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‘Exploring the “Construction” strand in the Irish Primary School Visual Arts Curriculum through the Forest School approach’

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ABSTRACT

Forest School is a concept, or intervention to traditional educational settings, backed up by research and built upon long-standing theories that children engage with nature naturally and that learning becomes more relevant to the student when they can relate it to real life scenarios. This research documents the implementation of the Irish Primary School Visual Arts Curriculum through Forest School, specifically, the ‘Construction’ Strand. The research was a qualitative inquiry that was supported by an action research methodology. It was conducted over six weekly sessions. Key findings show the development of a sense of responsibility, resilience, independence, happiness in a sense of achievement and an awakened awareness of the child’s own surroundings. The findings advocate the benefits of implementing this approach to enhance the Primary School Visual Arts Curriculum, as well as promoting happiness and contentment in the remainder of the day at school in other curricular subjects. .

KEYWORDS

Forest school; primary school; visual arts; construction; Ireland

Introduction

‘Kids at this developmental stage benefit from messing around with paints, or clay, or crayons; they gain little, on the other hand, from assembling together some construction paper shapes that their teachers cut out ahead of time’ (Dahl, 2016). I become an advocate of this mind-set while engaged in the process of creating my own art.

The aim of this study is to examine the effects of teaching the strand ‘Construction’ through Forest School methodology. As a primary school teacher, I witnessed children’s enjoyment of working with nature. They are open-minded about the creative possibilities that can take place outdoors, regardless of the challenging process of making a den with leaves or simply applying paint to branches. I also find that at this age (6–8 years old) children are highly engaged in the art-making process. They are content in the creation and do not need to have a product. While facilitating children’s art lessons, I found that there was less of an interest from children in pencil only drawing skills classes as they were more interested and engaged in lessons that allowed them to experiment with a variety of materials. They need a stimulus in making art.

I visited Holly Trees Primary School, Brentwood, Essex in the UK in July 2015. The deputy principal informed me of the outcomes that he had noticed after the implementation of this approach in the school. He described the high level of engagement that he witnessed in some children while working outdoors in this methodology. He spoke very positively of Forest School and the effects it had on the children in this school.

Ciara Hicksman, owner of Earth Force Education had facilitated training in Ireland from 2013, and there was a small grassroots movement of practitioners in Ireland. They were mainly based in pre-school settings.

I began to research the aims and objectives of the Irish Primary School Visual Arts Curriculum. I created a survey through my Facebook page (facebook.com/ClairePrimarySchoolArt) and it was apparent that practising primary school teachers found the strand of 'Construction' challenging to implement. This strand encourages the child to experiment with creating imaginative structures and problem solve with form and often requires loose resources. The lack of structure can often breed chaos in a large class of young children and can therefore be quite stressful for the teacher.

The stimulating outdoor environment was the perfect location for creativity to flourish. The Forest School approach supported the achievement of all of the objectives of the 'Construction' strand. Children were provided with the opportunity to experiment with materials and create imaginative structures as well as respond to each other's creations, as stated in the Irish Primary School Curriculum objectives (NCCA, 1999).

Context and scope

The research was conducted in a large, urban, disadvantaged, multi-denominational Primary School. The grouping was formed from a mixed, First Class of variable abilities. The children ranged in ages from six to eight years old. The research took place over a six-week period, from April to May 2016. There were eleven participants in this study group.

The Irish Primary School Curriculum consists of eleven subjects, and each subject is divided into 'Strands' and 'Strand Units'. My research examines the extent that the Irish Primary School Curriculum Visual Arts 'Construction' strand objectives could be achieved through the Forest School approach.

These strand objectives state that children in First Class should be enabled to explore and experiment with properties and characteristics of materials in making structures. They should make imaginative structures to become aware of structure and balance. Each child should become aware that different parts relate to the whole. As with all strand units in the Visual Arts Curriculum, the children should be exposed and respond to art from others (NCCA, 1999).

The research questioned if the curriculum objectives were achieved, and the children's engagement in the learning process during the Forest School sessions.

