with me

Zalen – sad

Ashab – friend

Ferhan – happy

Ahaln – hello

Hajika – garden

Sponsored Nature Walk

On Friday we are meeting at the bandstand in Princes Street Gardens at 10am with all our nature detectives. We should be returning to the centre just after 11.30am.

Hope to see you there ☺

Eco-Tips

To make your own urban compost box, go to www.yougrowgirl.com

For tips on making your own beauty products visit www.pioneerthinking.com

For a greener alternative to 'ladies towels' visit www.mooncup.co.uk

Visit www.wasteonline.org.uk for more tips on cutting down waste.

Visit www.ecogenie.co.uk for a range of environmentally friendly domestic cleaning products (they also offer a refill service).

Finally, as we become a forest school ourselves, please take a moment to read the following inspirational passage from Claire Warden. Additionally I have attached a paper that explains 'what is a forest school' I hope this is of interest (it is rather long but very interesting ☺)

Nature Kindergartens

“Imagine a world where the lines were harsh and unyielding, the textures were consistent and variation is unheard of. Does it inspire you? Now imagine a place where the carpet changes everyday, the ceiling is a myriad of different colours, light, shadow and movement. The feelings of movement completely surround you, sometimes breezy, sometimes cold, others warm. Unexpected wonders fly by, sometimes full of colour and sometimes full of noise and movement. If we really want children to thrive we need to let their connection to nature nurture them.”

(Nurture through Nature, Claire Warden, 2007).

Inspirational don't you think?

Warm wishes

Lynn

Conference paper given at Anglia Ruskin University conference
"Reclaiming Relational Pedagogy in Early Childhood: Learning from
International Experience"
April 19th to 21st April 2007

Title: Forest School: relational pedagogy in action

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Abstract: This paper starts with the claim that Forest School is all about relationships, between children and their environment certainly, but also between each other and between the adults in the wood with them. It describes how the Forest School movement started in the UK in Bridgewater in the 1990s, since when it has slowly spread north and east. It describes the author's involvement in establishing Forest Schools and associated training in East Anglia, and her current research project in Suffolk. The paper then goes on to look at the benefits of Forest School to young children, and how this is facilitated. It goes on to distil from this the ethos of Forest School in the UK, and to state the author's belief in Forest School as an ideal learning environment for young children. It ends with a plea to practitioners to record and share their experiences.

Text:

Being a part of a Forest School session will quickly convince any participant observer that relationships are a key part of the experience, relationships between children and the environment certainly, but also between each other and between the adults in the wood with them. Since I taught in Norway for a year in the 1970s I have been interested in why it is that being in this natural environment should have such a profound effect on the social and emotional environment of the participants. I would like to share with you today where my thinking has taken me.

With apologies to those who are familiar with Forest School I would like to start by describing a brief history of the development of Forest School in this country, and my involvement in that development. I will then describe why I think that Forest School is relational pedagogy in action, and go on to talk about the research that I am doing to seek support for that assertion. I will end by saying what Forest School has come to represent for me, and why I think its influence is so important for young children.

It is possible to see links between Forest School and all manner of movements promoting children's learning outdoors, from the MacMillan nurseries to Gordonstoun School. The Industrial Revolution in this country in the 19th century saw the formation of many of these institutions, as practitioners recognised the impact of urbanisation upon the health, well being and education of children. However, in the second half of the 20th century mainstream education in this country seemed to lose sight of the importance of regular outdoor opportunities, with a steady erosion of PE and a decline in Outdoor Education due to health and safety scares. In other countries, principally in Scandinavia, this has not been the case, and Forest School in the form that it is best recognised was developed in this country largely as a result of a visit to Denmark by the nursery nursing department of Bridgewater College in the 1990s.

Bridgewater College began to run Forest School sessions for their own college nursery children, then for students with special needs at the college, and eventually for all the students in the college. As they developed their provision they developed their understanding of what Forest School could do for different groups

of people at different times in their lives. An interesting new development at the Burnworthy Outdoor Education Centre, where one of the original lecturers now runs his own Forest School, is the work they are doing with Women's Refuge groups. But I will stick to the early years story for now.

