Introducing the Forest School approach in an Early Years setting

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Fictional Case Study.

Claire is the manager of a pre-school which takes children from the age of two and a half. The setting is situated in a deprived, inner-city area, with a multi-cultural population. Unemployment is high which has placed additional pressure on families financially as well as emotionally. A community of travellers have come to settle in the area and have enrolled their children in the setting.

Claire and her staff are feeling the pressure of having a diverse group of children and feel they are not meeting their individual needs, with some children displaying challenging behaviours. Claire and her team have been reflecting on their practice and feel they need to change their pedagogy. The team have made the decision to incorporate one day each week to visit a Forest School which will be reviewed at the end of term. It will involve the children travelling to a woodland area, which has already been developed by the local city council. Information has been delivered to parents and risk assessments have been approved.

This paper will focus on the Forest School approach, the philosophy behind it and the type of teaching methods that are involved. Learning in the outdoors has become just as important as the indoors, children must have the opportunity to experience both environments (GOV.UK, 2020). In addition, it will look at the environmental factors that are thought to have an effect on a child's learning, in this case, deprivation and poverty. Research has revealed the benefits of using this method of teaching, however there are challenges when introducing a new pedagogy and one specific method of teaching may not support all children (Forest School Association, 2020). Many factors need to be considered including the culture and diversity of the children attending the setting and the stakeholders' views and opinions.

The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) states "it's a child's right to develop as well as to survive" (UNICEF, 2020). Many children will not reach their full potential due to certain factors and the children in this case study live in an area defined as 'deprived'. In a 2007 report, the poverty advisor Professor Donald Hirsch found that a child who lives in poverty, in poor housing, in a disadvantaged community or who has parents with few qualifications is less likely to achieve themselves. Cultural barriers may make it difficult for some families to access support and early years education (Hirsch, 2007, p. 8). Research shows that by the age of three a child can be nine months behind in their development (Hirsch, 2007, p. 5). However, some children do go to achieve in education (Hirsh, 2007, p. 2).

In 2018, the National Institute for Health carried out a study in America involving 77 children. Their focus was on the effect of poverty on brain development in children. Part of their findings looked at the cortisol levels in the brain which enables a child to control their emotions and affects a child's ability to concentrate. The cortisol levels in children living in poverty were high having an effect on a child's ability to learn (Blair & Raver, 2018). The practitioners in this setting would need to look at each child and ask themselves the question, are the basic needs of this child being met? This can be related this to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs theory (Bates, 2019, p .66). Practitioners must have knowledge of the type of support that is available to families in their local area, so they can be signposted to the correct support.

Children attending this setting come from a wide variety of cultures and backgrounds. Cultural capital, the different experiences a child brings into a setting depending on their social environment, has been included in the changes to the Early Inspection Framework 2019. The reason for this change was to improve the opportunities for children from all social classes (Pre-

School Learning Alliance, 2019). We can relate this to the work of Pierre Bourdieu (1998) a French sociologist (Hunt, 2020). He related cultural capital to a person's education, interests and accent. Each child that attends a setting will have had a number of different experiences which are called a habitus, these will be based on their personal circumstances. Some suggest that children who have enjoyed a wide variety of experiences will have a greater cultural capital compared to children from a disadvantaged background. Practitioners must provide opportunities for all the children in their setting, this begins with learning about each child and their family. Children in this case study may not have access to a garden or visit parks the forest school approach to learning would give these children a new experience of the outdoors (Hunt, 2020).

The pre-school staff have decided that for one day of the week they will take the children off site to experience a forest school. A definition of this approach, taken from the Forest School Association states, "Forest School is a child-centred approach and inspirational learning process that offers opportunity for holistic growth" (Forest School Association,2020). Forest schools arrived in the United Kingdom in 1993 (Forest School Association, 2020). Ella Flataus, from Denmark, started one of the first examples of a forest school in 1952 (Bates ,2019, p 96). As part of the curriculum they would take children on walks every day through the woods. After a few years of the children doing this a group of parents organised school buses to take children to the countryside (Stasiuk, 2017). The McMillan sisters also adopted the idea of using the outside for children's learning and development (Jarvis et al, 2017, p.102). The sisters believed in the importance of sunshine, fresh air and plenty of time playing in the garden and they saw the benefits this had on the children's physical and emotional well-being (Jarvis et al, 2017, p.10).