Curricular structure and impact

The Irish Primary School Curriculum was published in the 1990s and became compulsory in schools from 1999. The Visual Arts Curriculum consists of six 'Strands'; Drawing, Paint and Colour, Clay, Fabric and Fibre, Print and Construction (NCCA, 1999). Each curricular document details the content for two primary school years. This study focuses on the First and Second Class curricular objectives.

Efland, Freedman, and Stuhr (1996) argue that while there is a movement away from a linear view of education and learning, books still arrange art and design lessons in instructional ways. The Primary School Curriculum encourages the teaching of concepts and skills. However, research reports that teachers in primary school lack confidence in teaching the arts (Alter, Hays, & O'Hara, 2009) and feel they do not have time to teach the arts in an already crowded curriculum (Garvis & Pendergast, 2012). Art-making in this context is considered to be teacher-directed, product-oriented and lacking in artistic merit (Schirmacher, 2002). Eckhoff (2013) states 'primary school art is often shallow, linear explorations of art media and methods culminating in a pre-determined model' (in Boyd & Catcher, 2015, p. 91). Boyd & Catcher (2015) argue that children do not question their work, but instead enjoy the fun element of creating art. Children's art and their creativity ought to be protected so that they continue to explore their own ideas and not just start reproducing art that is already there. Hallam, Gupta, and Lee (2011) argue that the dominance of

experimental methods in children drawing research excludes the study of children within a naturalistic educational context. 'This is significant as there is a growing body of research which demonstrates that the creation of child art is guided and shaped by the wider educational context it occurs in' (Hallam et al., 2011, p. 193).

Aktepe (2015) promotes education as a determining factor in shaping a child's perception of their habitat and nature. 'Nature is often overlooked as a healing balm for the emotional hardships in a child's life' (Louv, 2005, p. 49). Ridgers, Knowles, and Sayers (2012) argue that children learn at their own pace by engaging in a range of activities and that this can then be linked back to the National Curriculum objectives. Samples of activities listed in this study included making mobiles, dyes, bunting and elder jewellery. The study recorded the improvement of the use of children's own imagination and the creation of items in natural play. This study linked the United Kingdom's National Curriculum objectives to the Forest School principles. Listening to the children's voices as a reflection gave further insight into the research.

Davis, Rea, and Waite (2006) argue that the school system is lacking in the holistic development of children. They state that there is a need to bring a holistic means of educating children into our curriculum.

Forest Schools

Forest Schools is a pedagogical approach. Some researchers have critiqued the lack of pedagogical aims of this approach, but Leather (2013) argues that a national model may take away from the philosophy underpinning the Forest Schools. Educators wishing to become Forest School Leaders must complete a level three qualification, which includes obtaining an outdoor first aid certificate. Trainee Forest School Leaders conduct a six-week block of practice and must submit a portfolio of work that is approved by an accrediting body.

The Forest School (FS) approach is based on six principles:

- (1) FS is a long-term process of regular sessions, rather than a one-off or infrequent visits; the cycle of planning, observation, adaptation and review links each session.
- (2) FS takes place in a woodland or natural environment to support the development of a relationship between the learner and the natural world.
- (3) FS uses a range of learner-centred processes to create a community for being, development and learning.
- (4) FS aims to promote the holistic development of all those involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners.
- (5) FS offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.
- (6) FS is run by qualified Forest School practitioners who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice.

(forestschoollassociation.org).

Forest School is a process that builds on an individual's innate motivation and positive attitude to learning, offering them the opportunities to take risks, make choices and initiate learning for themselves. 'Nature may inspire different kinds of creativity and different art than the built environment' (Louv, 2005, pp. 97 & 98). During Forest School, children engage in activities such as building shelters, cooking on campfires and identifying plants and wildlife. The focus of the scheme is on the whole child and their experiences, therefore developing the child's independence and self-esteem through their engagement with the natural environment (Murray & O'Brien, 2005).

While Owens' (2005) study was focused on environmental values, it was noted that some outdoor experiences were remembered by children for many years, e.g. collecting leaves in

autumn. Bilton (2003) and Owens (2005) agree that children need to be taught specific skills when participating in outdoor areas. These studies stated that it was not sufficient to provide stimulating school grounds; children must be shown how to interact with them. Forest School is an approach that provides educators with guidance in how to achieve this. Waite (2010) notes that classroom learning is a certain type of learning, whereas outdoors seems to be another kind of education. Owens (2005) also found that children who worked outdoors more often had more contributions to the school and therefore had a higher level of critical thinking.

