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Short Article

Practitioner enquiry: Does Forest school education have a positive impact on young people's wellbeing?

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Abstract:

This article will discuss the positive impact that outdoor learning can have on young people's wellbeing (Mannion, Mattu & Wilson 2015; Tiplady & Menter, 2020). This is an exploratory study with one group of seven children, 8-13 yrs, from care experienced backgrounds who participated in forest school for 15 weeks. The programme has been developed to support young people across the city who struggle at times with the traditional classroom environment, many of whom are care experienced. Forest Schools have been successful across different part of the United Kingdom (Cudworth & Lumber, 2021; Garden & Downes, 2021).

Introduction

Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC) is a Scottish Government policy that aims to ensure children and young people in Scotland have the support needed to reach their full potential. GIRFEC's purpose is to provide opportunities that will help improve well-being, create a supportive nurturing environment where our young people feel safe, provide support that is needed tailored to individuals' requirements, ensure the team around the child is all working together and prioritise interventions offered. Forest School is seen as a way of meeting a lot, if not all, of these needs.

Rationale

It is well documented that children and young people learn using a variety of different methods. Many children and young people can find a classroom environment challenging. There is a clear link between play and development, yet outdoor experiences seem to, at times, take a back seat to the ever-increasing use of learning through technology (Coates, 2019).

Many studies have found that the benefits of Forest Schools, for any age group, promote positive correlations between learning in nature and wellbeing.



Experiences make learning relevant. Children and young people need play and outdoor experiences as this brings a host of life enhancing benefits. Forest School is an educational approach that is child centred and offers the opportunity to thrive in an environment that is not restricted by walls or doors. The Forest School is based in a small-wooded area in a local park. The camp is set up with activities, a campfire for cooking food and shelters. All activities are outdoors and include activities such as bridge building, identification of flora, fauna and local wildlife, bushcraft skills, conservation activities and campfire building. The young people come together in a group of 8-10 pupils. The Forest School Leaders have completed the Woodland Activity Leader Training which has professional recognition by the General Teaching Council for Scotland (GTCS).¹

Forest School has been found to bring with it a better appreciation for nature (McCormick, 2017) and also increased cognitive ability, enhanced social and emotional states and improved mental wellbeing (Sella et al., 2023). Research further supports the view that learning in nature allows children and young people to be intrigued by their surroundings in a calming manner. Whereas in an urban environment there is a need for heightened attention as this environment is often filled with potential hazards, for example, cars (Berman, 2008).

Aim

The aim of the enquiry was to explore the impact that attendance at Forest School has on our young people's wellbeing, resilience, and self-confidence. This was carried out as part of a practitioner enquiry for ongoing professional learning.

Methodology

The enquiry was conducted with a group of care experienced young people. Being care experienced means that the young people taking part are looked after by the local authority or have been previously looked after. This includes living at home on a compulsory supervision order, living with a foster care family, in a kinship care arrangement or in a children's house.

Care experienced is not a legal term but one used by 'The Independent Care Review' and holds meaning for many who identify with this term. The Promise Scotland explains being care experienced as:

- A description of the situation they've grown up in.
- A recognition that this situation may grant them additional support and protection under law.

¹ The GTCS is the independent regulator for teachers in Scotland. See <https://www.gtcs.org.uk>



- An understanding of their personal identity.

Yet for others the term still holds stigma and for that some do not wish to use this term. For the purpose of this enquiry, I will use the term 'care experienced' to identify the situation the young people have grown up or find themselves in currently (The Promise Scotland, 2024).

The young people were aged between 8 to 11 years, boys and girls from inner city Glasgow, where green space is becoming more limited (Robinson et al., 2022).

Research by the University of Sheffield analysed greenspace in cities across Britain and found that Glasgow ranked bottom of cities with green attributes. Researchers looked at tree coverage, vegetation and the presence of parks within urban cities. It was concluded that those cities with the most green space were found in the south of England while those with the least were former industrial areas (Project Scotland, 2022).

