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How does forest school attendance impact child wellbeing?

Abstract

With increasing levels of low wellbeing being recorded across the United Kingdom, there is a shift in focus to promote wellness in school aged children, the rationale of this research project is to understand whether spending a regular and prolonged period of time accessing a forest school setting has an impact on a child's wellbeing. The research will take place over a period of 2 years with 3 groups of 12 children aged 8 and 9 from mixed backgrounds. Each group of children will visit one of 3 forest school settings. During the length of the programme the children will be observed, and video recorded to assess changes to their behaviour, Children will be interviewed using semi structured questions to gain their perspective using narrative models. Children will be asked to complete the good childhood index independently on entry to the programme, at 4 monthly intervals and on exit of the programme to assess their wellbeing levels, the children will be made aware that this information will be kept anonymous. These data sources will be compiled , Analysed and compared to previous research data in order to gain greater understanding of how Forest school might be impacting a child's wellbeing.

Ethical considerations will be regarded at all times throughout the project, ensuring all participants and those responsible for them have a clear understanding of the rationale of the project, they have given full informed consent and are aware that they are able to withdraw at any point. All data will be collected and stored in line with GDPR.

Literature review

The rationale for this research project is to assess the impact of attending forest school on a child's levels of wellbeing. Leach (2013) states that 1 in 10 children aged between 5 and 16 suffer from a diagnosable mental health condition. With higher wellbeing positively impacting on a person's life expectancy, effecting health behaviours, and improving recovery

from illness, many countries around the world are now focussing on increasing wellbeing (The Department of Health, 2013).

Forest school is an adaptation of outdoor education seen around the world for generations. Originally born at Bridgwater college in 1993, Forest school is a long-term outdoor learning approach run by qualified practitioners, which usually takes place in a natural wooded environment. Through spending multiple sessions surrounded by nature the learner has opportunities for hands on experiences which aim to promote child led learning, developing confidence, self-esteem and sense of community through a holistic pedagogy (Cree & Robb, 2021; Forest school Association, 2016). According to Gibbs (2013) there is an increasing understanding of the beneficial effects of being among trees on a person's wellbeing, moreover, where children regularly participate in forest school activities, they show increased self-awareness and fewer behavioural challenges (Tiplady, 2018).

More than the absence of illness, wellbeing is the positive aspect of health (Warwick medical school, 2021). The Department of Health (2013) defines wellbeing as a person's ability to function in accordance with social norms and values, including having a positive emotional state and their basic human needs being met. These needs are reflected in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Maslow theorises that there are 5 levels of need: Physiological, security, belonging, esteem and self-actualisation. The theory assumes that a person cannot reach their full potential unless each level of their needs is met first and in order (Pichère & Cadiat, 2015).

Acton and Carter's (2016) study researched the effect of spending time participating in woodland activities on young carers wellbeing. The findings of this study showed that children's overall wellbeing was increased with children and their parents noting fewer negative emotions, increased sense of self and a greater ability to make friends. Acton and Carter also stated that the parents said their children seemed calmer and the children themselves expressed higher levels of happiness following their sessions in the woods.

For maximum benefit a forest school programme should be made up of regular sessions over an extended period of time (Forest school association, 2016). McCree, Cutting and Sherwin's (2018) study 'The Hare and the Tortoise go to forest school' followed a group of disadvantaged primary school aged children attending weekly forest school over a period of

three years. Through use of the Leuven scale the study found that the children's wellbeing levels stayed consistent throughout the programme, however, school teachers noted that approximately half of the children showed higher levels of wellbeing in the classroom after attending the programme.

Tiplady and Menter's (2020) Breeze project studied 2 groups of children and young people over the course of one year who were unable to access mainstream education due to poor mental health. The study identified the child led approach of forest school to be a critical factor in benefiting from the programme, however, Tiplady and Menter state that despite evidence of the benefits to some areas of the children and young people's wellbeing and the rich data collected from the project, there was not enough evidence to suggest forest school had a significant impact on the children and young people's holistic wellbeing and therefore more research is needed.

One study took two groups of primary age children and compared their learning in both a school environment and a forest school environment, the children visited the Forest school setting multiple times a week over the entire school year. The rationale of this study was to understand how mainstream and outdoor education can work hand in hand to promote learning, in addition to their main aims, the study found that in the forest school environment, where the children were away from academic pressures, they became more confident and resilient and thus their self-esteem was boosted compared to in an indoor classroom (Pimlott-Wilson and Coates, 2019).

