

Reading Outside the Classroom

Peter Wolstencroft
Judith Darnell

Reading importance

On the first Thursday in March a strange phenomenon sweeps schools in England. Class after class arrive at school in clothing that is not their normal uniform. Instead, a plethora of Harry Potters, Elsas and the occasional Horrid Henry saunter down the street towards their classrooms. Since Tony Blair launched World Book Day in 1998, the annual celebration of reading has been marked in over 100 countries with children being encouraged to talk about the books that inspire them as well as being encouraged to experience the joy of reading.

The National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) stresses the importance of ensuring children read regularly and any child falling below set thresholds should be encouraged to improve and reach the required standard. To encourage reading, some schools have incentives, such as team points or dojos. Others take a more punitive approach and deny children playtime if they do not have their reading log signed off on a daily basis. The message set by both the government and schools is clear: reading is essential. Whilst the importance of the skill of the reading could not be denied, what appears to be missing in the curriculum is the flexibility of choice. Traditionally reading has always been viewed as something that has its roots in the classroom but as adults we have the freedom to choose when/where/what we read. Once it ceases to be a necessity to ensure that milestones are reached at school, an increased freedom marks a mature reading journey. As adults, we can read wherever we like; this is far more likely to promote the sense of reading as something to be enjoyed rather than endured.

Holistic learning

A frequent criticism of any curriculum is that the topics set are compartmentalised rather than integrated. This is often out of necessity. Assessments, by their very nature, tend to stress one subject. Expertise amongst teachers, even primary teachers who are likely to teach cross-curriculum, is likely to be limited to a small number of topics. Numerous ways of ensuring that education has a more holistic approach have been undertaken in recent years and one of the most successful has been the introduction of the Forest School approach (Cree and Robb, 2021). Although some settings are committed wholly to the forest school approach, (to the point where some are set up in a woodland with only a tent for cover), many integrate the values of the forest school philosophy and devote time and space to productive outdoor learning opportunities whilst being attached to a traditional school set-up. The forest school philosophy is designed to ensure that children develop a variety of skills that often focus on resilience, greater knowledge of nature, communication, teamwork and the ability to integrate a variety of elements of any given curriculum and contextualise them in a nature framework. Often the forest school philosophy focusses on freedom and choice for children and encompasses the idea that “free play” produces the most engagement in learning. The Forest School setting we are referring to in this blog embraces all of these approaches and has been used to explore how reading outside can be used as a prompt for play within the outdoors.

Integrating story-telling into the forest school

At the heart of the Forest School was engendering a sense of freedom; as part of this and to further encourage a love of reading, we sought to examine the relationship between providing a structured start to a forest school session through use of a story book and to observe the way in which this

fuelled children's imaginations and inspired them to fully engage in the environment provided to them. Forest school settings often use vocal storytelling without any physical book. However, our aim was to look at the engagement levels of children after gathering round at the beginning of the session to share in a visual printed book.

The session started with introducing the book "Stick Man". This book was chosen due to its obvious connection with nature, the sense of adventure that it instilled, and the links to the environment. It also allowed us to discuss feelings with the children and the emotions of going on a journey and getting lost. The story was shared whilst sitting around an unlit campfire on logs. The group was small, and the children were at a suitable distance to view the pictures and hear the narrative. At the end of the story, the children were asked if they would like to select a stick to be their stick man. The children were naturally eager to personify and name their stick. Sticks were then used to create a mud pie, hunt for bugs in the bug hotel area and explore the den-building spaces. By using an exciting story with an appealing main character the children's imaginations were stimulated as well as their eagerness to participate in an unknown environment. The sticks appeared to act as a vehicle between the story and the environment and helped children be confident in an unfamiliar setting and explore with enthusiasm alongside their new-found friend.

This activity demonstrated that using a printed story and a prop was successful in encouraging imaginative play opportunities as well as supporting children's confident exploration in a new setting. Engagement throughout was high and the association between reading and play were evident. Children were able to use their imaginations to explore new possibilities after sharing the book and it was clear that engagement in the story was being mirrored in the play scenarios. From our observations, we argue the case that reading within a forest school programme can enthuse and encourage children to engage in reading and use their imagination showing reading does not have to be confined to a traditional classroom.

References:

Cree, J. and Robb, M. (2021) *The essential guide to forest school and nature pedagogy*. London: Taylor and Francis

Department for Education (2013) *The National Curriculum in England: key stages 1 and 2 framework document*. London: DfE.