Forest School: Bringing Visual Arts Outdoors

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Background of the Study

- PRIMARY SCHOOL TEACHER
- MA STUDENT, LIMERICK SCHOOL OF ART AND DESIGN
- EXPLORING MY OWN VISUAL ARTS; STUDIO SPACE
- HOLLY TREES SCHOOL, BRENTWOOD, ESSEX, UK.
- EARTHFORCE EDUCATION, WICKLOW, IRELAND
Forest School

- 1993; Bridgewater and Taunton College, Somerset visited Denmark on an exchange visit
- Inspired by ‘Frulitsliv’ open-air culture that permeates early years education
- Established their own ‘Forest School’ for children attending the college creche
- Provided training since 1995
- Training in Wales and across England since 2000
- 2003; Open College Network qualification established
The Forest School Association

• Established in 2011 (UK) and 2016 (Ireland)

• Defines Forest School as:

  an inspirational process, that offers ALL learners regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or natural environment with trees

Identified Key Features of Forest School...
Six Guiding Principles

1. Forest School is a long-term process of frequent and regular sessions in a woodland or natural environment, rather than a one-off visit. Planning, adaption, observations and reviewing are integral elements of Forest School.

2. Forest School takes place in a woodland or natural wooded environment to support the development of a relationship between the learner and the natural world.

3. Forest School aims to promote the holistic development of all those involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners.

4. Forest School offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.

5. Forest School is run by qualified Forest School practitioners who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice.

6. Forest School uses a range of learner-centred processes to create a community for development and learning.
Forest School participants are viewed as:

- Equal, unique and valuable
- Competent to explore and discover
- Entitled to experience appropriate risk and challenge
- Entitled to choose, and to initiate and drive their own learning and development
- Entitled to experience regular success
- Entitled to develop positive relationships with themselves and other people
- Entitled to develop a strong, positive relationship with their natural world
Research- Positive Outcomes

Attainment of UK National Curriculum Objectives
(O’Brien, 2009; Swarbrick, Eastwood and Tutton, 2004)

Social Skills and Impersonal Skills
(Harris, 2017; Waite, Bolling and Bentsen, 2015; O’Brien, 2009)

Language and Communication Skills
(Waite, Bolling and Bentsen, 2015)

Gross and Fine Motor Skill Development
(Waite, Bolling and Bentsen, 2015)

Motivation and Concentration
(Roe and Aspinall, 2011; O’Brien, 2009)

New Perspectives
(O’Brien, 2009)

Pride, Inclusivity and A Sense of Belonging
(Cumming and Nash, 2015)

Self-Esteem and Self-Confidence
(Waite, Bolling and Bentsen, 2015; Roe and Aspinall, 2011;

Deeper Awareness of the Natural Environment
(Turtle, Convery and Convery, 2015; Ridgers, Knowles and Sayers,
2012; Harris, 2017; O’Brien, 2009)
Forest School; a Constructivist Pedagogy?

- A focus on learning and not performance
- A view that learners are active co-constructors of meaning and knowledge
- That a teacher pupil relationship is established and built upon the idea of guidance and not instruction
- That learners are engaged in tasks seen as ends in themselves and having implicit worth
- And that assessment is promoted as an active process of uncovering and acknowledging shared understanding

Pedagogy in Forest School

Guided by
Joseph Cornell’s
*Flow Learning Cycle*
(1989)
What does Forest School look like?
However, there is criticism...

- The Scandinavian philosophy of ‘Frulitsliv’ may be lost due to cultural differences (Leather 2013; 2018; Lloyd, Truong and Gray, 2018; Waite and Goodenough, 2018)
- The rapid development and commodification of Forest School leading to a loss of awareness of the philosophical underpinnings (Leather, 2018; 2013)
- Forest Schools is under-theorised in outdoor education literature (Leather, 2013). Research of large scale, long-term effects is required and the need to deepen the research-based understanding of the outdoor learning process (Harris, 2017).
- Slade, Lowery and Bland (2013) argue that many of the forest school studies are anecdotal, and there is a need for a systematic approach to the impact of forest school in primary schools
- Forest School activities should be linked to the planned work in school (Slade, Lowery and Bland, 2013) There is a tension between the achievement of academic curricular aims and playful learning (Waite and Goodenough, 2018; Slade, Lowery and Bland, 2013, Harris, 2017; Maynard, 2007)
- Standard of qualification (Knight, 2018)
An initial exploration of the Forest School approach in the Primary School Curriculum

**VISUAL ARTS; CONSTRUCTION STRAND**

- OVERALL QUITE POSITIVE; THE CHILDREN NOTED THAT THEY ‘LIKED’ THE LESSONS
- DEVELOPMENT OF NEW VOCABULARY
- OBSERVED ENTHUSIASM AND ENGAGEMENT
- AWARENESS OF THEIR NATURAL SURROUNDINGS
- ENGAGED IN THE PROCESS OF MAKING ART

After:
In Forest Schools I am grateful for:

**All the Activ**

are Lots of fun
Fun stuff to do
Opinions of what to do
Rolling only once
Really cool stuff
I like it made
Excellent listening
Super overall
Felt on day 1.
Some unanticipated results of this study

Co-operative learning; a natural formation of groups with freedom to change

Enjoyment of space; control over their proximity to other children

Change of attitude towards the outdoors; earthworm
Continuing this exploration

• ‘How Children and Teachers in Four Primary School Classes Perceive the Impact of the Introduction of Forest School Sessions on Teaching and Learning’

• How do the children perceive the Forest School sessions?

• Do the teaching and learning methodologies adopted in the Forest School sessions differ to the practice and methodologies articulated in the Irish Primary Curriculum?

• How do the teachers perceive the Forest School sessions?

• Were there any teaching and learning methodologies that the class teachers may incorporate into their own practice?
References