The data from these studies suggests that although there is some evidence to prove that Forest school promotes wellbeing (Acton and Carter, 2016), some of the evidence may be anecdotal (McCree, Cutting and Sherwin, 2018) and there is not enough definitive evidence, therefore there is a need for further and longer term studies into the impact of forest school on a child's wellbeing as a whole (Tiplady and Menter, 2020).

Methodological considerations

In order to measure a person's wellbeing they must be able to communicate their own perception of their personal wellbeing, this in itself can raise issues when researching with children (Public Health England, 2015) However, when working with young children more than one method can be used as each child will have their preferred method of sharing

information (Palaiologou,2012) By using a range of methods where children can exercise their competence, researchers can promote a child's rights and capacity to act, just as should be done with all participants (Docket, Einarsdottir and Perry, 2011). Children should not be viewed as the object of the research but as a participator in the research (Palaiologou, 2012), Children are central participators in the research process and are paramount in sharing their viewpoint in order to gain greater understanding of their world (Smith, 2011) When children are active participants, not only can a valuable perspective into their own lives be gained, but the child themselves is gaining valuable experiences and opportunities to develop agency (Docket, Einarsdottir and Perry, 2011)

All tools can be relevant in research with children when they are underpinned by ethical practice (Palaiologou, 2012) , however, the chosen methods must reflect the intended outcome of the research as opposed to being the subject of the research (Docket, Einarsdottir and Perry, 2011). Therefore, the following methods were considered for this research project,

Warwick-Edinburgh mental wellbeing scale , abbreviated to WEMWBS is quantitative analysis tool (Shah et al, 2017) which uses a measurable 14 or 7 point scale depending on the researchers needs. The scale gives an understanding of the state of a participants wellbeing through responding with levels of agreement to statements such as "I have been feeling relaxed" (Warwick medical school, 2021). (Nolan, Cartmel, and Macfarlane, 2013) state that researches must be sensitive to individual needs and be respectful of culture, language and that varying viewpoints values should be welcomed, with an understanding that this can promote rich and dynamic data. To promote accessibility the scale has been translated into more than 25 languages (Warwick medical school, 2021). Shah et al (2017) state that use of the WEMWBS has shown a dramatic increase over the last 10 years (Shah et al, 2017) Warwick medical school (2021) state the scale is effective in measuring change in a participant's wellbeing and is capable of distinguishing between interventions that do and do not impact on wellbeing (Shah et al, 2017), therefore is a valuable assessment tool. However, it is worth noting that WEMWBS has only been validated for children over the age of 13 and therefore is not appropriate for use with young children (Public health England (2015)

Huebner's Student Life Satisfaction Scale is a quantitative tool created in the USA which has been validated for children from the age of approximately 7 years old. The tool comprises of 7 questions related to the previous few weeks of the child's life and with answers from strongly agree to strongly disagree form a 6 point scale (Public Health England, 2015), However although the Huebener student life satisfaction scale is similar to the Warwick-Edinburgh mental wellbeing scale, there is little up to date evidence of its effectiveness and therefore has been discounted as a suitable model for this study.

The Good childhood index was developed by the Childrens society to support them in their own research to measure children's subjective wellbeing and is validated for children aged 8 and above. The index uses a short index tool to measure the child's happiness with life as a whole before looking at 10 areas identified as important in a child's life and asks the child to rate these from 1 to 10. The short index tool is suitable for measuring perceived changes to wellbeing in smaller scale studies (The Children society, 2021, Public Health England, 2015) and is derived from Huebner's Student Life Satisfaction Scale, asking the children About their overall happiness with life followed by the following statements , "I have what I want in life, I have a good life, I wish I had a different kind of life, My life is just right, My life is going well" (The Childrens society 2021). This quantitative method has been identified as suitable for use during the research project as the model can measure changes in wellbeing along side a proven use with children ages 8 and over.