Maynard describes the possible tensions between the Forest School leader and the class teacher and the possibility of a contrast of two educational goals. 'With a movement [Forest School] that has spread so far and so fast with little written material to support it, there is a clear danger that the original idea will be lost through lack of understanding' (Knight, 2013, p.13).

Aims of the study

As a primary school teacher, I am passionate about teaching the process of art rather than the product. I feel that this process-based method of teaching removes the fear of the blank white page and the pressure of the display of product art on walls. During process art, the children engage in the aims of the curriculum and creativity on a higher level.

We need to have a curriculum that matters in a child's life; they need to be interested in the experience at hand and society and culture will affect this. A process-based, inquiry curriculum is open-ended. Content is focused on procedures and criteria. On the other hand, there is the question as to whether it is actually possible to design a curriculum without objectives? There is a need for a curriculum to ensure appropriate lessons are delivered, yet teachers' opinions are often over looked during the creation of curricula. Action research is vital as it empowers teachers to make their voice heard.

Research question and sub questions

The research question was 'To what extent can the Irish Primary School Curriculum Visual Arts Construction Strand Objectives be achieved through the Forest School Approach?'

The Sub Questions explored were:

- What outcomes were achieved from implementing the approach? Pedagogy or otherwise (social/emotional).
- Were the 'Construction' Strand Objectives met?
- To what extent were the children engaged in the learning process?

Methodology

The main methodology was Action Research, as described by McNiff (2009). This methodology was appropriate as I wished to improve my teaching of the 'Construction' strand. It was a qualitative inquiry that featured multiple viewpoints to create a triangulation of data. Data was collected through video, photographs, journals, informal interviews and observations. Data collection was systematic, and clarification of research bias and critical reflection is evident through the teacher journal and discussion in later sections, as highlighted in Sullivan, Glenn, Roche, and McDonagh (2016). Kemmis (2009) notes that this process is one of self-transformation, in which the researcher remakes the practice for themselves.

This research was in a qualitative constructivist format as according to Creswell (2014). 'Unlike positivistic social psychology, which ignores or presumes its subjects' interpretations of situations, echogenic social psychology, concentrates upon the ways in which persons construe their social

world. By probing at their accounts of their actions, it endeavors to come up with an understanding of what those persons were doing in the particular episode' (Cohen, 2007, p. 20).

The naturalistic approach is an alternative to positivistic. Blumer (1969) states that people are deliberate and creative in their actions and that they act intentionally and make meaning through their activities. Situations are fluid and changing rather than fixed and static; events and behaviour evolve over time and are richly affected by context-situated activities. It is a view that the social world should be studied in its natural state, without the intervention of, or manipulation by, the researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983).

The methodologies used lie in the theories of Rousseau, Herbert, Steiner, Pestalozzi, Froebel and Montessori. These theorists agree that learning must satisfy the child's curiosity about the world as discussed in the literature review (Mc Kernan, 2008, p. 62). The design of the research project, an action research intervention is built upon these theories.

Research methods

The research instruments assessed if the objectives of the Irish Primary School Visual Arts Curriculum 'Construction' Strand were achieved; that is, 'that the child should be enabled to make structures using their imagination to experiment with materials as well as looking and responding to other people's art' (NCCA, 1999).

Written data

The participants kept 'Forest School Journals' in which they recorded their thoughts and feedback about the session each week. I felt that I could decipher student engagement with the program through reading and responding to their words and drawings.

Observed data

Observed data was recorded in my personal diary and entered onto both my private and public (clairesprimaryschoolart.blogspot.com) blog page. This was the most accurate way to record and analyse the process of art-making each week.

Observations by staff members and parents/guardians were also included in the research.

Visual data

A 'Go-Xtreme' action camera was attached to a nearby tree using a grip tripod. This captured the group working together as a whole. I had a hand held 'Nikon DS3000' DSLR camera to capture photographs of the children working closely. My 'iPhone 6' was also used to capture video and record any audio that occurred that I felt was of an addition to the trial. This allowed me to revisit the process-making as well as student engagement and any other occurrences from an outsider view that I may have missed in the lesson.

