A Pilot Study to Assess the Feasibility of Using Base-line Data at School Starting Ages as a Measure of the Effectiveness of Forest School in Early Years Settings

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Abstract

There is interest in the UK in the relevance of Forest School to social and emotional development in the Early Years Foundation Stage. Forest School is a way of working with children and young people in the outdoor environment. Research undertaken to date has been qualitative in nature, and indicates that Forest School does offer such developmental opportunities. Anecdotal accounts from schools also indicated that the impact of Forest School should be measurable quantitatively in the Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) outcomes, which is the baseline used by schools at entry. The pilot investigation aimed to discover if there was a positive relationship between children's scores on the FSP and their experiences of Forest School during their early childhood education. The pilot uses FSP data from Essex schools from 2007/08, now in the public domain. We compared results from the Foundation Stage Profile from schools participating in Forest School with those who are not, matched by key criterion. The research questions we explored included whether there was a positive relationship between participation in Forest School and FSP outcomes, and how the effect of Forest School was shown across the six areas of the FSP. The findings did not show statistically-valid correlations, which has led us to question the relationship between an academic measure and one grounded in social and emotional development.

Keywords: Forest school, foundation stage profile, concentration, early years, motivation, outdoor experience, self esteem

Introduction

In the UK, Forest School is a way of working with children and young people in the outdoor environment, preferably but not exclusively in wooded settings. This is based partly on the premise that repeated enjoyable outdoor experiences will have a positive effect on children's development. In Scandinavian countries this has grown out of the cultural concept of Friluftsliv (Henderson and Vikanger, 2007), but once imported into the UK it has developed in response to different cultural pressures into a more tightly defined ethos, as there is less of a tradition of accessing wild spaces and more of a tradition of structured interventions. The delivery of Forest School is being used particularly with three main client groups. The first of these is with teenagers and young adults who struggle socially and emotionally with the mainstream education system, either because they have been excluded or because they are excluding themselves. Forest School with these youngsters is a remedial process whereby over time they can be either integrated back into the mainstream or be given alternative qualifications in wood-based skills that will improve their employment chances, and in either case it will raise their self esteem and confidence. In the second group there are

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children and young people with special needs, where Forest School is enhancing their development with a range of sensory activities and with ways to encourage their self-help skills. Again, the self esteem and the confidence of participants have been seen to improve. The perceived efficacy of Forest School has been embraced for these groups without rigorous research evidence as there is more of a culture of embracing new approaches and then recording their outcomes with these groups, and in both cases it is easier to release the funds for this to happen.

The last major group benefiting from Forest School is children in the Foundation Stage of the English Curriculum. Until 2008 the Foundation Stage covered the care and education of children from three to five years, with the education aspect advisory in content. The new Foundation Stage Curriculum (DfES 2007) is more prescriptive in content, and covers the ages from birth to five years where children are in group day care. One of the six areas for development is "Personal, Social and Emotional development". Forest School is popular for children in this age group partly because there is a perception borne out by various reports that children's access to nature is becoming limited, partly by a recognition that young children need to be physically active and have exposure to sunshine to develop normally, and partly because their usual curriculum is play-based and it is therefore easier to fit Forest School into the curriculum.

Forest School in the UK is a movement independent of government, although it has been supported by the Forestry Commission, which is a branch of government. In Wales the new Foundation Phase has recognised Forest School as a valuable way in which children can engage with the outdoor environment. What happens during sessions varies according to the age of the participants, but children typically engage in den-building, whittling sticks, lighting fires and creating natural art installations. Forest School has been defined as conforming to eight criteria:

1. Forest School takes place in a natural wild space, usually woodland.
2. Whilst it is safe enough, it is somewhere where children can learn to keep themselves safe by taking reasonable risks.
3. Forest School happens over time, typically a half a day once a week for 10 weeks, to enable changes in behaviour to be consolidated.
4. Children go out in all weathers, and so experience the full range of nature and the environment.
5. Trust is central, of and by the practitioners, of and by the children.
6. Learning is play-based, child centred and, as far as possible, child initiated.
7. The blocks of sessions have beginnings and endings, recognising their powerful emotional impact.
8. The sessions are led by practitioners who have undertaken Forest School Leadership training – they may be teachers, early years practitioners or from an environmental or forestry background.