Narrative models of qualitative research allow the participant to use stories to make sense of their experiences, then convey that to other people (Delve, 2021) through encouraging a child to discuss a drawing they have made or narrating a video of themselves the researcher can gain a child's perspective of a situation in an unstructured way(Palaiologou, 2012), this is known as a dual layer perspective where the child makes sense of the situation through narration then the researcher assesses their own perspective of what the child has said (Delve, 2021) Using this method only the child's narrations would be used, the drawing or video they are discussing would only be used as a tool for prompting the discussion. (Palaiologou, 2012) An appropriate methos of gaining information relating to a specific study would be topical story narratives and semi structured interviews, promoting the child with topical but subjective questions about the specific situation (Delve, 2021)

Solvason and walker (2014) explain that quantitative data is that where there is numerical value, such as the use of a scale, whereas qualitative data is that where meanings are emphasised such as in narrative models. Through using mixed method research combining both qualitative and quantitative models, the study provides a more comprehensive understanding of the information and richer more in depth data (Roberts-Holmes, 2018). Using triangulation is central to the success of many research projects (Solvason and walker, 2014) Triangulation is the process where mixed method research is used, evaluated and then combined to create a holistic view of the data collected (Roberts-Holmes, 2018).

Public Health England (2015) state that a child is able to evaluate their own thoughts and communicate their own perceptions of their individual mental health from around 7 years, however the chosen method of evaluating a child's wellbeing, The Good Childhood index has been validated for assessing a child's perception of wellbeing from 8 years old (The Children's Society, 2021) therefore, the chosen participants for the study will be children aged between 8 and 9 years old and from school year 3.

Where all participants are clear of their role, an appropriate research relationship can be formed and both the adult and the child will become active and committed contributors to the research (Harcourt and Conroy, 2011) However, The researcher themselves and their own biases has an impact on all areas of the research, therefore, it is important to be transparent about this and ensure that the researchers participation and background is apparent to participants and noted for the audience to consider in their interpretation of the study (Nolan, Cartmel, and Macfarlane, 2013) . Single attributes can have an effect on a person's biases, this is known as the halo effect, discovered by Fredrick Wells, the single attribute blinds the observer to the persons other attributes and an assumption about the person is created (sprouts, 2022) where a child arrives with a dirty face or unkempt it is easy for the researcher to make assumptions about the child's parents and background (Gabrieli et al. 2021) This must be kept as a consideration during analysing the qualitative elements of the study. Another consideration for qualitative analysis is the Hawthorne effect, also known as the observer-expectancy effect (Brown, 2017), this is where a person's behaviour may change because they know they are being watched. Oswald, Sherratt and Smith (2014) mentions a 6 stage protocol to help reduce the risk of the Hawthorne effect, the essence of the 6 stage protocol is to build a relationship between the researcher and the participants in

order to ensure everyone is relaxed enough to be themselves. It is important to be mindful of the Hawthorne effect as not only can it effect the participants behaviour but may skew or give the observer a false understanding of the data (Brown, 2017)

Ethical considerations

Before commencing the study there must be considerations about how the research can be conducted ethically, this is especially important where children are the subject (Nolan, Cartmel and Macfarlane, 2013). Children are capable and competent of participating in research, especially when the research directly relates to their lives. (Smith, 2011). Before beginning the research project, all participants must give informed consent (Nolan, Cartmel, and Macfarlane, 2013). Informed consent is the process of inviting the participant to voluntarily give their permission to be included as part of the research project, through providing them with thorough knowledge and ensuring their understanding of what is involved and expected of them, including any risks and benefits (E.R.I.C., no date). All individuals need to be aware of how the project will run and what is expected of them throughout, it would be unethical to encourage participation without ensuring full understanding of the demands involved before potential participants decide to participate. (Harcourt and Conroy, 2011, Nolan, Cartmel and Macfarlane, 2013). An information sheet, often referred to as a plain language statement, which outlines the details of the project in simple terms for ease of understanding, can be used to provide information before making the decision to participate or invite others such as staff or children to participate (Nolan, Cartmel, and Macfarlane, 2013). Although parents must provide consent for their child to participate in the research project (Green, 2012), Smith (2012) argues that it is important to understand that children have the ability to make their own decisions and should be included in the consent process, insuring they are made fully aware in an age-appropriate manner of what the research entails and how this may impact them. A consent form should be signed showing a clear agreement to participate in relevant areas of the project, or in some instances such as anonymous surveys, participants must be made aware that by submitting the survey they are agreeing to that data being used (Nolan, Cartmel, and Macfarlane, 2013). However, Green (2012) explains that when children are involved in the consent process it is important to understand that every child is different and therefore consideration as to the most appropriate way of gaining their consent appropriately must be

taken. Children should be given the same participation rights as adults during the research (Nolan, Cartmel, and Macfarlane, 2013) and ample opportunities to provide their own feedback and take ownership of that data (Smith, 2011)