Spoken data

Informal, non-invasive interviews were conducted after the action research intervention was completed. This allowed me to understand how the parents/guardians and fellow staff felt about the research project. It also gave me an insight to the feedback that children may have provided at home, that they may not have mentioned to me, their teacher.

Participants

The objective of this research was to examine the effects of implementing the construction strand of the Irish Visual Arts Curriculum through the Forest School approach. For the purpose of this study, all children in my First Class with guardian and self-permission participated in the study. As previously mentioned, the class was a mixed class and the students ranged in age from six to eight years. The school is a multi-denominational, DEIS band 2 status school set in a large urban area.

Ethical considerations

Permission for inclusion in the study was sought from each child and their guardians. Every child was aware that they did not have to participate in the research study to be involved in Forest Schools. They were also informed that they could decide to opt out of the study at any given time.

Cameras were situated to capture the group as a whole, ensuring that images were of the group dynamic, rather than individual children where possible. Media was stored on password-protected devices.

Analysis of raw data

The research question formed the initial point of data analysis; while the sub questions created a structure to forming a hypothesis. Each data collection method (written, observed, visual and spoken) was analysed through the achievement of the Visual Arts Construction Curriculum objectives, as below;

The Irish Primary School Curriculum outlines that children in First Class should be enabled to:

- explore and experiment with the properties and characteristics of materials in making structures
- make imaginative structures
- look at collections or photographs of natural and built structures and investigate spatial arrangements, balance and outline and how the spaces created relate to the whole
- look at and talk about his/her work and the work of other children
- look at and talk about a local building complex, at a famous building and at visually stimulating artefacts (or slides or prints)

(NCCA, 1999).

Analysis of written data

The written data from each child stated that they 'liked' the lessons. This was demonstrated through the colouring in of the 'smiley face' in their journals. As each child stated that they liked the lesson, there was evidence of the enjoyment and engagement in the learning process. Most children commented that they made 'land art', 'shelters' or used the 'bow saw', the use of this new vocabulary indicates that they were engaged and learning through the activities. The children drew pictures of themselves exploring and creating their imaginative structures as well as other child's creations illustrating their response to their own as well as each other's work.

Analysis of observed data

My first blog entry detailed the class' finished 'Land Art' pieces, inspired by Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Shilling. The children were focused on the process yet, the product was much stronger

than when I had completed this lesson with a class previously (Claire's Primary Art Blog, 2016 (<http://clairesprimaryschoolart.blogspot.ie>)).

The child's enthusiasm was also observed as they were clearly engaged with the process of exploring and experimenting with the materials. I noted that children were approaching me with items they had found that were suitable for creating their constructions. When I questioned a child about his creation, he told me that he was not making a 'thing' but just 'doing it'. Children were enthusiastic to participate in the Forest School sessions and recalled their experiences in a positive light.

I observed an engaged response to each other's art during the lesson where the children created creatures and constructed shelters for them. As the children responded to each other's art, they decided to move near one another and create neighbourhoods for their clay creatures. The children responded by commenting on each other's creations and adapting the environment (shelter) for the role of the clay creature.

I found that as a practitioner I felt well prepared, as the Forest School Leadership training had included so many aspects of risk assessment, site set up and lesson content. The lessons were planned and structured and I felt quite confident in leading the sessions. The children were excited and engaged and I felt a great sense of achievement. I was teaching the children lessons that they wanted to learn. After the first session, the delivery of my lessons changed and I became a facilitator to the child's learning. This meant that I could observe the child's behaviour and learning in a calm, more paced means than in the classroom.

I noticed an enhancement of the children's awareness of their surroundings from the first session. One child held a leaf in their hand as they were observing it through a magnifying glass. Another child, who would find sharing quite difficult, grabbed the leaf to see what was on it. He ended up squashing a small slug. Immediately, I noticed a difference in his awareness of the delicate nature of the outdoors. It was raining quite heavily during the third session, so I set up a tarpaulin as a means of shelter. As one child ran to find cover under the tarpaulin, she tripped over the string fixing the tarpaulin into a taut tent-shape. The corner collapsed and was open to the elements until I repaired it. Another moment occurred when a child found an empty snail shell. He was quietly working away and discovered this 'gem'. Another child who was quite active had not found anything and wanted a similar shell. We looked as a group, but could not find another shell. There was a sudden awareness of how special each item in nature was as there may not be duplicates.