Green space is defined as 'an area of trees, grass or other vegetation set apart for recreational purposes in an otherwise urban environment'. The enquiry was carried out over a 15-week period, starting January 2024 through to May 2024. The enquiry covered seasons of winter into spring through to the summer term, however, Forest School opportunities are carried out across all seasons, providing opportunities for young people to wonder and learn from the world around them.

All young people are referred to Forest School by their schools, and referral information was provided that included anticipated outcomes for participation. The young people involved were all from different parts of the city and all had found, in different ways, a classroom environment difficult, for example, displaying challenging behaviours, non-attendance and lowered self-esteem and participation.

The enquiry was undertaken with young people that were new to Forest School. A young person's questionnaire was completed at the beginning of their time after Easter and again at the end of a 15-week intervention period before the summer break. The questionnaire was designed by the author to gather young people's thoughts and feelings giving valuable data to support the project at the beginning and end to quantify any changes. It is important to get opinions of active participants to make adaptations, alterations if and where needed. This approach is consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (incorporated in Scots law in the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Act 2024) which states in Article 12, 'I have the right to be listened to and taken seriously'.

Forest School leaders' observations and a final questionnaire was completed by the young person's school and parent/carer. This was then analysed.



All the young people who were referred shared commonalities of anticipated Forest School outcomes such as building self-esteem and self-confidence, developing positive relationships and knowing one’s capabilities.

Findings

Based on previous research on the many benefits of Forest School education on our young people’s well-being, the enquiry hoped to find a similar enhancement in the areas of resilience, confidence, and well-being. The data collected, therefore, focused on the young person’s perception of their development and growth over the intervention period, as well as gaining a reflective evaluation from schools and carers. A group of 7 young people, all new to forest school, were involved in the enquiry and were the bases for the questionnaires and evaluation evidence. All young peoples schools submitted referrals which included anticipated outcomes and the schools were then asked, after the 15 weeks, to reflect on the impact Forest school has had on their young people.

One question in the questionnaire asked the young people how good they were at working as part of a team, using a rating scale of 1 to 10, where 1 indicated ‘not very well’, and 10 ‘really well’. On examination of the pre- and post-questionnaire responses, there was a positive change in those who now viewed themselves as able to work as part of a team. This area had also been a significant area of interest highlighted by schools as an anticipated outcome before starting this intervention.

Figure 1 shows that before participation in Forest school half the young people rated themselves ‘okay’ at working in a team (an average rating of 6.00) while Figure 2, post placement, all the young people rated themselves as very good (an average rating of 9.40).

Figure 1: Pre-placement question – How well can you work in a team?

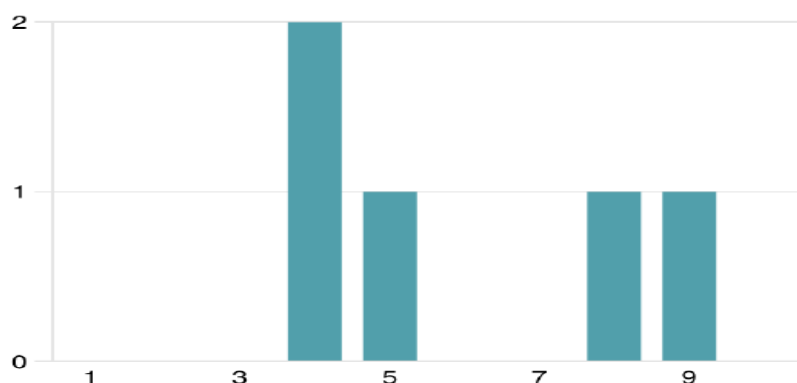
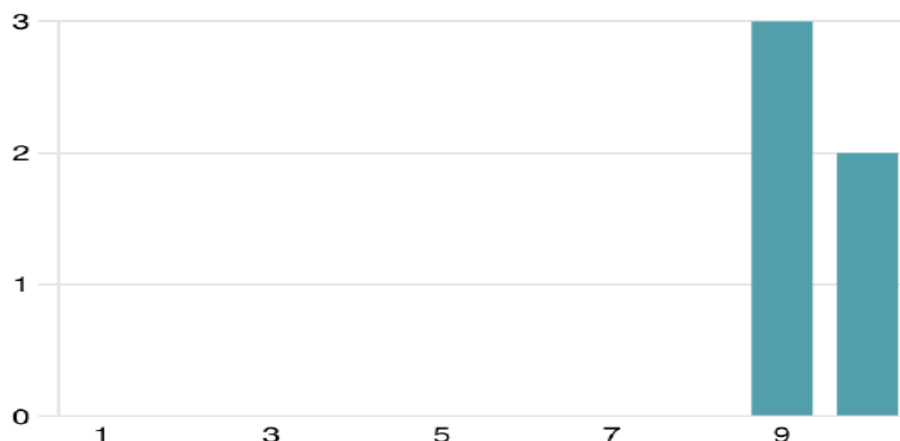


