



SUNNYMEDE JUNIOR SCHOOL

MARCH 2011

Background

Staff members at Sunnymede have long been passionate about opportunities for outdoor learning. Therefore, the chance to be involved in helping rangers from Wat Tyler Country Park to gain their Forest Schools qualification was grasped firmly with both hands. Children were selected for this experience based on a principle of recognising unsung heroes i.e. the children who always work hard, behave well and achieve average progress. These are the children who can become invisible if teachers allow them to do so. They never cause any problems nor do they set the world alight with outstanding achievement.

The children's response to the sessions was so overwhelmingly positive that it was decided that the teacher involved should attain a Level 3 qualification in Forest Schools so that we could use the programme to target specific groups within school on a regular basis. To enable this to happen, an application for funding was submitted successfully to the Forestry Commission. The grant was sufficient to pay for the training and accreditation, as well as purchase some of the necessary resources. In addition, arrangements were made to cover the teacher's commitments for one morning each week, as required.

Local Authority	School /Centre
Essex County Council	Sunnymede Junior School

Context of school

Sunnymede Junior School is situated in Billericay, a town approximately thirty minutes by train from London. Many parts of the town are relatively affluent. However, there are two areas of social housing either side of the Sunnymede site. As a result, children attending the school have a wonderful mix of socio-economic backgrounds, which prepares them well for future life. Sadly, we no longer have any children from the Traveller community at Crays Hill, as the school there has now been allocated more or less solely for their use.

Due to the falling birth rate within the area, the school role has declined considerably during the last five to six years, from 338 to 228. Having been a three-form entry school for several years, Sunnymede will be fully two-form entry with effect from September 2011. This change has necessitated innovative changes to the organisation of classes and the timetable.

For the last three years, the timetable for year 6 students has been as close as could be possibly managed to a secondary school timetable. The children are divided into two registration groups at the start of each morning and each afternoon session. In the morning, they are set for both English and maths, with four sets for English and five sets for maths. During the afternoons, they are taught in three groups making good use of the expertise of individual teachers e.g. one teachers practical science to all groups whilst another focuses on recording science work in written format. Although something of a nightmare to arrange in the first year, this is now a well-established practice much appreciated by students, teachers and parents/carers.

FOCUS AND PURPOSE

The introduction of a Forest Schools programme to allow students to gain confidence whilst exploring a magical, stimulating, mysterious, exciting and educational environment away from the school site. Participation in the programme is designed to present children with challenging tasks in a safe and supportive setting that allows them to develop positive relationships with a range of peers. The overall aim is to improve academic achievement and community participation by boosting self-esteem and confidence.

SELECTING THE CHILDREN

All children chosen for the first cohort were in year 6. The first student chosen more or less selected himself. The youngest of three boys, he had become all too aware that academically he was lagging behind his peers. His way of coping with this realisation was to disrupt lessons and generally behave in an unacceptable manner. Unfortunately it is not unusual for boys in his situation to adopt a similar demeanour. After all, it is preferable to be deemed the class clown or one of the lads rather than acknowledge that you are unable to achieve in the same way as some of your peers.

The remaining children were chosen because it was felt by teachers that their lack of confidence was hampering their progress and possibly preventing them from taking full advantage of opportunities to shine. Although one or two of the children appeared outwardly confident, it was obvious to those who knew them well that they were adopting a facade of confidence to mask their insecurities. The teacher responsible met with the parents/carers of all the children selected to ensure that they were totally happy for their child to participate and that they would support the programme fully by ensuring all sessions were completed irrespective of the weather. One of the teacher's favourite phrases is "There is no such thing as unsuitable weather, just unsuitable clothing".

WHO WAS RESPONSIBLE?

The teacher concerned had to plan and deliver six half-day sessions as one element of gaining his qualification. The sessions were overseen by a qualified ranger from Wat Tyler Country Park, with the final session being attended by the person responsible for accreditation.

RESOURCES

Permission was gained to use nearby Norsey Woods free of charge. However, it was necessary to pay for a ranger from Wat Tyler to work alongside the teacher until his qualification was successfully completed. This also fulfilled the criterion of having a second adult on site. A range of resources were purchased including:

A First Aid Kit

Long-handled loppers

Secateurs

A bow saw and hand saws

A hand drill

Tarpaulins

Rope

WHAT DID THE CHILDREN DO?

