

Can risky play promote teamwork in forest school?

An abstract

This research project aims to discover if teamwork can be promoted through risky play in forest school. There is limited existing research on this subject matter, so there is lots of scope for further enquiry.

The sample is small, but the mixed methodology of the research is beneficial, and adds to the validity of the research.

A literature review

Bell (2005) defines a literature review as a comprehensive study of literature that relates to a research project, which identifies existing research and facilitates the research project.

Before considering the potential for risky play to promote teamwork in the forest school environment, it is necessary first to attempt to define what teamwork is, and how teamwork is typically demonstrated in the sample age range of 4-5 years. The Early years foundation stage statutory framework (2023) states that for children to have reached the expected level of child development for their personal, social and emotional development by the end of the early years foundation stage, they should “work and play cooperatively and take turns with others” (DFE, 2023, P.13). The non-statutory guidance; Development Matters (2023) concurs with the Early years foundation stage statutory framework, and advises practitioners how they can support Reception children to co-operate with their peers and form friendships.

Having considered what teamwork looks like in 4-5 year olds, it is now necessary to define the environment that will be examined and clarify what is meant by forest school in this research project. According to the Forest School Association (2024), forest school takes place in a natural environment, such as woodlands, and involves regular sessions for a prolonged period, where learners explore the natural environment. Forest school follows a risk-benefit process, that is mutually managed by learner and practitioner, and favours a learner-centred approach, which aims to foster independent and resilient learners. The forest school approach began in Scandinavia and came to the UK in 1993.

Having defined what is meant by forest school for the purposes of this research project, it is now necessary to define what is meant by risky play. Risky play often takes place outdoors

and carries a risk of physical injury. Risky play is categorised into six categories: play at great heights, play with high speed, play with tools that may be dangerous, play near dangerous elements, rough and tumble play, and play where children can disappear from the supervision of adults (Sandseter, 2007). Children pursue risky play despite, and often because, it is linked to the feeling of thrill and fear, and the prospect of potential harm (Adams, 2001; Aldis, 1975; Gibbs, 2011; Sandseter, 2011; Smith, 1998; Stephenson, 2003).

There is a substantial amount of research to indicate that outdoor learning, which could include forest school sessions, is beneficial for young children. The statutory framework for the early years foundation stage (2024) sets out the requirement for all early years children in settings to have access to an outdoor play area or be able to participate in daily outdoor activities. Ofsted (who inspect and regulate settings in England) have previously published an example of good practice to include the forest school approach (*Using a forest environment for pre-school children*, Ofsted, 2012). In addition, Knight (2016) refers to several Ofsted reports that cite forest schools positively. One report from 2014, stated that the forest school programme contributed to pupil's strong social development.

Development Matters (2023) talks about adults using scaffolding to support children's learning. This is demonstrated in the forest school approach, where practitioners observation is said to feed into scaffolding and tailoring learning experiences (Forest School Association, 2024). Birth to 5 matters (2021) discusses the benefits and unique opportunities made possible through outdoor play, and acknowledges the ideas of Froebel, who advocated freedom with guidance. This concurs with both Development Matters (2023) and the forest school approach.

In order to work effectively as part of a team, communication skills are important. Knight (2016) cites a research project undertaken in Cambridge in 2012, when it was found that children who had participated in weekly forest school sessions, demonstrated a clear improvement in their communication skills. O'Donnell (2011) offers anecdotal evidence of the potential benefits of outdoor risky play for early years children, including improved communication. Armitage (2011) discusses how den building can facilitate pretend play involving narrative and cooperation.

All children are unique, so play, including risky play, can differ greatly from one child to another. What one child may consider to be risky, may not be considered risky to another

child. Adventure can be individually and culturally relative (Beames and Brown, 2016).

Forest School has been established for longer in Europe, therefore there is more research on the impact of forest school provision in Europe. Children who participate in forest schools in Europe have less behavioural disorders and greater cooperation with classmates (McKinney, 2012).

There is limited relevant research into the potential benefits of risky play in forest school provision in the UK for Reception aged children, despite forest school operating for thirty years in the UK. One potential cause for a lack of research is that risky play has often been curtailed due to a perception that it is too dangerous. Risky play has been discouraged, often based on a misunderstanding of health and safety laws (Department for Education, 2022).

Reasons for preventing risky play can be cultural; for example, play or this type of play may not be seen as beneficial, institutional; fear of growing litigation or differing educational trends, and structural; there may be a lack of suitable space (Louv, 2013).