(Knight, 2009: 15)

The expansion of Forest School since its introduction into the UK in the late 1990s has been very fast, and research that gives hard data about its effectiveness is thin on the ground. Positive outcomes have been recorded in the research undertaken by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) and the Forestry Commission (O'Brien and Murray,

2006), but so far this has been qualitative data only. Whilst not wishing to devalue qualitative research in any way, the author wished to explore the possibility of a quantitative measure, to increase the validity of the research by methodological triangulation. She has been involved with Forest School as a practitioner, trainer and academic since the beginning of the century, and is keen to increase this research base. Anecdotal evidence is that Forest School experiences at a time that chimes with children's natural enthusiasm to explore, investigate, experiment, and learn; particularly in England from 3 years to 5 years, fosters important learning dispositions and personal skills. These have been identified by Guy Claxton (Claxton, 2002) as key factors in academic success.

It was decided to look to see if there was a mechanism already in place within the education system that would generate qualitative data as a by-product of its primary function. The author therefore looked at the formal system of education. When children in England move from the Foundation stage to Key Stage One of the National Curriculum (at the end of their reception year in primary school) their understanding in six areas of learning are recorded in a Foundation Stage Profile (DfES 2003), data that then forms a baseline for future achievements to be assessed against. This data is collated at a school level, and then at an area and county level. It was felt that a possible quantitative measure might be found by comparing the profile results from schools where children had had Forest School experiences with matched schools that had not. This needed to be done as soon as possible, before Forest School is more widely embraced, making it harder to find comparison schools who are not offering Forest School. In order to test this idea, the author decided to undertake a pilot study.

Not only does Anglia Ruskin University have a close working relationship with Essex County Council Education Department, but the author has also been involved with establishing Forest School within the County, and was therefore able to talk to Forest School practitioners who could identify schools which had offered Forest School to children in their Foundation Stage classes in the academic year 2007/8. The Council was then able to identify a matching set of schools whilst preserving their anonymity. Two undergraduate students assisted in collating the data, and colleagues in the Faculty of Education supported the study through discussions and advice. The questions we sought to answer were as follows:

1. Is there a positive relationship between participation in Forest School in the reception year in England (four and five year olds) and the outcomes of the Foundation Stage Profile that is carried out on all children at the end of the reception year?
2. If there is, which of the six areas is this most strongly expressed?
3. If this is not the case, why not?
4. What other methodologies might capture the value of participation in Forest School in the Early Years?

Literature Review

There are some papers referring directly to Forest School in the UK. O'Brien (2009) draws on her previous research papers (2002, 2005) to explore the ways in which Forest School increases self-esteem and confidence, motivation, communication and concentration, coordination, stamina, and fine-motor skills. She highlights these in relation to children in the early years and to children with special educational needs. This is echoed in the 2004 study by Swarbrick et al in Oxfordshire, and the Worcestershire Forest School Initiative (2007), both also qualitative studies of Forest School. The author's own book (Knight, 2009) reports two qualitative studies that demonstrate the positive outcomes of Forest School. Given that the movement is so new, the number of reports is encouraging, but the range of methodologies used is still small.

There are papers in the UK which state benefits from outdoor experiences, but do not refer specifically to Forest School. The "Learning Outside the Classroom" manifesto from the government (2006) reflects this climate of interest within education. Fabian (2005) writes of the benefits to children in transition into school, Manzo (2008) describes how outdoor classrooms promote physical, mental well-being, academic achievement and knowledge of environmental issues, and could combat obesity. The paper claims that children naturally learn and thrive outdoors, something Forest School practitioners would all agree with. The recent paper by Pretty et al (2009) looks at the long and short term benefits of nature to children's health and wellbeing in a comprehensive way. These three papers represent the current interest about the impact of nature on the developing child in the twenty first century, but do not address Forest School as a specific intervention.