Analysis of visual data

The visual data collected depicts the engagement in the curricular objectives. [Figures 1](#) and [11](#) depict the shelter building for Forest School creatures. [Figures 2](#) and [3](#) show tools commonly used in the Forest School approach; food peelers and wooden discs or 'cookies'. [Figures 4](#) and [5](#) is the student feedback in Forest School Journals. [Figure 6](#) is a record of child feedback on the last day of the school year. [Figure 7](#) is the cooperative creation of 'Land Art' as a response to Andy Goldsworthy and Richard Shilling. The earthworm is captured in [Figure 8](#).

The children analysed photographs of Alexander Calder's sculptures and built structures in response. The children investigated the spatial arrangements, balance and outline and how the spaces created relate to the whole. They discussed his work before responding to it with their own wire and natural material imaginative constructions. [Figures 9](#) and [10](#) depict the exploration and experimentation with the properties and characteristics of materials in making structures in response to Alexander Calder. [Figure 11](#) shows the additional benefits of the Forest School approach in creating a sensory experience. [Figure 12](#) shows an example of shelter building skills.



Figure 1. Constructing shelters.



Figure 2. Whittling with food peelers.

Analysis of spoken data

Spoken data was collected through informal discussions with parents/guardians and staff throughout the implantation of the research project.

Overall, parents were very positive about the Forest Schools approach. While ensuring that children remembered to bring their waterproof clothing was a challenge, it also enabled them to take responsibility in remembering their personal belongings. A parent commented that their child always made sure that she had packed her Forest School clothes the night before school. This was a good indicator of the child's engagement and enjoyment of the program. One child in the class suffers from anxiety and this has a drastic effect on their attendance. This child wanted to attend



Figure 3. Wooden discs.



Figure 4. Forest School Journals.

school because of Forest School, even when that child had an extremely sore tooth abscess. Another parent commented that their child seemed to be unable to dress themselves at home, but as they had to change for Forest School, they learned how to do so. This child was initially scared to make fire, but after he did, he was proud of his accomplishment.

Parents also commented on how the children discussed the work that they created each week in Forest School and brought home items to show to their families. Children in other classes began to become aware of the skills the children were learning as well as the products they were creating in the garden, as items such as bird feeders were left in the trees for the birds.

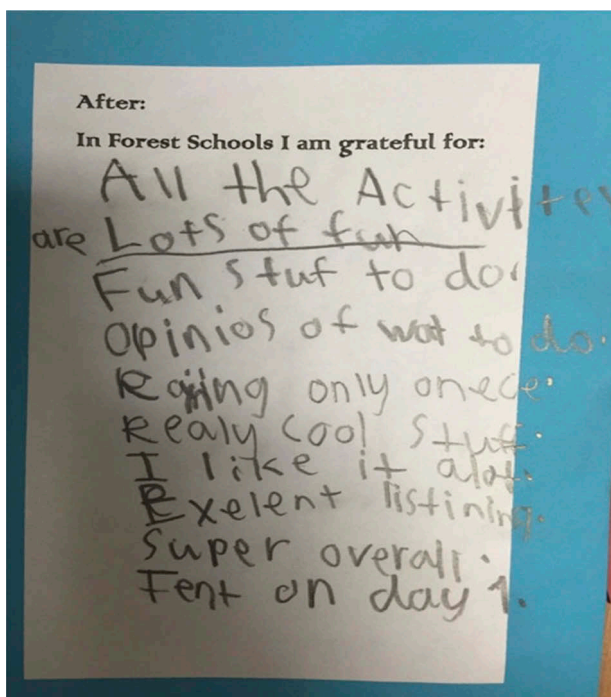


Figure 5. Child's reflection in their Forest School Journal.