Risky play is beneficial for children because it enables them to learn how to manage risk and fosters resilience (Gill, 2007) Gibbs (2011) concurs with Gill (2007) about risky play being beneficial for learning to manage risks,

Risks can be assuaged through risk benefit assessment, allowing an agreeable amount of risk to remain. (Gill, 2012; Willoughby, 2011).

The available research on the potential for risky play to promote teamwork in forest school is limited. There is a wealth of research available about forest school, however, this research does not focus on teamwork, and is often produced by the Forest School Association or practising forest school practitioners. Therefore, this research is not independent and may be biased in favour of forest school.

Research about the how risky play promotes teamwork is also limited. Other potential benefits, such as resilience and cognitive development have been identified more often in research.

Undertaking research into the potential for risky play to promote teamwork in forest school is then a relevant subject for further research

Methodological considerations

This research will be primary research, collecting new first-hand evidence, rather than secondary research; collecting pre-existing data. This research will be useful as there is little existing data on the potential promotion of teamwork through risky play in forest school.

The sample for this research project will be Reception children (aged 4-5 years) who attend a school with forest school provision. Younger early years children may not yet be exhibiting cooperative behaviours and working as part of a team, and it is essential to select a setting where forest school is operating. The sample will be made up of 4 groups of 4 children, with an equal number of girls and boys. The research will be inclusive and include children who are at the expected level of development, as well as children who are working towards the expected level of development.

The research will be conducted using three different research methods. The research will be qualitative.

The research will be participatory research, meaning that the research will be conducted with children rather than on children. Empowering research is becoming increasingly common (Clark et al. 2013). The first research method will be observation, observing separately, four groups of four children in forest school. The observation will be recorded to enable later analysis. An observational template will be used, which will record activities, interactions, speech, the level of risk perceived by the researcher, and if and how the sample worked as a team. The research will be affected by the researchers own perception of risk and their ideas and opinions about teamwork.

The second research method will be a focus group of professionals, who often attend forest school in the setting. The group will be asked to discuss their perceptions of risk and teamwork in the forest setting, and if they believe that the sample children tackle risk similarly in other environments, or take more or fewer risks in the forest environment. The focus group of professionals will also be asked about their perceptions of teamwork being demonstrated in and out of the forest.

The third research method will be a child led study group to review the recordings of themselves in the forest. The children will be asked to consider any risks they took and how

they worked as part of the team. The child led study group will be conducted individually, in order to avoid children being inclined to agree with their peers, rather than have their own recollections or thoughts, or to avoid children not wanting to be ridiculed for their perception of risk. The researcher will need to consider the Hawthorne effect, and how this may affect what the children say.

The research project will use mixed methods of research, in order to better understand risk and teamwork in forest school. By using 3 research methods, triangulation is possible, which can increase the validity of the research, if the 3 research methods all generate similar data. (Holmes, 2018).

Questionnaires are not being used in this research, because despite being relatively quick to complete and convenient, as well as potentially providing quantitative data that can be compared, questionnaires provide limited data, and would not be appropriate to use with early years children.

This research project is influenced by the Mosaic approach. The Mosaic approach uses multi-methods, and involves listening to the perspective of children, to ascertain a balanced picture of the lived experience of children (Clark, 2011). The Mosaic approach is reflective and adaptable (Clark and Moss, 2005). The idea of children's right to participation is influenced by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out children's right to a voice, and Article 13 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out children's freedom of expression (UNCRC, 2024).

Ethical considerations

The research project will be conducted in accordance with the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) *Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research* (2024), and be mindful of the Equality Act (2010), as well as The British Psychological Society's Code of Human Research Ethics (2021).

The research will be participatory research, involving children and for children, to better understand and support their learning. Children will be asked to assent to being part of the research, and if they do not wish to be part of the research, this will be respected. Children will not be pressurised into participating in this research, or offered incentives to participate. If children assent to participating in this research, but their body language suggests that they are

unhappy to continue, the research will cease immediately. Parental consent will also be sought. Details about the intended research project will be provided to children and parents in order for them to be able to make an informed decision about assent and consent.

All children involved in the research will be treated fairly and sensitively.

All participants (children and professionals) will be anonymous. Children and professionals will be referred to by a letter, and no identifiable information will be published with the research.

The filming of the observations will take place on one device that is password protected and is stored securely, where only the researcher has access. Any notes made during the professionals focus group, or child led study group, as well as notes made about the observation will be stored securely and will not name individuals.

The Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) is the independent supervisory authority for data protection in the UK. The Data Protection Act (2018) implements the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), which set the standards for data protection.

The researcher will be required to process data. Consent will be used as the lawful basis for processing this data.

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