Papers from non-UK writers are considering the benefits of outdoor experiences in their own countries, but these do not specifically relate to Forest School. In their 2009 paper, Aasen et al explain how outdoor settings in Norway provide more choice and flexibility enabling children to learn decision-making, negotiation and compromise, as well as independence. They refer to the tradition of Friluftsliv from which Forest School sprang. Cleaver (2007) also cites research indicating that outdoor learning improves test scores, this time in the US. She claims that not only does outdoor education positively affect school achievement, but also children who have been taught to appreciate nature will engage with issues such as global warming much better. Miners (2008), too, writes that outdoor classrooms are becoming more common to combat childhood obesity and academic gaps in the US. Meade (2005) looks at the importance of outdoor space to young children in New Zealand, while Elliott and Davis (2004) do the same in Australia. Bentsen et al reflect on the evidence in Denmark to support education outside the classroom as a way to "add value to normal classroom teaching especially with regards to health, social and well-being perspectives" (Bentsen et al, 2009). Waite and Rea (2009) pulled much of this together with a recent review of international perspectives on outdoor learning. This is exciting, as the author found at a recent conference "*Early Childhood Curriculum, Policy and Pedagogy in the 21st century: An International Debate"* (Anglia Ruskin University, 2010), when she led a discussion entitled *"Valuing Outdoor Spaces: Outdoor Learning in the Early Years"* with colleagues from around the world, all of whom were concerned about the effects of

the modern environment on the well-being of young children, and viewing contact with nature as an important counter-balance to this. This research will hopefully contribute to this.

Other early years interventions in the UK have developed communication skills (Bertram and Pascal, 2000; DCSF, 2008), and work with young children is closing the gap for children at social disadvantage, but there is no clear strategy for improving well-being generally (SCIES, 2009). Given the findings of the UNICEF report (UNICEF, 2007), these are important findings. Ofsted have carried out two studies into promoting emotional health and well-being in schools (2005, 2009), but these have not addressed the Foundation Stage age group. Therefore research that contributes to the evidence to support interventions targeted at early years' well-being should be of interest.

The papers reporting quantitative research around outdoor activities with young children were found to be largely around health issues, for example Tucker and Irwin's (2009) report on physical activity in preschool children in Canada, a similar project in Norway (Berntsen et al, 2009), and a study in France (Jouret et al, 2007) which considered activity and diet together. In the UK papers such as that by Ellaway et all (2006) link the growth in childhood obesity in Glasgow to their lack of outdoor play facilities, but do not mention Forest School. The British Heart Foundation blames lack of physical exercise linked to lack of access to nature for the rise in childhood obesity (British Heart Foundation, 2009).

Currently, assessment of developmental progress in the Foundation Stage in the UK by early years practitioners use learning stories (EYFS, 2007). At the end of the Foundation Stage teachers record a Foundation Stage Profile (DfES, 2003) for each child based on observations and questioning. These are recorded on a score sheet which contributes to a school-level profile for the five year olds starting on their formal education journey. It is this system which the research team have experimented with, looking to use an existing system for a new purpose.

The Early Years Excellence (EEL) project (Bertram and Pascal, 2000) adapted the Leuven Involvement Scale for use with young children. One new application reported since this research was undertaken was the application of OPEC environmental assessment tools combined with the ECADDES tool for recording inattentive, hyperactive and impulsive behaviours in children in preschool settings, to measure the restorative potential of green outdoor environments in Sweden (Martensson et al, 2009). This was published subsequent to the research discussed here, and these may indicate next steps for the research team.

Methodology

In order to compare the benefits of Forest School for young children's early achievements, Foundation Stage Profile (FSP) scores from 10 schools in which children had participated in at least six weeks of Forest Schooling were compared with those for schools (matched for size and socio-economic status of intake) who had not had a Forest School experience. The schools which had participated in Forest School were identified by the Forest School practitioners who had worked with them, and their permission was sought by the main investigator for their participation in the pilot. This was done out of courtesy and ethical considerations, although no individual children could be identified

from any of the data sets. In addition, this gave the option of returning to the schools in case there was a need to seek any deeper clarification, although this option has not as yet been acted upon.