One of the key principles behind the Forest Schools Programme is that the activities are child-led wherever possible. Children are encouraged to develop their curiosity and use all their senses to explore a natural environment in a way that was the norm for previous generations of children. Of course, they will increase their knowledge of flora and fauna. However, possibly of greater importance they will increase their personal skills such as team building, goal setting, planning and achieving, working co-operatively and being able to evaluate their own performance.

The children at Sunnymede undertook a wide range of activities including:

- ✓ Designing and creating their own totem featuring their Forest Schools name
- ✓ Building a den/shelter
- ✓ Singing around a campfire

Interestingly, the children tended to choose an animal for their totem that embodied their own characters e.g. mouse, mole and rabbit, confirming that we had correctly selected participants.

IMPACT

The children were asked to evaluate their experiences on the programme. They were told it was to convince the Headteacher to allow it to continue for further groups. They considered that their confidence had improved and evidenced this by stating that they were putting up their hands more often in class. Their teachers also perceived that the children were taking a more active role in lessons and appeared to be making accelerated progress as a result.

Recent test results (February 2011) have verified this to be the case.

Maths

Forest School Name	NC level in September 11	NC level in February 10	Points progress
Rat	3.0	4.0	6
Squirrel	3.0	3.3	2
Rabbit	3.0	3.3	2
Bee	4.0	4.7	4
Jaguar	3.0	3.7	4
Mushroom	2.0	3.3	8
Mink	3.3	4.0	4
Mole	4.3	5.0	4
Mouse	3.0	3.0	0

Average progress = 4 (double that expected within the timescale)

Reading

Forest School Name	NC level in September 11	NC level in February 10	Points progress
Rat	2.7	3.0	2
Squirrel	4.0	4.7	4
Rabbit	4.0	4.0	0
Bee	5.0	5.7	4
Jaguar	2.7	4.0	8
Mushroom	3.7	4.0	2
Mink	4.7	4.7	0
Mole	4.7	5.0	2
Mouse	2.7	3.0	2

Average Progress = 3 (1½ that expected within the timescale)

Writing

Forest School Name	NC level in September 11	NC level in February 10	Points progress
Rat	2.3	3.0	4
Squirrel	3.3	4.0	4
Rabbit	3.3	3.7	2
Bee	4.3	4.7	2
Jaguar	3.7	4.0	2
Mushroom	3.0	3.7	4
Mink	3.3	3.3	0
Mole	4.3	4.3	0
Mouse	3.0	3.3	2

Average Progress = 2 (slightly more than expected within the timescale)

Science

Forest School Name	NC level in September 11	NC level in February 10	Points progress
Rat	2.7	4.0	8
Squirrel	3.7	3.7	0
Rabbit	3.0	3.0	0
Bee	4.0	4.7	4
Jaguar	2.7	3.3	4
Mushroom	3.3	3.7	2
Mink	4.3	4.3	0

Mole	4.3	4.7	2
Mouse	2.7	2.7	0

Average Progress = 2 (slightly more than expected within the timescale)

NEXT STEPS

- ✓ The children who participated in the six sessions will undertake two more sessions this term, so that they can complete further activities and two can be selected as mentors for the next group.
- ✓ A second group will be selected to complete sessions during the summer term.
- ✓ The Headteacher Designate is committed to the continuation of the programme and will explore avenues to ensure that it will be possible to continue to release the teacher responsible at a time of reduced staffing and budget.
- ✓ Consider training another member of staff so that there will no longer be a need to pay for a ranger to attend all sessions. However, it would be better if this was an LSA, as releasing a teacher would cost more than paying for a ranger.

BLUE SKY THINKING

Whilst there will always be a need for Forest Schools to take place off-site for selected children, it is unlikely to prove practical to involve every child. However, the school has an extensive playing field that includes a copse of saplings planted by the students. There is also a large wildlife garden and a wildlife pond. The school already has an increasingly extensive armoury of strategies that are used to build the self-esteem and confidence thereby ensuring the well-being of the students. In an ideal world, it should be possible to tailor the FS programme sufficiently to make even better use of these resources in order to provide yet another strategy and increasing provision for all children.

Sunnymede Junior School became the first Lead Healthy School in Essex as a result of the action research undertaken to increase children's emotional health and well-being. It would be truly wonderful if every student had the opportunity to benefit to some degree from the principles behind Forest Schools.

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