This approach must not be confused with an outdoor learning pedagogy. Forest Schools follow six key principles which are exclusive to this type of learning. The key principles are it takes place in a natural wooded environment, it uses a range of learner-centred techniques, promotes holistic development, children take supported risks, practitioners hold a Forest School qualification and it is a long-term approach. There are three levels of training for practitioners to complete (Forest School Association, 2020). This approach focuses on the child's experience as a whole, results and tests are not part of the method (Mehmet, 2020).

The Forest School approach promotes holistic development with each child using a range of learner centred processes and children are supported in risk taking (Forest School Association 2020). Dr Frances Harris from the university of Hertfordshire (2017) describes this teaching method as "constructivist education" Children learn from both the natural environment and from working with others (Harris,2017, p.272-291). During a session, a child may be involved in activities such as scavenging, jumping in puddles, climbing, constructing a bug hotel or starting a fire (Mehmet, 2020).

In a 2017 article, Gabriela Bento (2017) writes about how outdoor play is lessening and children are becoming disconnected from the natural world. Research was carried out in Portugal on the benefits of playing and learning outside (Bento, 2017, p.157). The findings revealed how it benefited a child's cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being. Spending time in the outside supports bone development and children develop a stronger immune system (Bento. 2017, p. 158). Professor Derek Clements Croome from the University of Reading carried out research on heat in the classroom and the effect on a child's ability to learn. His findings concluded that the classroom environment was unhealthy and when the carbon dioxide levels were high children's reaction times were slower their memory was affected and they became drowsy (Bilton, 2010, p.17).

Forty children from an early years setting in England were taken to a Forest School in 2018. They experienced a range of outdoor learning experiences. A teaching assistant who accompanied them wrote about the positive effects this had on the children. Firstly, they got to spend time in open woodland spaces which they were not used to. Secondly, the children who struggled with behavioural and emotional problems found that the peace and quiet, as well as being in a large space supported their well-being and behaviour (Greaves, 2018). In an article written by Liz O'Brian and Richard Murray (2007) describing the impact of Forest Schools on young children, they highlighted that the Forest School approach involves the children attending on a regular basis for a long period of time before practitioners see changes in children's behaviour (O'Brian & Murray, 2006).

Four children from the traveller community are attending the setting. Each community of travellers have their own unique culture, history and some have their own language (Hardy,2018). Traveller children often watch the adults in their family and community and will take part in tasks that are often associated with only being carried out by an adult. Traveller children must be taught in a way that identifies with their cultural experiences (Cambridgeshire Race Equality and Diversity Team, 2020). Dawn Breeze, a headteacher in a primary school, wrote about her experience of traveller children attending her school. Her view was that travelling children spend a great amount of time outside and therefore a Forest School approach might benefit some children (Breeze, 2016).

Adopting a new pedagogy in a setting can seem daunting but adopting one from another county can bring its own challenges. Firstly, ensuring that the philosophy behind this approach is understood. Mark Leather, professor of Education and Outdoor Learning, writes, "aspects of an original philosophy implemented in other countries can be lost" (Leather, 2016, p. 3). Regarding Forest Schools in this country, his view is that practitioners are being trained quickly due to the high levels of interest into Forest Schools. Practitioners learn how to provide activities but don't understand the philosophy behind it. Leather also criticised the amount of research findings regarding Forest Schools and felt there was not enough reliable evidence available (Leather,2018, p.2-18).