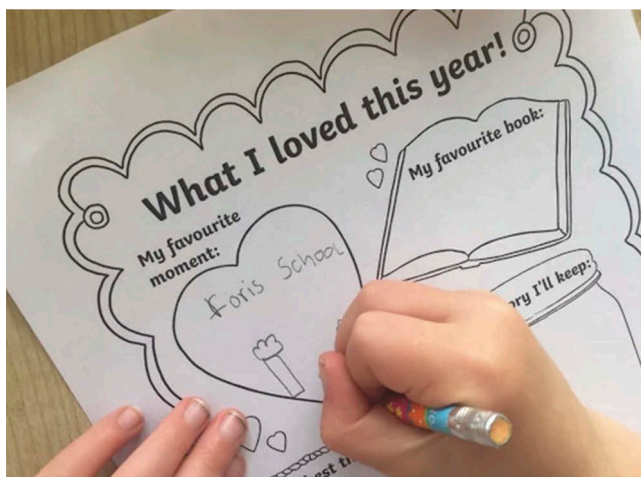


Figure 6. Child's reflection on the final day of school. (Template from [Twinkl.co.uk](https://www.twinkl.co.uk)).

Some spoken data was recorded on camera. There is excitement at the beginning of each session. Children can be heard exclaiming, 'Look what I found!' While responding to the work of Alexander Calder, one child quoted 'I'm going to collect them all!' I ask, 'What does it look like?' in which he replies, 'I'm not sure, maybe the skin of a cocoon?' The child is engaged in the process. 'Oh! I think I know what is coming into place; a bird flying around the sun, makes sense!' Another child describes her piece as 'It's kind of like a bridge going up and



Figure 7. Construction of 'Land Art'.



Figure 8. The earthworm.

down'. She is not thinking of the product, but the shape of the item she has created in the process.

Initially children are recorded stating 'I can't do it', but in time, children begin to guide one another. 'Oh, you put it around' [the wire]. One child, who would demonstrate actions of low self-esteem in the classroom setting, helps another child and sings while he works.

Unanticipated results

Cooperative learning

The class were engaged in cooperative learning throughout the academic year through pair work, participation in jobs and roles of responsibility in group projects, however, in Forest School I began to see groups form naturally. Children worked with groups of friends and groupings were of different sizes. If a child was unhappy in a group, they could freely move to another group, or decide to work independently.

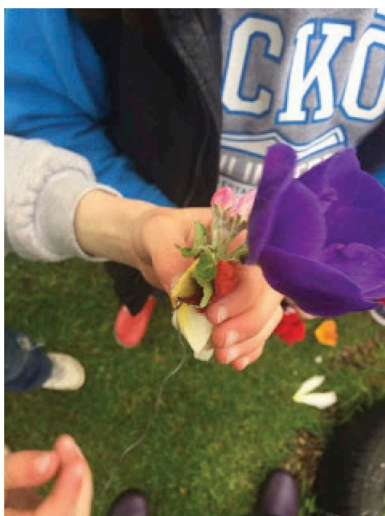


Figure 9. Wire structures.

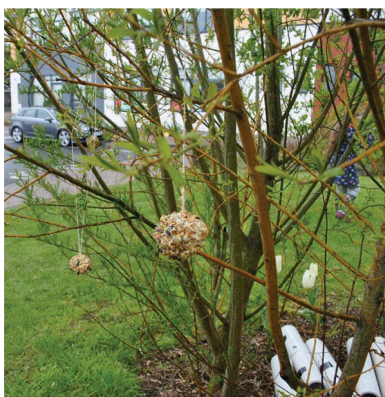


Figure 10. Bird feeders.

Enjoyment of space

I found that the children enjoyed and made use of all the space within the boundary of Forest Schools. Some children that tended to be frustrated when sitting in close proximity with other children enjoyed having their own space to work in. They tended to move to quieter areas when creating their pieces, and then moved back when re-joining the group. These children were happier to work beside children when they transitioned back into the indoor classroom setting after the Forest School session.

Change of attitudes towards the outdoors

Each week there seemed to be an earthworm in the middle of our Forest School circle. I found this an interesting subject to focus on as it reflected the attitudes I noted in my '*Observed Data*'. One day, before the intervention began, the children brought in a football that had an earthworm on it. They were repulsed and asked me to remove it. On the first day of Forest Schools,



Figure 11. Sensory exploration of leaves.