The matched schools were identified by Essex County Council, and all schools were coded to protect anonymity by the author before the data was made available to any other participants in the project. Essex Local Education Authority provided Foundation Stage profile data for 12 schools whose reception class children had experienced Forest School in their reception class, plus data for 10 schools for each of the target schools, making a total of 132 data sets. At no point were the children identified individually. At the end of the pilot the raw data sets were shredded. This satisfied the University's ethical requirements.

Outcomes for the two groups (Forest School and no Forest School) were compared manually, and by using the Mann Whitney test. The distributions in the two groups did not differ significantly.

Findings and Discussion

The schools who had participated in Forest School with their early years or reception classes were grouped with at least nine other schools of similar profile. The first two of these groups are shown in the following table (Table 1) as examples of the matching, together with a key and an explanation.

The first seven columns relate to the matching process. The first two indicate the key for the school, SCH standing for the school and GR for the group. Thus, schools can be referred to by the two numbers: for example as school 14.2. The third column indicates that the first school in each group, the one coded (1), was the one taking part in Forest School, and the next four explain why they are grouped together. Column four, NOR, gives the number of children in the whole school. You can see that the first two groups are very small schools. This is typical of many primary schools in the county, and only one group represented schools significantly larger, with numbers from 376 to 433.

Table 1. The profile of schools used in the pilot

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
SCH	**GR**	**FS**	**NOR**	**FSM**	**SEN**	**EAL**	**PSE**	**CLL**	**MAT**	**KUW**	**PHY**	**CRE**	**TOT**	**FSP**
1	1	1	124	8	12	1	22.4	25.7	23.4	8	7.8	7.3	94.7	12
2	1	2	128	6	33	0	20.0	24.8	21.1	6.6	7.1	7	86.8	16
3	1	2	119	6	26	0	22	26.5	21.7	7.9	7.8	7.3	93.3	26
4	1	2	130	8	11	0	17.6	22.4	19.3	4.9	6.2	4.6	75.2	17
5	1	2	123	9	14	9	18.5	20.6	18.2	5.6	6.1	5.4	74.5	33
6	1	2	122	9	28	0	16.0	21.1	17.7	5.3	6.1	5.7	72.1	22
7	1	2	112	9	12	1	18.3	21.9	18.7	5.9	7.6	6.4	79	17
8	1	2	133	10	32	0	21.7	27.8	21.2	7.3	7	6.8	91.9	21
9	1	2	132	11	17	0	18.3	21	17.7	5.7	6.67	6.4	75.9	15
10	1	2	127	12	17	0	16.5	22.9	17.8	5.8	6.5	5.8	75.3	14
11	2	1	197	10	23	0	17.8	23.9	19	7.1	7.1	6.2	81.3	26
12	2	2	195	5	23	0	19.7	24.2	19.8	6.7	6.9	6.6	84.1	33
13	2	2	177	12	25	0	19.5	22.9	18.4	4.9	6.1	4.9	76.8	57
14	2	2	177	6	22	9	19.8	26.3	20.2	6.9	7.1	7	87.4	60
15	2	2	205	13	36	1	16.7	21.5	17.8	6.1	6	5.7	73.8	28
16	2	2	201	9	29	1	19.8	26.4	18.2	6.4	5.9	6.8	83.7	30
17	2	2	195	14	24	3	17.4	22.8	17.4	5.7	5.9	5.5	74.9	30
18	2	2	205	15	36	1	16.6	21.1	18.4	5.7	6.2	6	74.2	27
19	2	2	206	5	18	0	23.3	27.8	22.1	7.7	7.9	7.8	96.8	31
20	2	2	205	7	27	14	17.3	20.1	18.6	5.2	4.6	5.2	71.1	30
21	2	2	215	6	28	1	19.5	26.3	20	6.8	7.7	5.8	86.2	30
22	2	2	202	8	39	9	18	24.5	20.3	6.7	6.6	6.5	82.7	30

Key:

SCH = number allocated to the school
GR = group of schools allocated
FS=?
NOR = number on roll
FSM = number of pupils receiving free school meals
SEN = number of children recognised as having special educational needs
EAL = number of children with English as an additional language
PSE = average score for Personal Social and Emotional development
CLL = average score for communication, language and literacy
MAT = average score for mathematical development
KUW = average score for knowledge and understanding of the world
PHY = average score for physical development
CRE = average score for creativity
TOT = average total score
FSP = numbers of children tested

Column five shows the number of children in the school entitled to free school meals (FSM). In the UK this is taken to be an indicator of the economic levels in the catchment area, something which we know can affect academic success. The variation in the first two groups is representative of most of the groups, group one is between 6 and 12, two is 5 to 15. However, one group (three) varies between 9 and 78, which one might expect to affect the results in that group. When we look at the summary for that group, however (see Figure 1 below), this does not appear to be the case.

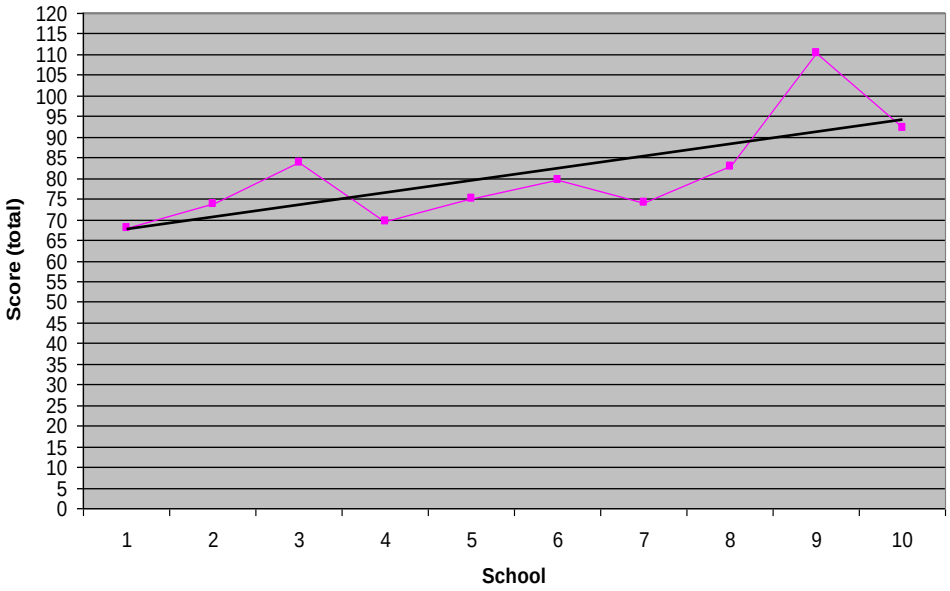

Figure 1. Group 3 FSP results (totals)

Column six shows the number of children in the school who have been identified as having special educational needs (SEN). It would be surprising if this figure had an impact on the figures, as children have rarely been identified by the age of five as definitely having special educational needs. This can be seen by looking at group seven, which contains the schools with the highest percentage of children with special educational needs (SEN), and whilst there is a variation in their scores, giving a spiky profile, it is still within the same range as the other groups, see the chart below. The lowest score is for school 7, where 29% of the schools have SEN, but this school also scores highly for free school meals (21% of pupils) and EAL (57%), which I will talk about next. It is a middle-sized school of 193 pupils, but clearly has particular issues to deal with that place it outside the normal range of the schools represented elsewhere in the study.

