



Final Report Innovation Grant, Forest Skills, Inclusion and Wellbeing Service, Julia Dixon

Overview

The aim of this project was to provide an outdoor play based approach for early primary aged children who were identified as struggling emotionally within a formal learning environment. The benefits of outdoor play is now well researched and it is documented globally. In particular there is now an increasing body of evidence and research that focuses on the link between outdoor play opportunities and the development of emotional wellbeing and good mental health. The Scottish government published their Out To Play guidance in 2018 where it states that “ children’s wellbeing and mental health is improved by playing outdoors, resilience is developed through taking and managing risks outdoors in a safe environment, self-esteem and confidence are increased through free play outdoors, making own decisions, problem solving and managing boundaries, emotional health regulation and interpersonal skills are improved through negotiation and conflict resolution, wellbeing is improved by being outdoors in nature which has a calming effect...” (*Out to play 2018 p6*) In contrast published data is currently showing an alarming surge in mental health difficulties in young children. The charity Childline reported a 36% increase from 2013 – 2016 of children seeking support for serious mental health issues. The NSPCC reported similar findings revealing that “50,819 children and young people in 2015/16 received counselling for a serious mental health issue – a rise of 8% over four years” (The [Guardian.com](http://www.guardian.com) 2018). In Scotland currently children begin formal education aged 4-5 and despite evidence from research highlighting the importance of outdoor learning and play this is still mostly conducted indoors with only brief pockets of free play offered. This project was implemented to increase the opportunities available to children to engage in active outdoor free play sessions within a rich natural environment.

The benefits of this project were recognised by the Inclusion and Wellbeing Service and is now set to continue into the future with interested colleagues hopefully able to attend. I've also received emails from mainstream teachers asking to observe the group to see how children with additional support needs can be supported in play. A few parents and carers attended this group. Future blocks will aim to include parents and carers more consistently with the intention of hopefully encouraging more families to engage with free play in a natural setting. This would mean that this type of play would become much more embedded in the children’s daily lives.

Summary

The funding was used to pay for a taxi and escort to transport children from their mainstream school to the location of the forest play group. All children were between 4-7 years old and had been identified as having an additional support need including additional social, emotional and behavioural needs. The children were provided with a 6 week block of the play group which consisted of a 2 hour forest play session per week. Before entering the forest all children were reminded of the potential hazards of the forest environment and in addition the children were also heavily encouraged to self-risk assess and take a crucial responsibility for

their own safety. As Tovey observed “It is the fear of danger that has contributed to a decline in children’s freedom to play outdoors, placing them at greater risk from accident or abuse within the home”. (Tovey, 2007, p3).

Floorbook planning was used throughout this group to ensure that the children had a clear ‘voice’ and to support and enable play ideas. Floorbooks are a child led approach to planning where the children help to document their ideas and evaluations of learning activities.

It was noted by myself and my colleague that participating pupils were observed to develop their cooperative play skills and resilience levels in comparison to earlier sessions. In addition gross motor skills were improved and children were able to risk assess activities themselves. As the weeks progressed it was noted that the children were able to sustain their attention for longer periods of time and gradually began to generate their own play either alone or with peers. The concept of being listened to through the Floorbook plans appeared to become a very important element for the children who were often reported as disengaged at other points in their school week.

Outcomes

Participating pupils were observed to develop their cooperative play skills and resilience levels. For some children who struggled to self-regulate and interact with other children were suddenly in the perfect environment for self-regulating with the freedom they required. With the open space they needed to feel comfortable interacting with others they were able to form friendships.

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Lessons Learned

Staffing of the group each week was problematic. I had encouraged each school to send a member of staff with the child as far as possible so that there was always a familiar adult available for the child. Schools found this tricky to manage even with the additional funding from the Froebel Trust. We did however appeal to parents and several family members attended with the child in place of a pupil support worker so that the child was able to attend. This worked brilliantly as it created an opportunity to increase the confidence of parents at taking their child out into a rural setting for play which some parents stated they wouldn't have done before supporting with the project.

Since the initial project we were then able to offer 2 blocks at a school for children with social and emotional needs. This started with the youngest children which went well although it was a smaller group. The second block was for older children in the school however this was more problematic as many of the children already had more advanced play skills and were used to more structure in their day. Going forward my plan is now to develop an outdoor play session for the older children that challenges appropriately and provides different experiences.

I issued before and after surveys to schools and families to help measure the impact of the group however I didn't receive a single response. In secondary blocks I tried again and altered the format to make it shorter and simpler to complete. I also issued the questionnaires electronically but again received no responses. In the future I may issue the questionnaire alongside the permission forms. If parents do attend this should create an opportunity to issue and gather exit questionnaires.

External Influences

One of the later blocks saw a change in staff supporting the group alongside myself, on an almost weekly basis, and this was difficult to manage as different adults had different attitudes towards outdoor play experiences. Planning, risk assessments and an essay explaining the rationale of the project were all issued and we even changed the name of the group from Forest play to Froebel play but it was difficult for some staff to appreciate the benefit and truly understand the project when they only saw snippets. It was also lacking continuity for the children. Moving forward I will aim to have a dedicated staff member supporting the sessions as I also hope to encourage others to try their own forest play groups.

West Lothian Council also financially contributed for the lead researcher and another specialist teacher to support the first block.

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