Figure 12. Creature villages.

an earthworm appeared in the centre of our circle. The children screamed and jumped up. I explained the importance of earthworms and why it was important that they stay in the soil, away from sunlight. During the third session, an earthworm appeared again! This time the children noticed that it was there and ensured they did not stand on or hurt the creature by making other aware of its existence. During the final session, we were completing an activity that involved piecing leaves back together and another earthworm appeared. It was a sunny day, so the children decided to use their leaves to cover the earthworm and ensure he stayed out of the sunlight. This is one example of the change in attitude over the few weeks of the programme. The children were respectful and knowledgeable of their surrounds. It was a new awakening for them.

Emerging themes

Emerging themes were identified through data and discourse analyses. Salkie (1995) notes that 'a discourse analysis is based on the details of speech (and gaze and gesture and action) that are

arguably deemed relevant in the context where the speech was used and that are relevant to the arguments the analysis is attempting to make' (Gee, 2011, p. xi).

Using a colour coded system, I analysed the language used and observations during data collection to identify emerging themes.

The children were engaged with the curriculum, and the objectives were met as described in the findings section. The children explored and experimented with the properties and characteristics of materials in making imaginative structures.

They looked at photographs of natural and built structures and investigated the spatial arrangements, balance, outline and how the spaces created relate to the whole. The class also looked at and talked about their work and the work of other children.

During the data collection, the main themes I noticed that began to emerge were themes of:

- Resilience,

Nature is delicate; findings may be a once off. As discussed, in our first session when one child found a snail shell. Others liked and wanted one, but we could not find any more. The children had to accept this fact and move forward. As some children enjoyed working in their own space, they could move away from the general group and take time before re-joining the group. This allowed the children space to gather themselves or to move away from others that were working on a different project/energy.

- Responsibility,

There was a new-found responsibility for the school garden. This was not only their space but also a space that birds, creatures and plants lived in. The children began to pick up rubbish and remove it from the garden. They viewed this area as a space that was separate to the schoolyard and there was a sense of importance linked to it.

- Independence,

I also noticed that children had gained a new sense of independence, whether this was while getting ready for the session, or in the session itself. The class had a greater freedom as there was more space and less children in the teacher-child ratio. With this freedom came extra responsibility and the children respected this.

- Happiness in Achievement,

The children were proud of their work and placed importance on the process rather than the product. This was particularly evident in the creation of bird feeders for the school garden in which the children choose to leave for the birds.

The sessions were designed with movement games and fun activities to encourage the production of endorphins through exercise and all children were happy in the sessions and eager to take part. This stayed with each child after they returned to the classroom and I noticed that those children needed less emotional attention from me throughout the rest of the day.

- Awareness of the Surroundings,

The class were imaginative. Natural resources provided a stimulus and inspired each child in the school garden. The children drew inspiration from flowers under trees. I had overlooked the possibility of these flowers as a resource.

Comparison with previous similar work/theories

Similar to Ridgers et al. (2012) study, it was evident that this approach shaped the child's perception of their environment. With a deeper understanding of the environment and the plants and animals that live there, the children had a desire to protect their environment. They began to pick up any rubbish and became proud of their school garden.

The class learned through enquiry learning, as described by McKernan (2008). They were afforded the opportunity to learn through hands on, discovery methods. This experience was more meaningful to the children than ever could have been reproduced in a classroom setting.

Murray and O'Brien (2005) described how children learn at their own pace and I also found that they learned in their own space as discussed in the previous chapter.

Upon attending the inaugural Irish Forest School Association meeting, the concern that Davis, Rea and Waite (2006) felt about the dilation of the standard of practice without a governing body was raised. This is a concern that has been addressed through the establishment of an association and an affiliation of members.

Limitations and difficulties in methods used

There were limitations in the research as this was only a short six-week study. One of the main principles of Forest Schools is that it is reoccurring issue. This yields possibility for further research.

I, the researcher, was also the Class Teacher and the Forest School Leader. It was often difficult to implement the program and conduct the research, but due to staffing ratio this was necessary.

I attached my 'Go Xtreme' action camera to a tree to record data. Some children were aware of the camera. I also had my Nikon DS3000 DSLR camera on me to photograph events. This was a bit of a restriction and interrupted the flow of my involvement, as I was conscious to capture as much data as possible.