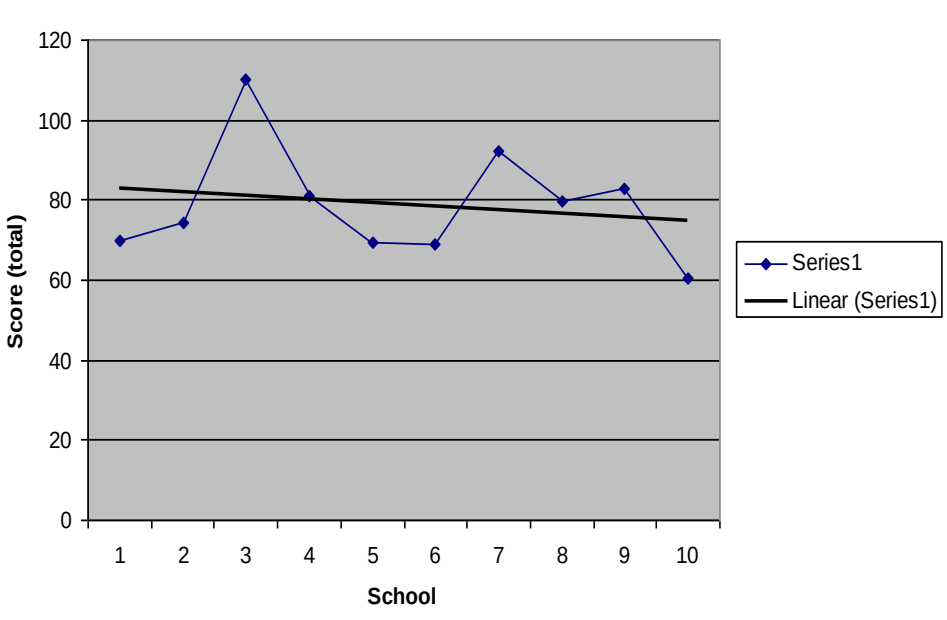

Figure 2. Group 7 FSP results (totals)

Column seven shows the number of children for whom English is an additional language (EAL). This is extremely variable across the county, with the majority of schools having just one or two pupils, and just nine out of one hundred and fourteen schools having between 15 and 30 pupils with EAL. This does not seem to have a detrimental affect on the scores; in the chart below for group four schools, schools 2 and 8 have higher than average numbers of children with EAL, and have higher scores than the other schools in their group, including School 1, the school participating in Forest School.

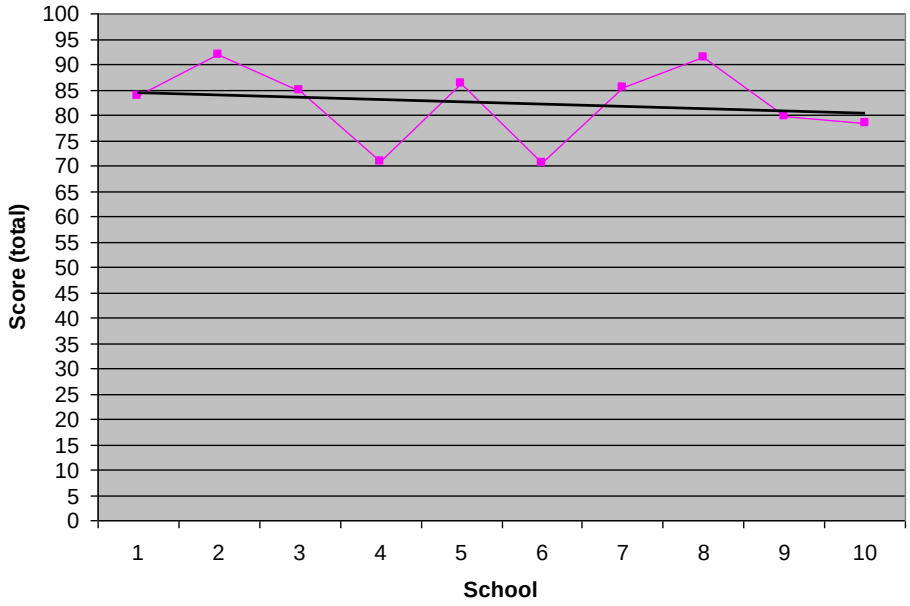

Figure 3. Group 4 FSP results (totals**)**

Columns 8 to 13 give the average scores for the six different areas of the foundation stage profile. There did not appear to be any one subject in which the schools participating in Forest School outdid their matching schools in most groups. Similarly, Column 14 gives the overall average score for each school, and the variation across them all is really quite small. The lowest scores are to be found in groups seven and three, where they drop below 70, and the charts for those groups are above. Group 8 scored the highest, and their chart is below. School 8 has a score of 104, taking the group average to nearly 100. This is a group of small schools, NOR from 82 -100, and School 8 has 98 on roll, of whom just four have free school meals, ten have SEN, and none have EAL. School 8 in this group would seem to represent the highest extreme, where school 7 in group 3 is the lowest. None of the schools participated in Forest School at the time of data capture.