Figure 2: Post placement question – Since Participation how well can you now work as part of a team?



When the young people were asked about how well they shared their thoughts and feelings, the pre-placement questionnaire responses varied in levels of engagement. The young people didn't feel confident or comfortable talking about themselves and one pupil stated that 'no one listens so I just get angry'. During Forest School sessions all young people were encouraged to have their voice heard and the post-placement results reflected this.

Figure 3 shows that before participating in Forest school the young people varied in awareness of their abilities to share thoughts and feeling (an average rating of 5.20). Figure 4 indicates that the young people had significantly increased in confidence when sharing thoughts and feelings (an average rating of 7.67).

Figure 3: Pre-placement question – How good are you at sharing your thoughts and feelings?

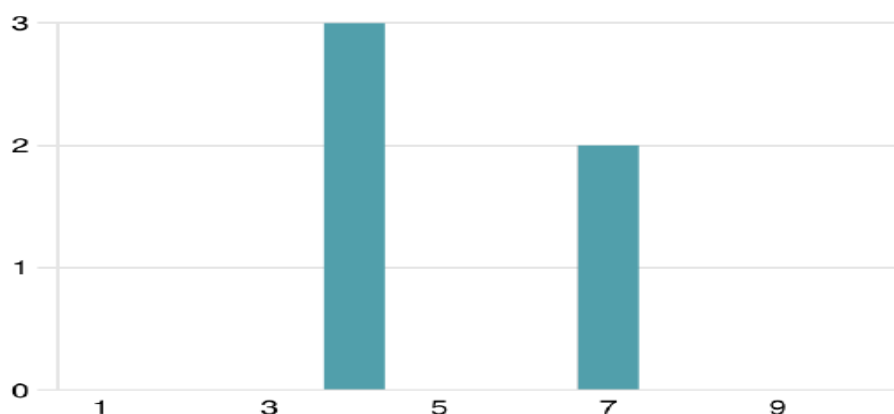
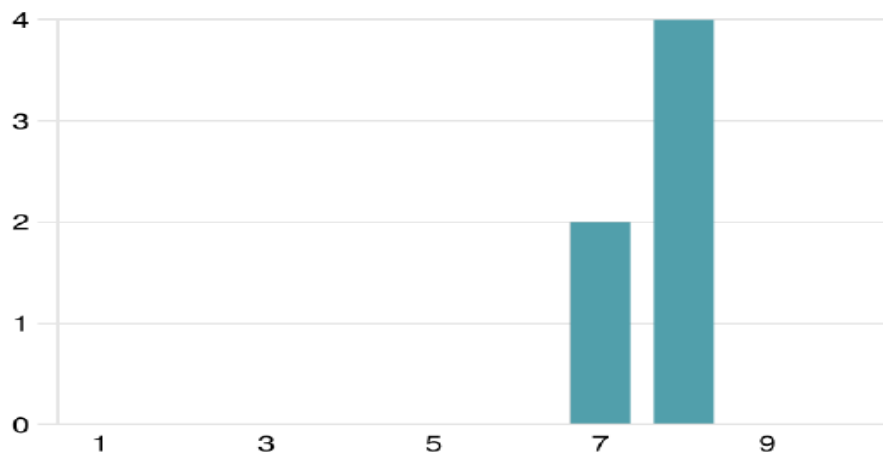


Figure 4: Post placement question – Since participating in Forest School how good are you at sharing your thoughts and feelings?