The setting was in the school garden rather than a forest. This was arranged purposely so other primary school teachers could take inspiration from the study without feeling the pressure of having to have access to woodland. It also ensured that all children could access the program. When I visited 'Holly Trees' in Essex, England, they also practiced Forest Schools in the school garden from Reception to Year Three to teach basic skills. After this, Forest Schools is then facilitated in a local woodland area. I arranged a 'Bug Safari' school tour in the Wicklow Mountains National Park to combat this, however; I found it difficult to see a notable difference in the child's attitude in the school garden compared to that in the forest. I felt that the children saw the area of the school garden used as the 'Forest School Area' and separate to the classroom environment.

Children with additional learning needs, specifically children on autistic spectrum in my class found some of the unstructured movement games challenging as they felt order had been lost. As the weeks progressed, they understood the system and the routine of the approach and found it less upsetting.

The children commented that it was like 'school outdoors' when we brought out the school chairs. Bringing structural setting from the classroom may not be best practice. Tree stumps would enhance the learning environment while maintaining a Forest School ethos.

Conclusions

Learning outcomes; curriculum objectives

The research question was 'To what extent can the Irish Primary School Curriculum Visual Arts Construction Strand Objectives be achieved through the Forest School Approach?'

The sub questions explored were:

- What outcomes were achieved from implementing the approach? Pedagogy or otherwise (social/emotional).
- Were the 'Construction' Strand Objectives met?
- To what extent were the children engaged in the learning process?

Pedagogical objectives were also achieved during this intervention. The children explored and experimented with the properties and characteristics of making structures in accordance with the Irish Primary School Visual Arts Curriculum 'Construction' Strand objectives. They discovered how some materials help create or suggest form and how structure and balance are created. Different parts of structures were used to create a whole structure and materials were joined together. The children constructed imaginative structures from natural and reused objects. They also responded to each other's work.

Pre-academic or social and emotional skills were also achieved in the areas of resilience, responsibility, independence, happiness in achievement and in the child's awareness of the surroundings.

Child engagement in the learning process

Initially, the children were ecstatic about working in a new learning environment and engagement was poor as they could not focus on the task. I found the first session challenging, as I felt that I had to lead the learning as it was concerned with boundaries and safety. Once the children understood the safety elements, I could facilitate the session and allow their interests to lead the learning and their level of engagement flourished. All children were engaged in the tasks. They were curious and each child tried their best. As the activities were process-based, there was no pressure to create a perfect product and the children thoroughly enjoyed the sessions.

Recommendations

I recommend the use of the Forest School approach in the implementation of the Irish Primary School Curriculum. There are a few adjustments that may enhance the programme. Firstly, while teachers are curious, at present the training is expensive (€1,200). While teachers may implement elements of Forest School untrained, there is a concern that this may dilute the quality associated with the title of 'Forest School'. It may be financially beneficial for a school to hire an outside agency to come to the school to implement the program. This may also ensure that the programme is available in schools on a long-term basis in a low adult to child ratio. Slade, Lowery, and Bland (2013) and Austin et al. (2016) also recommend this need for Forest School sessions throughout the year to experience different seasons and build on skills to conduct follow-up research.

I will continue to use elements of Forest School in my classroom practice. While Leather (2013) and Waite, Bolling, and Bentsen (2015) argue the cultural differences that may impact on the adaption of this Scandinavian style of education, the healing space that nature and the outdoors provides cannot be ignored. Forest School has taught me a structure in which I can implement outdoor learning in a risk-assessed, safe manner. I feel that primary school teachers may be more inclined to bring their classes out if they know some of these structures (boundaries, call back chants and movement games). Leather (2013) questions if the commodification of Forest Schools may deduct from the underlying philosophy, this may be an optional added element to some modules in initial teacher training courses. Slade, Lowery and Bland (2013) notes that the activities should relate to classroom work to ensure curriculum enrichment through closer links with the Classroom Teacher and Forest School Leader.

Austin et al. (2016) note the lack of large-scale research in this area, this small case study would also benefit from a large-scale study reaching across a variety of settings.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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