In line current government regulations, it is important that information gathered is always treated confidentially (Nolan, Cartmel, and Macfarlane, 2013). E.R.I.C (no date) states that there are many aspects of confidentiality and privacy that must be considered in research, UNICEF (2010) state that as part of the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child, children's privacy must be protected, this is reflected in the General Data Protection Regulation also known as G.D.P.R. as outlined by University of Bristol (no date). University of Bristol explain that GDPR comes into effect where the information stored affects living people, all information collected, stored, or used that could identify a participant such as name, characteristics or social identity are classed as personal data and must be protected. When using videos to record data for example, it must be remembered that a person is more easily identifiable and anonymising this data is more difficult, therefore careful consideration of how video footage is stored and when the footage should be destroyed must be taken (Bilkstad- Balas, 2019) However, fully anonymised data is not affected by G.D.P.R. (University of Bristol, No date). How personal data will be treated confidentially and protected must be outlined in the plain language statement (Nolan, Cartmel, and Macfarlane, 2013). University of Wales Trinity Saint David abbreviated to UWTSD (no date) recommend that research data is kept for the entirety of the project and as long as they are of value, UWTSD hold a valuable tool which helps researchers decide appropriate measures for storing this data. Where personal information is lost or there is a data breach there is a significant risk to all involved, a data breach may cause harm the individuals whose data is lost, may have a detrimental effect on the institute and researches reputation and could result in the data holder being liable financially (The information commissioner, no date)

It is also vital that Participants are made fully aware of their right to withdraw from the project at any time, however it should be made clear that if the participant withdraws after a certain point the data collected will still be used (Nolan, Cartmel, and Macfarlane, 2013). Therefore, it is advised that participants are given a cooling off period of 4 weeks where they can withdraw, and their data will not be used. Taking time to listen, step back and then

reflect is key to allowing active and informed assent and dissent with children and families (Green, 2012)

Being transparent open and honest in research is crucial to the integrity of the report , its value and the reputation of the institute and the researcher (University of Manchester, no date). It is important to be mindful that many projects are centrally funded and therefore members of the public may have high expectations of the research process (Oliver 2010). Sharing data honestly can include pre study information, outcomes, and information in the public interest such as funding (University of Manchester, no date). Many research proposals will need permission from an academic institute to proceed, this ensures ethical value is upheld and protects the institute from repercussions, therefore openness and honesty about the whole project will be required as it is important for everyone involved and the audience to be aware of how the project was funded (Oliver 2010). It is generally acceptable to compensate participants for their time, loss of earnings and expenses when involved in research (E.R.I.C., no date), however, where payment is involved, the researcher must be honest about who has been paid for their involvement in the research project and what for (Oliver, 2010). Payment must not be used to bribe or coerce participants to consent to the project (E.R.I.C., no date) Information must also be freely available to participants through the medium of a plain language statement or an equivalent document, setting out the rationale of the project, the expectations of all involved, confidentiality and data protection procedures, risks involved and participants right to withdraw consent at any time (Nolan, Cartmel, and Macfarlane, 2013). Openness is of benefit to everyone and can have a valuable impact on credibility (University of Manchester, no date) therefore, where the researcher has their own biases that may impact on the research, transparency about their role and how this may impact on study interpretation is essential (Nolan, Cartmel, and Macfarlane, 2013).

One of the biggest considerations when researching with children is whether the research needs to be done and in turn balance up the risks and benefits to the participant and the researchers institute (E.R.I.C., no date). It is also important to remember that children have the right to protection from judgment, humiliation, and harm (Smith, 2011). This is reflected in the United Nations Convention for the Rights of the Child which says that adults should act in the child's best interests and protect them from harm, while considering their right to form their own ideas and express them freely and without judgment (UNICEF, 2010). The

plain language statement created to inform participants of the research should outline any risks involved in participation (Nolan, Cartmel, and Macfarlane, 2013). It is therefore the researcher's responsibility to ensure that participants are protected from harm, this may include but is not limited to; physical harm, harm through association, judgment, bias, harm through incompetency or re-traumatisation (E.R.I.C., no date). The risks involved in the research need to be weighed up and balanced against the potential benefits to community, However each participants definition of risk and willingness to take risks may differ (University College Dublin, 2021) Therefore, procedures must be put in place to protect participants from harm, including identifying any possible causes of harm, seeking informed consent, ensuring robust safeguarding policies and procedures are in place and having procedures to signpost participants for support if needed (E.R.I.C., no date).

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