

The Unexpected Opportunities of Lockdown for Forest School

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In the first week of lockdown the prospects of running Forest School at all, or at the very least forest-school-as-we-knew-it in LBL (life before lockdown), were looking very slim. School leaders, and forest school leaders, across the country were juggling the answers to all kinds of questions; not just about the safety and practicalities of socially distanced activities, but perhaps even about the existence, or should I say the “necessity” of running Forest School, when there were so many other things to think about.

Looking back, we have discovered so many unexpected benefits, or learning opportunities. While no one would ever have wished lockdown to happen, it is an experience that our Forest School community, in its wider sense, has gained from enormously.

For the small group of priority children at Stonesfield Primary School, forest school became twice-weekly, instead of the usual pre-lockdown fortnightly activity, allowing for even greater continuity and building on learning. We have been able to observe, in slow motion, the incredible Spring of 2020 unfold in front of us: finding our first caddisfly larvae and watching blackbirds hatch and fledge on our now much quieter site. And with more time outdoors, the children have become really involved in creating a more sustainable school grounds; sowing wild flowers, fencing off areas from the mower, looking after saplings, in addition to all the hours spent making individual dens, pond dipping and lighting fires to make foraged teas.

Unlike the new indoor reality of school, where children not normally in the same year group were assigned to a classroom that wasn't theirs, with a “new” teacher and not doing their usual timetable, Forest School was familiar. They knew me, the site, the potential for activities, and several of them were well used to the mixed age aspect from Wild Club afterschool provision. This was a part of their life where they had some control and could feel (relatively!) normal. Watching a year 2 child show a year 5 child how to use a flint and steel, by explanation and demonstration at a safe distance, rather than by taking over and doing it for him, will be one of my favourite memories.

It has been for the whole school community, however, where some of the more significant opportunities have emerged. In LBL, Forest School sessions were always supported by TAs, parent helpers and local volunteers. Classroom teachers weren't able to come out because of the way class groups were split. Their observations of coming out with the priority children speak for themselves.

“I have definitely enjoyed my forest school sessions and haven't done anything like it since I was at primary school. I have more idea what they are doing out there than I did before and how I can link with what you are doing. DT sprung to mind with safety when constructing etc. All the hard work has been done outside, so when I construct something in class, they are actually much further along with their prior knowledge than I would have realised.”

“Being out at Forest School has helped me see how we can use it to make more explicit links to learning in the classroom, in all topics. Particularly as Science co-ordinator, I can see how we can help to link up with the topics in school and can play an important role in developing vocabulary and knowledge alongside the classroom learning.”

“Your knowledge of the children in terms of their understanding of the world and their behaviour and attitude to mistakes and learning in FS could be key in tackling the growth mindset and “can do” attitude we are trying to crack in class. The children love forest school days and it has been their saving grace during lockdown. For example seeing a child taking pride in starting a fire independently for the first time, and making her own miniature furniture. The confidence she had to start a project never done before and not to give up when the first attempt failed. That is massive for her as in the classroom she is often someone who says “I can't, I give up...” Hopefully she can take this newfound confidence back into the classroom with her. Ultimately links with teaching in school and attitudes to learning are the biggest positives that have jumped out at me.”

“The Forest School Google Classroom is amazing. Great ideas for projects and tasks and their response just shows how popular they are. I think it's the part of Google Classroom that really unites the school on a common theme, and shows the community cohesion even though we are apart.”

“It's been really amazing to see how some children, who we know struggle with verbal reasoning and problem solving in the classroom, don't seem to do so when they're outside. So I've been able to capture those moments of evidence and I've seen children using skills that I would otherwise have assumed they didn't have. It's been a real privilege to be with the children and to have the opportunity to see the skills and learning that we often only associate with school residential visits, when these experiences are often condensed into that short experience. But I've seen that this kind of learning is happening on a more regular basis, and we have to work out how we can make the most of this and take it forwards.”

“It's been brilliant for myself and the teachers to come out and see children in a different setting, especially those that don't always thrive in their academic work. It'd be great to build on this, ensure teachers come out regularly, perhaps every half term, and we can all build on the outdoor learning.”

"It was wonderful to have the 'tables turned' and to be taught by expert children - in my case how to whittle and hold tools safely. They were so kind and encouraging too - which really helped my resilience!"

For me, the biggest pluses have been getting to know all the teachers better, finding out about their beliefs about forest school, and hearing and learning from their insights and observations of the children's learning during sessions. In LBL, apart from snatched conversations at the beginning and end of sessions, in the chaos of getting wellies and waterproofs on and off, there is little opportunity to have more meaningful conversation about what goes on outside. I write up and pass on my session evaluations for teachers, but there is nothing like seeing it with your own eyes or experiencing it with your own hands – even as an adult! (A couple of teachers really enjoyed – and dare I say became a little competitive – when whittling and fire lighting.) I have enjoyed talking to teachers over a cuppa around the fire, rather than over the heads of little people jostling for welly pulls. Could this be the start of regular Forest School for all staff? Our more immediate challenge, of course, is to ensure that all outdoor skills, attitudes and learning experiences are transferring more explicitly into the classroom, and vice versa.