Bridgewater, and later Burnworthy, developed training courses through OCN and BTEC for Forest School leaders and practitioners, enabling Forest Schools to spread. Inevitably this was initially in the West Country, then Wales, and then Oxfordshire. In 2003 the Green Light Trust, an environmental charity based in Suffolk, was offered the opportunity to lead the development of Forest Schools in the East of England with funding and support from the Forestry Commission's education wing, the Forest Education Initiative. As their early years specialist I was sent to Wales to train as a Forest School leader, then as a trainer, and then two of my colleagues were also trained. We now run training courses at our base, and also go out to other settings to run training. In addition we provide resources via our website, and support conferences such as this one, and the Saffron Waldron conference in 2006. My role now is largely involved in observing, recording and researching what Forest School is, and what it can do for children and young people, with a view to producing researched evidence to promote its benefits. I have been interested to read the findings from the two NEF research projects (NEF 2003 and 2005) that have been undertaken in Wales and the South West, as I can see reassuring similarities in our findings.

At the moment I am working with Nayland School in Suffolk, where I started a Forest School in 2003 (Bond, 2004). Since my initial six weeks work with the staff and children, the Head Teacher and the Foundation Stage staff have enthusiastically embraced the Forest School ethos, which is made slightly easier for them by having a wood on one side of the school site. They have made Forest School an integral part of their Foundation Stage delivery, with every child entering the school experiencing between 18 and 36 Forest School sessions. Their Ofsted report of 2005 states that "Involvement in the Forest School project makes a magical contribution to children's development" (Ofsted, pg 5, 2005).

This leads me onto why it is that I think that Forest School is “relational pedagogy in action”. I asked one of the two Foundation Stage teachers what she gained from the Forest School sessions, particularly as she is also the deputy head of the school and has to make a considerable effort to be with her class in the wood regularly for a half day for six weeks of every term. She said that it gave her a chance to see the children as people, to see different qualities and strengths to those demonstrated in the class room, to have the chance to observe them and to enter into relaxed spontaneous conversation. Her Foundation Stage colleague and I summarised this for my research project:

““New perspectives” for children and other adults is about seeing children in different settings. This facilitates a more positive relationship between child and practitioner, and a holistic view of their unique strengths and weaknesses”

The “new perspectives” mentioned above is the 7th beneficial outcome of Forest School identified by the NEF research, but I feel that it is one of the most important. It focuses on the whole child, their interests, their talents and their personalities, gives a real and human dimension to their care and education that is missing if we focus on curricula or on specific areas of development. As the flyer for this conference quotes, “Human relationships....are the building blocks of healthy development”. The teachers at Nayland are being given time and space to meet their children as whole people, each with a unique set of talents and abilities. The children are being given the chance to develop relationships with adults in an environment that is independent of classroom constraints and that respects their individuality, fostering confidence and social competence that will support their learning when they return to the indoor school.

We considered all eight of the outcomes before the start of the forest school sessions in January 2007 as a focusing exercise, and will be returning to them later this month (March 2007). Sharing our findings thus far with you today will enable me to further explore the benefits of Forest School and how they relate to the themes of the conference. I will deal with them in the order determined by NEF through their work with the Forest Schools of Wales and the West of England, and will expand on how these opportunities are created later in the paper. They are based on

the observations of the staff over 7 terms, each of 6 sessions of Forest School:

1. Confidence: one thing that sets Forest School apart is attendance on a regular basis over time. Some children take time to become familiar and confident with Forest School and the routines associated with it. But as they do, they develop ownership of the wood, which encourages relaxation and comfortableness with it, a relationship with their woodland setting at their own pace. The Forest School routines provide stability, consistency and security. Knowing their boundaries leaves freedom for thought and activities. There is a freedom to take risks that are managed, giving independence and a desire to explore further. Learning is child-led in a setting flexible enough to adapt to their interests, allowing them to make their own discoveries and construct their own learning.
2. Social skills: it is about encouraging children to identify their own strengths and recognise the value they bring to relationships, not about creating a class of charismatic leaders. Thus they learn to value the contributions of others. Social behaviour such as giving, helping, sharing and comforting are encouraged.
3. Language and communication: the children are constantly conveying messages, expressing feelings, and making social contact. They are turn-taking, negotiating, listening to others. Their enthusiasm inspires them to use new words and with greater fluency. There is an increased and developed use of language, and improved vocabulary through spontaneous talk and descriptive language. Confidence and communication are linked – an increased willingness to communicate is an indicator of greater confidence. An inspiration to learn new words, create imaginary play and make up stories and ideas comes from their surroundings.
4. Motivation and concentration: children's interests motivate their desire to learn. Outdoor environments tend to fascinate, thus stimulating their innate curiosity. Child-led learning enables practitioners to see what intrigues the children who can then work, solve problems, discover new things, ideas and concepts. The input at this conference

from the Reggio Emilia nurseries also underlines this approach.

“A sense of awe and wonder” was an expression used in the early National Curriculum documentation – it happens naturally by being close to nature. Concentration spans are much longer than in the indoor classrooms for all children. They discover new phenomena, and accommodate them into their world; they may even ride dragons, pilot aeroplanes or create magical potions.

5. Physical skills: children are helped, tested and challenged at Forest School, improving the range and quality of their movements. Stamina may be gained just by the exercise of playing for three hours outdoors. Confidence to undertake risks and challenges comes through learning how to do things safely and through pushing at boundaries. There is space to learn, and to experience the tactile experiences that come from different weather conditions. As they gain in experience they trip over less often, and cope with putting on protective clothing more easily.
6. Knowledge and understanding: the Forest School space may be a different environment from those familiar to them, or just a familiar one approached differently. Whichever, the freedom to explore and create stimulates curiosity and observation. Curiosity developed in the wood transfers to the world beyond Forest School, increasing the desire to learn and explore. Knowledge is inspired by child-initiated exploration and supplemented by the expertise of the practitioners. Understanding develops over weeks of repetitions that increase their awareness of the impact of their actions. A sense of ownership also develops over time, giving a degree of pride and confidence.
7. New perspectives; we have discussed above.
8. Ripple effects on the children, their families and the wider community: open days and celebrations can help allay worries about risks, exposure to inclement weather, and the process of learning. This ripples into the wider community. And importantly, all manner of strengths that aid success in formal learning are transferred back into the indoor classroom.

So, the question is, how does Forest School work? And what are the key elements that create the Forest School ethos? It is difficult to know which question to tackle first but I think it will be most helpful to describe a block of sessions first, and then highlight those key elements.

Firstly, when embarking on a block of Forest School sessions it is necessary to make sure that the children are as safe as possible. There is a growing concern, expressed in Jennie Lindon's excellent book "Too Safe for Their Own Good" (Lindon, 2003), that children are being over-protected, and as a consequence are not able to learn to keep themselves safe. There is also a growing truth that our society is becoming more litigious, so if we are going to facilitate risk-taking we need to be able to demonstrate that those risks are reasonable ones for children of the age and stage you are working with. So Forest School practitioners are trained to risk assess the area they are planning to use, and not just once. Deep checks are undertaken seasonally, at the start of a term's sessions. This way action can be taken if necessary. Practitioners are also given silviculture training so that they can recognise when and where trees need coppicing, etc., and how such work should be carried out.

Daily checks are undertaken, looking for rubbish as well as fast-growing hazards like brambles and fungi. Identifying a hazard does not necessarily mean removing it. It means writing down what it is and what measures, such as pointing it out to the children, that you will take to minimise the risk.

