

Being a TOPS award school for “Taking Outdoor Play Seriously” when heard of Forest School last year through the council, I diligently applied but unfortunately our school was not successful in gaining the training. I put this to one side and our school directed all of our attention in developing our outdoor play area even further. Part of this was developing a gardening area, planting more trees and using natural and recycled resources whenever we could. The staff were fully on board with the outdoor play but as a leader, I knew that we needed to be thinking of how this could become fully embedded in learning and teaching within Rathcoole Primary School.

“Play is the highest form of research.” We understand what Albert Einstein was saying here. Play is learning. Play is research. ¹

I attended an information session with Brian Poots, at Earlview Primary, where the first video clip alone, had me engrossed. I left feeling positive that at least one of my staff would be able to work with me to complete the leadership training and even if we had to pay it ourselves it was worth it.

We work closely with five local primary schools and one high school within our local area. Part of this also involves liaising with the Public Health Agency. I was delighted when Brian contacted me to say that he had received funding for training from the PHA and would we be interested. Yes!!! Then came the task of recruiting the right members of staff. I knew that I wanted to do this, as a leader and teacher, but I also needed another member of staff to work alongside me. The email that was sent out was frank and to the point. This was just not a few days outside having fun, but involved research, assignments, leading CPD for other staff and disseminating the good practice and sharing the enthusiasm for forest school. I was slightly dismayed when only one teacher took on the challenge but delighted by the never-ending enthusiasm that she brought with her and knew that together we would soon have all the staff loving forest school.

We worked together with Brian then ourselves to review the work that was needed and planned out our sessions for the following few months. There soon developed a file with resources and the online Google Classroom became the one stop shop for all staff, with ideas, videos and printable ideas for all ages from nursery to Primary 7.

“The teaching life is the life of the explorer, the creator, constructing the classroom for free exploration. It is about engagement. It takes courage. It is about ruthlessly excising what is flawed, what no longer fits, no matter how difficult it was to achieve. It is about recognizing teaching as a medium that can do some things exquisitely but cannot do everything.”

– Christa L. Walck, “A Teaching Life,” *Journal of Management Education*, November, 1997, p. 481 ²

We are fortunate to have great grounds in our school and also we are within walking distance of many other local amenities. I felt though that we needed to stay within school so that parents, teachers and pupils could see that you did not need to travel outside of our community to take part in a forest school session. We already had a willow dome, a gardening space and had recently planted 200 trees and shrubs from the Woodland Trust. It seemed natural that we developed the space that already existed. P6/7 were the class that were going to be our “guinea pigs.” The first session with Brian was fantastic and I think the two teachers and two assistants were the most “giddy” of all, with the session really bringing out the competitive side in them!

It was the way that the sessions flowed so simply. There were no magic tricks, no big resources that had to be bought or carried out (barr the ruc-sac), there were no big right or wrong answers. The children led the sessions and group accordingly and each group had a chance to share and explain their learning and this was celebrated by all. The quieter children, who were typically less “academic” and did not enjoy written work, were the ones who surprised us most. These children were leading, asking questions, offering solutions, problem solving, taking the lead in den building and organising the group. Several of the statistically “intelligent” children found it difficult to have the freedom and the creativity. They were stuck by the fact that there was no one right answer for things and that it was better getting on with the group and getting things done, rather than standing discussing whose ideas were the best.

With two teachers training it allowed us to work together but equally stand back over alternate weeks and take in what the group were doing, how the sessions were going, what worked well and what didn't work well – in other words it allowed us to be observers or participants – rather than just the teacher or leader. This is an invaluable life lesson and something that teachers do not get to do that often. As Benjamin Franklin said, “Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.”³ Nothing is more true of forest schools.

Perhaps one of the things I enjoyed best about forest school was coming to school ready for the session. Wearing the old clothes and outdoor boots, cap in hand and warm coat on. Not worrying about our style and hair and being allowed to be who we are naturally meant to be. Some of the children were not so prepared, so we kept some footwear and clothes ready for them on a Tuesday morning. Some parents complained at the beginning about the muck and the cold but once we sent home more information and shared photographs on our school system with us they loved hearing about what the children were doing from week to week. The life lessons also about cleaning your boots and changing wet socks and clothes were also invaluable to many of our children and young people.

In conclusion, one of the best sessions my colleague and I led was a twilight session with all staff from nursery to Primary 7 via Forest School. Seeing 22 women competing for the best den and completing the tree art the quickest, is a sight to behold. The energy that was created that day was unforgettable. My job now, following the submission of assignments, is not to sit back and relax – instead it's to begin the new term and reignite the fire that WB Yeats or Plutarch so eloquently spoke of:

“Education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire.” —William Butler Yeats ⁴

In 5 to 10 years I see our school forest genuinely as a forest, I see a huge portion of lesson being outdoors because they enhance the learning and teaching, I see the children being more independent risk-takers in life in general and become great team players and communicators. In fact, I think that this is really what the Northern Ireland Skills based curriculum is all about. Our role now is to share that with the Education Inspectorate, Department of Education, parents, other schools and leaders, learning communities so that children do not simply become a number in the box or the data in the report – they grow to become who they are born to be.

“Children are not things to be moulded, but are people to be unfolded.” ~ Jess Lair ⁵

References:

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- 4 <https://quoteinvestigator.com/2013/03/28/mind-fire/>
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