The questionnaire asked the young people about strengths, their own qualities and the willingness to share these. Not all young people felt confident at telling leaders what they were good at, either in school or outside. The sessions were run in a flexible, relaxed manner that allowed the young person to try new things, fail and try again without judgement. Where support and encouragement to complete activities, independently or within a group, was evident, this had a positive impact and is reflected in the post-placement results that show a positive shift in the average rating.

Figure 5 shows that the majority of young people scored themselves as low on the scale of emotional control, pre intervention, (an average rating of 6.60) with Figure 6 showing a remarkable increase in self-reflection and emotional regulation post placement (an average rating of 9.17).

Figure 5: Pre-placement question – How well do you manage talking about the things you are good at?

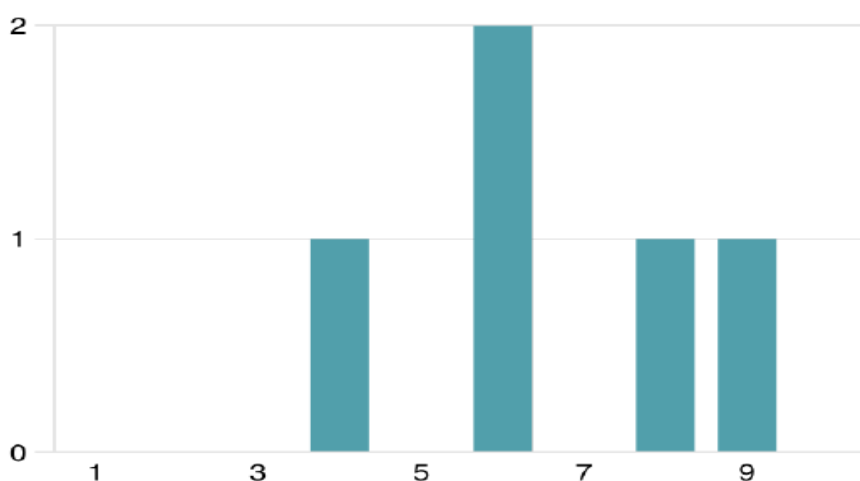
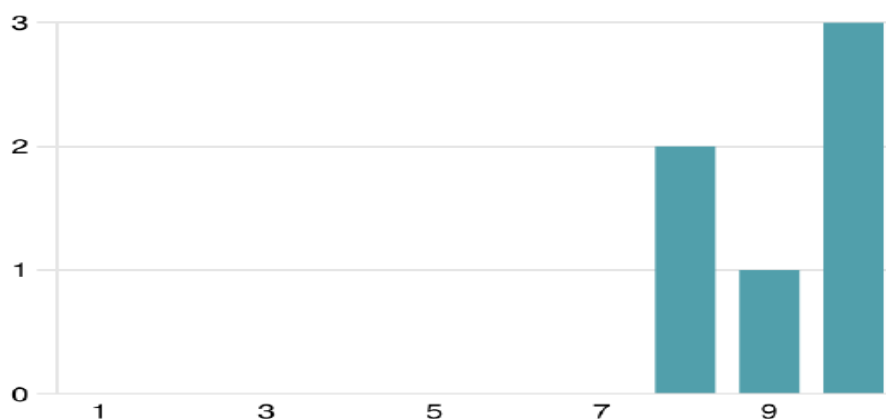


Figure 6: Post placement question – Since participating in Forest School how well do you manage talking about things you are good at?



Failure can be a hard life lesson. The young people were very open about how they felt and what triggers them not to be able to manage their emotions. The young people are challenged within Forest School. It puts them in a new environment with new individuals. They are given the time they need to build important relationships with adults and peers. They are listened to and feel safe in our company. I found this result most heartening.

Figure 7 shows an average rating of 5.80 pre-placement regarding ability to manage emotions while Figure 8 shows the rise to an average rating of 9.00 post placement.