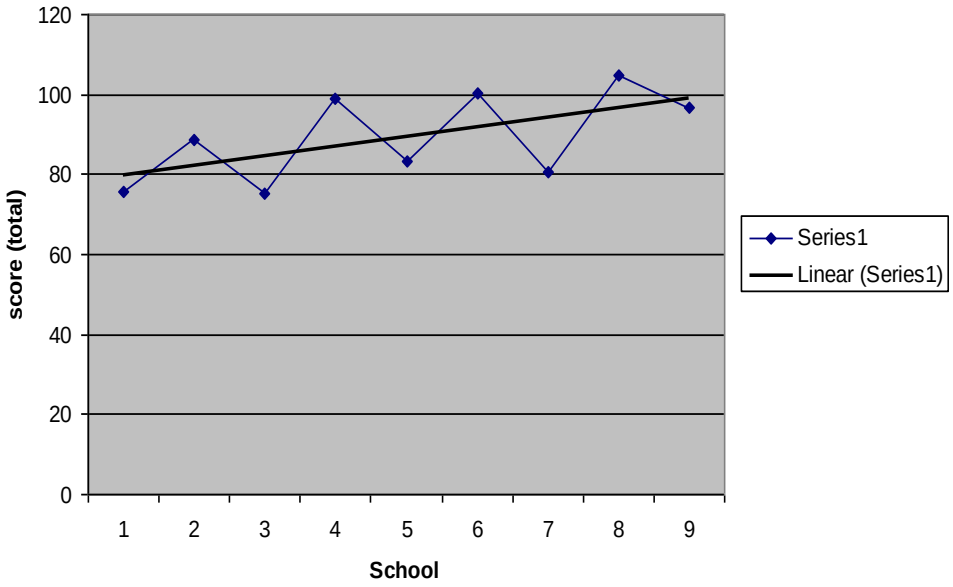

Figure 3. Group 8 FSP results (totals)

On returning to a closer examination of the Foundation Stage Profile, it would seem that our attempt to use the statutory measure of the FSP to justify Forest School in the Early Years was inappropriate, in that what is being measured in one is not comparable with what is indicated as a likely outcome in the other. The FSP is largely concerned with academic markers. Even in the Foundation Stage area which is identified as Personal, Social and Emotional development, the goals are contextualised to an academic culture rather than accommodating any variations in experience. For example, one measure is whether a child can work "as part of a group or class, taking turns and sharing fairly" (Foundation Stage Profile 2003: 3). Whilst this is a helpful achievement to support a child's learning journey in a formal education context, is not a statement that can necessarily be assessed outside that context, for example in a Forest School setting. By contrast, similar outcomes from Forest School would seem likely to be at a more fundamental level relating to abilities to communicate with peers and others within a context chosen by the child, see the definitions of Forest School above.

However, whilst collecting this information many head teachers and class teachers have recounted the difference in children's dispositions to learning following a planned exposure to Forest School experiences. This includes a school where, for financial reasons, in the first year of providing Forest School for their reception children, only half of them were able to attend. The selection was random, one of two classes going while the other missed out. The improvements were so great that extra funds were made for subsequent years, and the lottery did not occur again. Two years on, the staff still believes that they can identify which children went because of their improved social skills. Children themselves hold warm memories of these opportunities

for many years, and believe them to have had an effect (Knight, 2009: 52). These are non-scientific, anecdotal accounts that spur the author on in her search for a valid measure.