Although the majority of the activities that take place will be child-led and child initiated, there will be activities that practitioners will plan for, or will be aware that certain activities are likely to take place. So on activity planning sheets the risks are again noted, and measures to ensure that they are reasonable are discussed. Lastly, practitioners will look at the group of children they are taking out, to see if there are any who will need extra support in any way. This is particularly important if the Forest School Leaders are not the children's' teachers, and may not know the children at all before the first session.

You will also want to ensure that group sizes are practical, and ratios are high. There is guidance for this in Forest School training. All this may sound excessive, but generating this level of backup evidence enables practitioners to offer children the maximum amount of freedom in the wood.

The next stage is to start the enabling process. An external Forest School leader will usually spend at least one session with the children on their home patch, getting to know them and building trust. They will also teach the children the "1,2,3 Where are you?" game, which enables any adult or child to locate or attract the rest of the Forest School if necessary. Discussions will take place on any topic of concern. I usually facilitate this by letting the children unpack my Forest School rucksack, containing a wide range of items from string to toilet paper, secateurs to wet wipes.

At last you are finally ready to go into the wood! And the first thing you will do in the wood is the last of the safety parameters I shall go into today, which is to establish a base camp, with markers delineating its periphery. We use brightly-coloured tape which it is important to retrieve at the end of the block of sessions, for environmental reasons. The children decide where the boundaries should be, with some adult negotiation if they make the area too big, although this is unlikely with new visitors to the wood. Most children do have a natural instinct to stay within a few metres of their known adults when in unfamiliar surroundings. This agreed area is where the children are free to pursue their own activities. If they wish to go out of the area, they have to take an adult with them.

After all this you have created a "safe enough" environment where the children can create and explore. What happens in the sessions is up to them, with occasional stimulation or support from the adults. In Norway the leaders will take a flask of coffee and sit on a log while the children get on with their learning. They know that the children are familiar enough with the environment to be constructive in their play, and comfortable enough with the adults to ask for equipment, advice or support if required. We may need to do more initially, as our children are not accustomed to the freedom to puggle in the mud that many of us may have experienced as children. Although I have to say that after 7 terms

Nayland is heading that way! But we do show them how to make a tipi, which involves discussions about the safe ways to move long support poles. And we show them how to peel the bark off sticks with potato peelers, a popular and safe introduction to sharp tools.

The play can be boisterous and noisy, or quiet and reflective, or all of those things by turn. Once ground rules are agreed, nothing is ruled out. For example, you can't take children to the woods and say "no sticks", it would be cruel! And it is fascinating to see the same games recurring each week, being refined and developed as different children join or leave the group. Deep play happens quickly and is sustained, while skills and knowledge are acquired and practised almost incidentally, to support the play.

The roles of the adults in the Forest Schools I have been involved with are various. They may take the opportunity to observe and record. I have included one of the forms we are using at Nayland this term as an appendix, by way of an example. They may provide muscle to start a log rolling when requested. They may be asked to identify flora and fauna, or may draw the children's attention to things they may have failed to spot. They may, if it is appropriate (and it takes skill and sensitivity to know when that is), join in a game, offering through questions, etc., extension opportunities for the children. The adults are often in totally different roles to those they take in the formal school setting, and the children respond accordingly. There is a relaxation and warmth in the wood that can then support the creation of a more nurturing and positive atmosphere in the classroom and nursery.

The Forest School ethos would seem to me to be summed up by the implementation of these key elements:

1. The setting is not the usual one. Whether it is actually in a wood, which is the ideal*, or in another outdoor designated area, it is defined as a Forest School where Forest School rules apply, not those of the setting the children have come from. The setting allows children to engage with the natural environment. *There is something elemental and magical about a piece of woodland; no wonder Tolkien created Ents!