Figure 7: Pre-placement question – How good are you at managing your emotions?

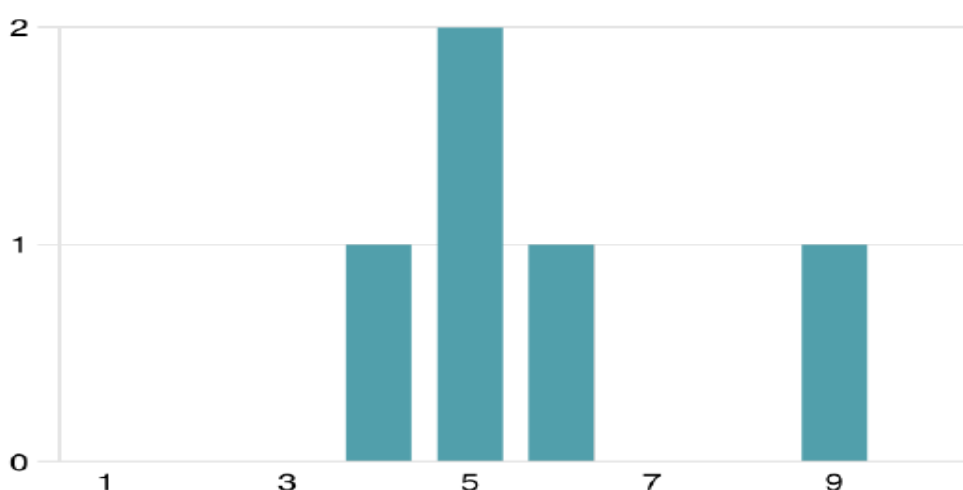
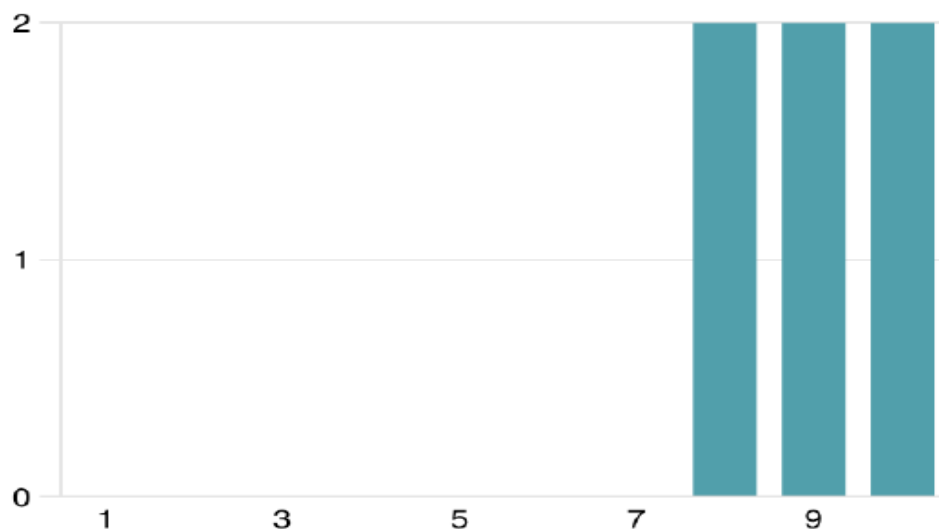


Figure 8: Post placement question – Since participating in Forest School how good have you become at managing your emotions?



A variety of new learning opportunities were made available to young people at Forest School and when asked, post-placement, what they enjoyed, it was evident that there were some clear favourites. These opportunities allowed the young person to work on the skills that school had previously indicated that they hoped to see improvements in. On reflection, the young people were also able to see improvements in these areas.

Figure 9: Post Placement question – What have you enjoyed about Forest School?