This pilot study was therefore able to establish that this methodology would not provide data to support the role of Forest School in the early years. Neither is it appropriate data to cite to reject the role of Forest School, as the measures are inappropriate. The search goes on for a suitable research design.

Areas for Further Research

The author has identified next step to continue her exploration of ways to effectively measure the outcomes of Forest School experiences in the early years. Firstly, she would like to further examination of how the benefits of Friluftsliv are evaluated in the Scandinavian countries. The idea of the value of outdoor activities is embedded deep in the culture in this part of Europe, but the author hopes that there may also be some form of measure or recording of that value that we can examine for applicability to England. Also, colleagues from other countries are interested in outdoor experiences for children in the early years, and sharing ideas with them could well prove fruitful.

There is also a need for a deeper review of methodologies used to measure other early years interventions in the UK. For example, the EEL project will bear closer scrutiny (Bertram and Pascal 2000, SCIES 2009) with its use of the Leuven Involvement Scale, a recognised quantitative measure. The early years adaptation of SEAL, entitled "Excellence and Enjoyment: social and emotional aspects of learning" (National Strategies, 2008) is another government-backed scheme that will also be investigated. Adopting existing methodologies has the expediency of capturing two sets of data for the price of one.

Qualitative measures such as recording children's own perceptions are being planned, based on similar work already undertaken by colleagues in the Early Years Research Group at Anglia Ruskin University, as yet unpublished. The idea of children as co-researchers is one the ideas that are keen to explore further. Current work includes recording sixteen case studies of Forest School applications, most of whom have evaluated their own effectiveness for funding bodies. This should offer some valuable insights into alternative methods of recording and measuring.

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Erken Dönemdeki "Açık Hava Okulu" (Forest School) Etkinliğinin Okula Başlama Yaşlarındaki Başlangıç Verileri ile Ölçülebilirliğine Yönelik bir Pilot Çalışma

Özet

İngiltere'de "Forest School" (Orman/Açık Hava Okulu) deneyimi ile ilköğretimin ilk yıllarında gözlenen sosyal ve duyuşsal gelişim arasındaki ilişkiye karşı bir ilgi gözlenmektedir. "Forest School" terimi çocuk ve gençlerle açık havada çalışmanın bir yolu olarak kullanılmaktadır. Bugüne kadar yapılan çalışmalar niteliksel yapıdadır ve "Orman/Açık Hava Okulları" tarafından bu tür gelişimsel olanakların sunulduğunu göstermektedir. Okullardan gelen hikayeler "Orman/Açık Hava Okulu" etkilerinin niceliksel boyutunun Temel Seviye Profili (Foundation Stage Profile_FSP) ile ölçülebileceğini göstermektedir ki bu girişte okullar tarafından kullanılan temel ölçüttür. Bu pilot çalışma çocukların Temel Seviye Profillerindeki puanlar ve erken çocukluk dönemindeki "Orman/Açık Hava Okulu" deneyimleri arasında olumlu bir ilişki olup olmadığını sorgulamaktadır. Pilot çalışmada İngiltere'nin Essex kentindeki okullardan alınan (şimdi herkesin kullanımına açık olan) 2007/08 "FSP"verileri kullanılmıştır. Verilerin analizinde "Orman/Açık Hava Okulu" sürecine katılmış ve katılmamış olan gruplar ana ölçütler bağlamında eşleştirilerek karşılaştırılmışlardır. Araştırmada "Orman/Açık Hava Okulu"na katılımı ile Temel Seviye Profilindeki (FSP) puanlar arasında bir ilişki olup olmadığı ve "Orman/Açık Hava Okulu" sürecinin altı farklı FSP alanı üzerindeki etkisi sorgulanmıştır. Sonuçlar istatistiksel olarak anlamlı korelasyonlar göstermemiştir. Bu sonuç akademik bir ölçüt ile sosyal ve duyuşsal gelişim temeline dayalı ölçütler arasındaki ilişkiyi sorgulamamıza yol açmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: "Orman/Açık Hava Okulu" deneyimi, temel seviye Profili, odaklanma, erken yıllar, motivasyon, açık hava deneyimleri, benlik saygısı