

Dunclug Primary School, Ballymena – Forest Schools Evaluation

The main reason that I wanted to get my school involved in the Forest School programme, was to get children learning outside in the natural environment. I am a strong believer that: “Children may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel.” For me, this statement rings true when pupils learn outdoors – as it is in the outdoor classroom that pupils really use all of their senses and truly feel alive.

I remember being anxious before our first Forest School lesson, for many reasons. I asked myself questions such as: ‘will it rain and everyone get soaked?’ ‘Will pupils’ behaviour be an issue?’ ‘Will pupils concentrate for the entire session?’ I should not have worried, as I can genuinely say that in all of the sessions there were no such concerns. The main reason for this, was the extremely high levels of pupils’ engagement. From the first minute of the first Forest School session, pupils have been motivated. I don’t think that I have ever said that before about an educational programme! There is no doubt that this is due to a wide range of factors. In my opinion, the most important factor is that the outdoor classroom awakens pupils’ senses. They love to get outdoors, to see all the colours, the smells and the sounds. No tablet or screen can provide this. Secondly, the outdoors classroom caters for all types of learners. There are aspects of the Forest School activities that appeal to kinesthetic, visual and auditory learners in every single lesson. Finally, put simply, the outdoor classroom can provide opportunities that the indoor classroom cannot. From taking part in the Forest School programme throughout this past term, I have seen our pupils taking part in activities such as building shelters, whittling wood and making a fire. I know, for the vast majority of these pupils, that this was the first time they had ever done such a thing and they loved every minute of it. To sum it up:

‘The best classroom and richest cupboard is roofed only by the sky.’

Margaret McMillan

Our pupils look forward to Forest School each week and it is no coincidence that class attendance is almost always 100%! It is definitely one of the highlights of the week and I have had several parents tell me that their child looks forward to Forest School on a Thursday. I have also lost count of the number of times pupils have asked me ‘have we Forest Schools this week?’ and they are always delighted when I tell them that it is on.

However, Forest Schools is not just about ‘having fun.’ Yes, the pupils love every minute of it but there are so many other benefits. For me, one of the main benefits is how it helps develop pupils’ confidence. They get to take part in different activities and in a different environment. This can be challenging and rewarding for many pupils – they are outside of their comfort zone as they are not in their familiar classroom setting. As a result, I have seen pupils’ confidence flourish over the past five Forest School sessions. I think back to the last Forest School lesson and the ease at how they helped set up the classroom boundaries; how they listened so well to a new task and finally, how they made such an effort at the end of the lesson to ‘leave no trace.’ This demonstrated for me how much they had grown in confidence and independence over the programme.

Above all, the Forest Schools lessons are a cross curricular experience like no other. The wide range of numeracy, literacy and art skills that we have covered in just five lessons is amazing! From making 3D shapes, to looking at perspective whilst making maps, from construction skills to poetry techniques – the wide range of opportunities is mind blowing and that is before we talk about the opportunities to study geography, science, nature and biodiversity! To get outdoors and to literally experience topics such as photosynthesis and food chains is much more beneficial and memorable than learning it from a book.

The Personal Development and Mutual Understanding opportunities are also immense. Each lesson, pupils are challenged to work together, to take risks, to think about different ways to approach a task. Their communication skills and self-esteem naturally develop throughout each lesson and they don't even realise as they are having such a good time. An example of this in a recent lesson was when pupils were asked to discuss the shelter that they had created. All of our pupils, even the usually shy pupils, took the opportunity to enthusiastically talk and present in front of their whole class and several adults.

As a teacher, Forest School has also helped my professional development. I have gained - not only a vast range of lesson ideas from Brian and from the Forest Schools website - but the programme has also enhanced my day to day teaching strategies. I have had some experience of attending outdoor learning courses before but Forest Schools is much more than an outdoor learning course, it is a change of mindset. For example, in a recent lesson that I was taking, I remember Brian emphasized to me the importance of allowing the pupils to explore – to give the pupils time to do this naturally. This is one of the main learning points for me.

Another learning point for me, is that Forest Schools is much more than a series of lessons but it is a movement or journey that the school becomes part of. We are only at the beginning of this and I look forward to seeing how over the next term and next few years we continue on our Forest School journey. I look forward to taking the Foundation Stage pupils out for several lessons during the upcoming weeks and I also hope to see other schools join us for some Forest Schools lessons in the future. I look forward to next year seeing Forest Schools principles developed throughout our entire school curriculum.

We have been very fortunate to have had access to an amazing venue in the People's Park for our introduction to Forest Schools. This is a venue that we are now using much more often – for example we used it several weeks ago to complete a RSPB birdwatch activity. We are lucky to have such a beautiful venue on our doorstep.

I would like to take this opportunity to thank the incredibly talented Brian for all of his encouragement and kindness as he introduced us to Forest Schools. He not only gently encouraged and coached our pupils and staff - he inspired us. I would also like to thank the Mid East and Antrim Council for facilitating and providing this introduction to the Forest School for Dunclug Primary School. I hope this evaluation gives you an indication of how much our pupils and staff have appreciated it and benefited from it.