The philosophy relating to this pedagogy is Friluftsliv; it is unique to Scandinavian countries especially Norway and Sweden (Leather, 2016). Friluftsliv is "open air living" and it is part of the country's heritage. Lasse Heimdal Secretary General of Norsk Friluftsliv described Fritulftsliv in an article published in the National Geographic where he wrote, "it's more than just an activity, it's a lifestyle, it's tied to our culture" (Smith, 2020). Regarding the United Kingdom, Trisha Maynard Professor of Early Childhood Spaces wrote, "the outdoor environment is not a central feature of British culture" (Leather, 2016, p. 3). Adopting this pedagogy for some may be difficult, as the outdoors may not be a big part of their lifestyle. Research was carried out in South Wales on four primary schools in an inner-city area. It focused on the use of the outdoors as learning spaces and asked members of staff for their views (Maynard and Waters, 2007, p.225). Their findings were the use of outdoor spaces for learning was weather dependent, one school didn't use the outside area from November to March. Teachers needed to be persuaded about the benefits of using the outdoors and they were concerned about the culture of blame that may arise from families because of accidents (Maynard and Waters, 2007, p.226).

The transition to Forest School learning will need to be progressed slowly to ensure all stakeholders are well informed and have the opportunity to ask questions and air their concerns. All staff members will need to be committed and enthusiastic and be prepared to be involved in

all aspects of the learning (Bento, 2016, p.217). Communicating with parents is crucial, information needs to be provided on practical aspects as well as the benefits it will have on their children. The information needs to be shared in an accessible way for everyone (Ouvry & Furtado, 2020, p.209).

Inviting a member of the Forest School team to come and speak to parents may be beneficial or visiting the site before the children's first session may help with addressing any concerns. Explaining to stakeholders that staff are trained in this specific area may put parents' minds at rest. Providing regular updates on how the change is going may help families feel included and reminding families that the Forest School approach is going to be reviewed on a regular basis is important. Another area of concern for families might be the idea of "school readiness" and whether the Forest School approach will prepare children for a reception class. In the United Kingdom there is no accepted definition of this term. School readiness will mean different things to different families (Grimmery, 2018, p.15). Oxford County Council describes school readiness, "it is when families, early years providers, schools, work together to support the development of children's confidence, resilience and curiosity" (Oxfordshire County Council, 2020).

Risky play is a large part of the pedagogy and parents may have concerns about the safety aspect. The Health Executive says regarding children taking risks, "the goal is not to eliminate risks but to weigh up the risks and benefits" (The British Association For Early Childhood Education, 2020). It is the role of the practitioners to evaluate the risks and make an assessment (The British Association for Early Childhood Education, 2020). Views on risk taking will differ in different cultures and the type of risky play offered to children will depend on the practitioner. (Little, Sandseter and Wyver, 2012). In a journal article written by Sandseter and Beate (2013) it discusses early years practitioners in Australia and risky play. (Beate and Sandseter, 2014, p.434) Research showed that while some practitioners promoted risky play others were concerned about the children taking risks and it was due to their own anxiety (Beate and Sandseter, 2014, p.434). One of the main factors contributing to this anxiety is fear of being sued by families in the event of an accident (Beate and Sandseter, 2014, p.435). Each child will decide the amount of risk they are willing to take. Risky play benefits a child's development in the following ways; it helps with problem solving, confidence, children learn how to use tools safely, helps build resilience and creativity. Risky play develops skills that will help the child as they grow and it is important to remind families that all the activities are carried out in a safe environment (Carrigg, 2016).

This paper has focused on the Forest School approach. Research has revealed the benefits to this pedagogy with regards to children's health and their development, but there are some elements that families may be unsure about, primarily, risky play (Bento, 2017, p.157). Introducing a new pedagogy may bring challenges. Communication between settings and stakeholders is vital because families must feel included and that their opinions are listened to (Ouvry & Furtado, 2020, p.209). This approach will not work in every setting (Bates, 2019, p.247). Practitioners must get to know their individual children and learn about their families so that they can find the best method of teaching for that particular group of children.

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