● Cooking	5
● Games	6
● Fishing	4
● Climbing	2
● Nature Walks	1
● Meeting new friends	4
● Identification of trees/ bugs	2
● Other	2

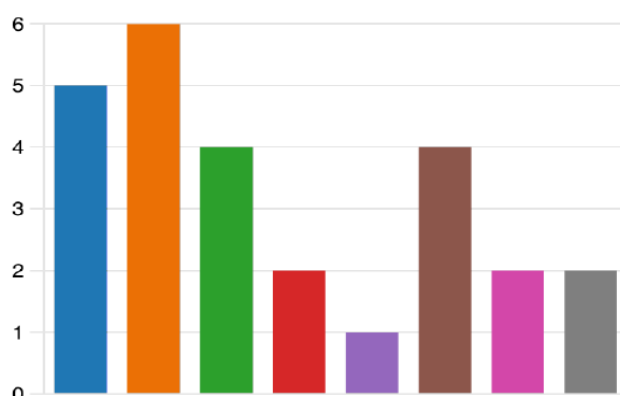
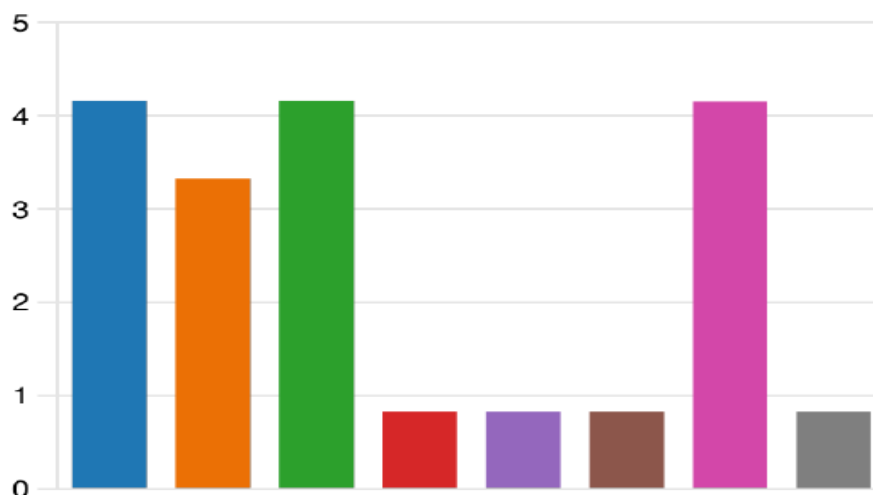


Figure 10 shows the anticipated outcomes while Figure 11 shows the young people's self-reflections on what they believe the intervention has helped them with.

Anticipated outcomes:

- Building Confidence – 5
- Develop skills to work as part of a team – 4
- Building self-esteem – 5
- Follow instructions – 1
- Improve attainment – 1
- Improve attendance – 1
- Develop relationships – 5
- Other – 1

Figure 10: Pre-placement question – Please indicate all anticipated outcomes that you would like Forest School to help your YP with?



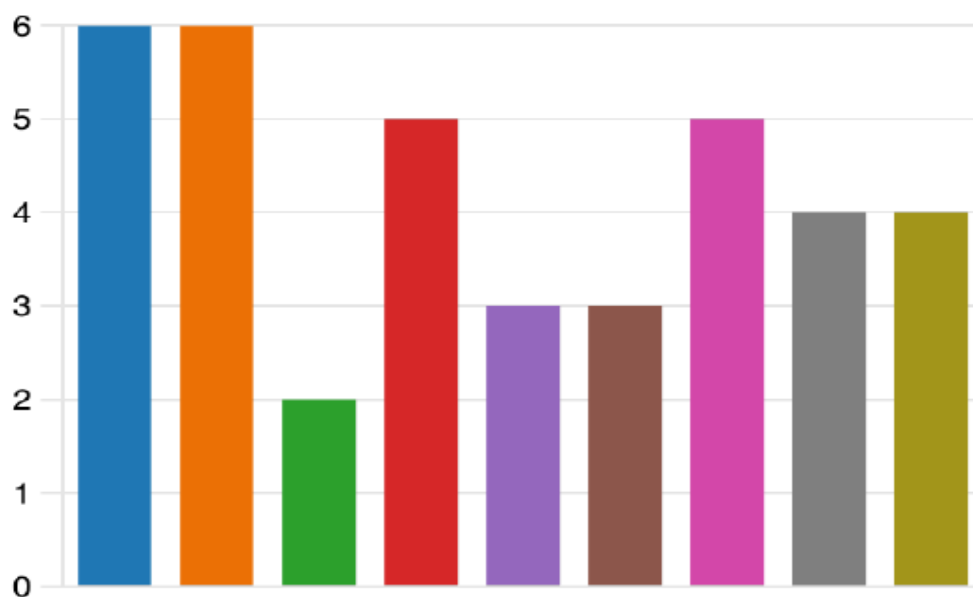
Self-reflections:

- Self-confidence – 6
- Making friends – 6
- Enjoying school life – 2
- Self-esteem – 5
- Participating in school – 3
- School attendance – 3
- School achievement – 5
- Mental wellbeing – 4



- Physical activity – 4

Figure 11: Post placement question – What do you think Forest School has helped you with?



All young people post-intervention said that they had enjoyed their Forest School experience and would recommend it to others as it is a fun way to learn.

Figure 22: Post Placement question – Would you recommend Forest School to other children? If no, why not? If yes, why?

- Yes – 6 Why? – 'Fun'
- No - 0



Not all young people completed a post-placement questionnaire before results were analysed. Six of the seven young people completed the final questionnaire.

The final method of collection was completed by sending out post placement questionnaires to schools. Not all schools returned these forms, and no forms were sent onto parents/carers. The feedback from those schools that did respond was very positive and they were pleased by their young person's participation.

School Responses

Has your young person had a positive experience at Forest School? If yes, how do you know this? If no, what did they not enjoy?

School 1	Our young person has loved his time with Forest School and is quick to tell you what he has been doing and what he liked etc (this is a stark contrast what he presented like previously)
School 2	Our young person has had a really positive experience at Forest School, and this is evident by his return to school and his engagement in class
School 3	Yes, the young person in my class has been very enthusiastic about Forest School. He was keen to share his learning with his peers so we put photos of him at Forest School on the board and he told the whole class about what he had been learning - we couldn't get him to stop! When we did outdoor learning at school, he was very enthusiastic and keen to share his prior knowledge. He also volunteered to support the teacher throughout the lesson.
School 4	Yes - he has persisted with the group each week after a hesitant start.

Table 1: School responses

Conclusion

The findings of this enquiry contribute to and support the view that Forest School can have a positive impact on our young people's wellbeing, resilience and self-confidence. Both reflective submission by the young people and from schools demonstrates that the outdoor environment is a beneficial teaching setting for allowing a young person to grow and develop vital social and practical skills that can be transferred into learning/life settings.

The young people involved all came with apprehensions of what to expect. Coming with no peer support, initially, they had to find their way in a group of mixed ability, mixed gender and mixed ages.

All of these young people thrived. The noticeable differences evident over the weeks were heartwarming to watch, from more young people taking on leadership roles and responsibilities for the running of the sessions to seeing them all interacting and working together.

Implications

This practitioner enquiry contributes to the evidence that Forest School interventions work. The need for outdoor learning and play is evident. With the growing number of outdoor educational nurseries available now this should be considered as an area that is taken on fully by primary and secondary establishments alike.

To get it right for every child, many children require something different. Not all can sit and learn at a desk or within a traditional school environment. As a



result, interventions need to be made available to allow children to flourish in their own unique way, indoors and out. Achievements, success and growth come in all shapes and sizes. There is not 'one size fits all', and young people cannot always be measured on standardised tests and don't always happen indoors. Maybe Winston Churchill got it right when he said, 'success consists of going from failure to failure without less enthusiasm'.

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About the author

Angela Macaulay has been teaching for Glasgow City Council for the last seven years and teaching for 19 years in total. Angela has worked in many areas of Education to include mainstream, additional support needs and social, emotional and behavioural needs schools. Presently Angela works alongside care experienced learners in Glasgow and helps lead a very successful Forest School experience for young people from within inner city Glasgow.