2. The Forest School is made as safe as is reasonably possible, in order to facilitate children's risk-taking so that they can learn to respect the environment and move around comfortably within it, keeping themselves safe.
3. Forest School happens over time. The minimum number of blocks of weeks is six, but often the best play and the most significant changes are only just starting at this point. Both Bridgewater and Burnworthy recommend blocks of ten weeks, particularly if this is going to be the children's only chance to experience Forest School.
4. There is not such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing. The only time that it is unsafe to go into the wood is in high winds, when branches may be broken off. That is a time to find an open space, not to go back indoors.
5. Trust is central. The adults trust the children to follow the Forest School rules, and visa versa. If you are a leader, don't go out until you are sure that all the children and adults have understood this.
6. The learning is play-based, and as far as possible child initiated and child led. There are no time constraints, and risk-taking is facilitated.
7. The children decide what should or should not be taken back to the setting, with adult support. If adults wish to take natural material into the classroom they can collect it at another time. This is a part of the children's ownership of the experience.
8. The blocks and the sessions have beginnings and ends. Because this is such a powerful emotional experience children need to be prepared for the block of sessions by the Forest School leader, and to have a significant final session. This may be a celebration with parents invited in, or a campfire with special food, or some other agreed event. Each session has its rituals at the beginning and end to signal the difference and the specialness. This is often the chat during toileting and dressing at the beginning, and a song at the end.

During the time that I have been actively involved with leading Forest School sessions, or training and observing others doing so, my conviction that it is a powerful and useful tool has grown rather than diminished. I have seen so many children gain from

the experience that it is my deepest wish that we could find ways to offer it to as many children as possible. I have seen a seven year old with Down's Syndrome find a way to reconcile his need for imaginative play with his belief that he was too old for such things by becoming a Forest School helper. I have seen a nervous four year old afraid to try to balance on a log run along one to reach another tree to climb, and a child with a speech impediment find a voice to express her extraordinary story-telling skills. And I have seen many boys who find the constraints of the conventional classroom claustrophobic develop skills in concentration, perseverance, cooperation and motivation.

Being in a Forest School with the support and nurture of committed adults creates an unrivalled learning opportunity. For Foundation Stage children it exactly addresses their developmental needs, fostering skills that then help them to succeed in our conventional learning environments. It also supports the emotional needs of children who the system has failed, but that is another story.

It is fascinating for me to watch the adults as well as the children, to see who takes to this mode of delivery. It is not for every adult, some of us have outgrown our love of mud and sticks, and it would be foolish not to admit it if it is not your thing – once you have tried it! At Nayland the school council have requested that all children be given a forest school session each week, but the head is aware that not all staff would welcome the opportunity to spend three hours a week in all weathers in the wood, even if the wood could take the strain! But there are people who take to this way of working as naturally as the children. They are not all teachers. For example, in Suffolk and Norfolk the Wildlife Trust Education Teams have trained three or four of their number and are offering Forest School sessions to schools.

As usual the bottom line is funding, as the training and organising of the sessions do not come cheap. This is one of the reasons for my current research project, as I hope to obtain tangible evidence for the benefits of Forest School. I would like to conclude with a plea that if you become involved in a Forest School project of any kind, please will you to keep evidence of what you are doing and what benefits your children gain from it. Only hard evidence will

convince funding bodies to facilitate a wider dissemination of this opportunity.

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Appendix:

Sample of Forest School Recording Sheet

Forest School leader report by pupil: Term: Spring 2007							
			Name:		Class:		
Date of FS session	General comments	Changes in self-esteem & self-confidence	Changes in collaboration & awareness of others	Changes in levels of motivation & attitudes to learning	Demonstrates ownership & pride in local environment	Improved relationship with & understanding of outdoors	Changes in levels of skills and knowledge
31/01/07							
07/02/07							
21/02/07							
28/03/07							
07/03/07							
14/03/07							

Author Profile:

Sara Bond is a Senior Lecturer in Early Childhood at Anglia Ruskin University, and also an environmental trainer with the charity the Green Light Trust. She has published numerous articles on a range of early years subjects including, unsurprisingly, a series in Nursery World on Outdoor Play. She has written educational materials for a range of applications including distance learning. Currently she is engaged in research on the long and short term benefits of participation in Forest School in the Foundation Stage.

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