Social cohesion and wellbeing deriving from woodland activities: Good from Woods

A Research Report to the BIG Lottery

GOOD FROM WOODS
Signed by Lead Researcher:

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Contents

Introduction: Good from Woods........................................................................................................1

1. Researching wellbeing with woodland activity providers............................................. 1

1.1 Why support practitioner research about the benefits of woodland activity? .................................................................................................................................................................................. 1

1.2 How to explore what’s good from woods? ............................................................................ 2

1.3 Why wellbeing? ....................................................................................................................... 3

1.3.1 What’s good from woods? .................................................................................................. 3

1.4 Why a practitioner led action- research approach? ............................................................. 6

1.4.1 Developing a reflective research focus: collaboratively conceiving of wellbeing in an outdoor and woodland setting ................................................................................................................. 6

1.5 Supporting practitioner-researchers undertaking research on the outcomes of woodland based activity................................................................................................................................. 7

1.5.1 What is research and how does it compare with practitioners’ existing roles? .............................................................................................................................................................................. 7

1.5.2 Transition to and confidence in a p-r role............................................................................ 12

1.5.3 Colleagues and managers engagement in the research: establishing a micro-research community ........................................................................................................................................ 16

1.5.4 University- Third Sector collaboration ........................................................................... 19

1.5.5 Achieving research: using blueprints and getting messy................................................ 22

1.6 Summary of Factors influencing practitioners confidently researching:.................... 24

1.7 Impacts of Good from Woods ............................................................................................... 25

1.8 What next? .............................................................................................................................. 30

2. The practitioner-researcher research summaries .............................................................. 31

2.1 Introduction to practitioner-researcher case study research.............................................. 31

   Psychological and Social Wellbeing ................................................................................. 32

   Emotional and Biophilic Wellbeing .................................................................................. 33

   Physical Wellbeing .......................................................................................................... 34
2.2 Summary Reports from Good from Woods Local Partners

Embercombe – Young Leaders Project .......................................................... 35
Ruskin Mill Trust – coppicing ......................................................................... 51
National Trust – Family Places Project .......................................................... 58
Forest of Avon Trust – Shirelink day centre .................................................. 64
Forest of Avon Trust – City of Bristol College ................................................ 71
Play Torbay – Fort Apache ........................................................................... 78
Woodland Trust – tree planting ...................................................................... 87
Otterhead Forest School – young teenagers .................................................... 92
Nature Workshops – Young Carers project ..................................................... 99
Nature Workshops – Mental Health project ................................................... 104
Stroud Woodland Co-op – shared ownership of Folly Wood ......................... 109
Mayflower Community Academy – Learning in the Natural Environment (LINE)
......................................................................................................................... 116

References .................................................................................................... 126
Introduction: Good from Woods

The Good from Woods (GfW) project, “Social cohesion and wellbeing deriving from woodland activities” was funded by the BIG Lottery Research programme to increase the capacity of the woodland activity provision and forest education sector to undertake its own research. Many organisations and initiatives in the southwest provide woodland activities resulting in social and personal benefits to participating within them. Discussions and consultation with groups involved in delivering woodland activities identified a need and desire for more robust research based evidence of the benefits of these in order to influence policy, funders, researchers and users of the services provided.

The funded project ran from April 2010 until Dec 2014, supporting eleven woodland activity providers to carry out fifteen case studies of practice in their own setting, in order to explore what and how wellbeing outcomes are realised. In addition to these individual studies, the practitioner researchers (p-r) were encouraged to attend training events and conferences to share their learning and participate in wider research networks. This report is split into two sections that summarise;

1. The process of supporting woodland activity providers to research wellbeing and findings on how research capacity can best be supported and encouraged within the sector.
2. Results (case studies) from practitioner-research into the wellbeing outcomes of the activities they provide.

Good from Woods Practitioner-researchers review their research ‘journeys’: Good from Woods Mini-conference, Plymouth University, 2011
1. Researching wellbeing with woodland activity providers

1.1 Why support practitioner research about the benefits of woodland activity?

The planning of this project responded to the recent rapid growth of woodland activity provision as health, education and wellbeing services (particularly the expansion of the forest school movement1) and providers’ need to explain and substantiate service users’ experiences to funders and policy makers in order to sustain this growth. Previous research in this area (Acton, 2010, Eastaugh et al. 2010, Kenny, 2009, Knight, 2009, Murray, 2003, Murray & O’Brien, 2005 for example), had tended towards fairly dispersed, case specific evaluations of activities, approaches, or projects. GfW aimed to foster research capacity amongst activity providers in order to:

- build on this body of work
- encourage adoption of a common area of focus (wellbeing) that could be shared across varied provision
- and communicate the process and results widely.

It is often assumed that practitioner research will take place against a setting of well established, familiar institutional frameworks, shared cultures of practice, standardised training paths and access to professional development. By contrast, this project focused on supporting research amongst a group of practitioners from diverse professional backgrounds. Whilst their initiatives commonly provide learning and development opportunities through the provision of some form of woodland activity, their activities are underpinned by varying organisational structures, ethos and practices. So for example, some were employees in small, recently established social enterprises, others volunteers in long established, large charities. What most

1 Forest School is an education or social movement that has quickly spread (Cree & McCree, 2012). The first Forest School in the UK was established by nursery nurses at Bridgewater College crèche inspired by the pedagogical approach of their Danish counterparts, following an exchange visit to Denmark in 1993. It responds to the friluftsliv (‘free air life’) tradition that sees Danish pre-school educators supporting young children to spend large amounts of time outdoors, in self-led and play based activity (FSA, 2015, Bridgewater College, 2015). However the roots of Forest School can be identified in outdoor learning movements and impulses stretching back to the 19th century. The Forest School Association (2015) argue that a range of naturalists, thinkers and pedagogues can be seen as contributing to its ethos and practices. McCree (cited by FSA, 2015) references Scandinavian friluftsliv, alongside the Romantic philosophers of the 1800’s and the educationalists Steiner, Pestalozzi and the originator of the kindergarten, Frederich Froebal, as early influences on the outdoor learning movement that FS can be seen as part of. Later, writers such as Thoreau & Emerson and educators such as Dewey, Montessori and Susan Isaacs are named by McCree (cited by FSA, 2015), as helping shape this movement. In the UK context, the growth of outdoor centres, camps (Woodcraft Folk for example) and skills teaching (for instance Scouts) in the 20th century can be seen as antecedents of the FS movement (FSA citing McCree, 2015). The FSA (2015) link the emergence of the specific FS model to a upsurge in the development of ‘alternative’ education systems in response to shifts in the British education system during the 1970’s and 80’s. They argue that during this period teaching became less child centred, as numeracy and literacy attainment took centre stage, so creating a space for the FS approach (Ibid). In 1995 Bridgewater College developed the first accredited FS training aimed largely at Early Years practitioners (FSA, 2015). Forest School delivery was then progressively taken up by local authorities, educators and trainers across the UK.
commonly united behaviour and approach within these work settings was the value placed on both providers’ and participants’ interaction with and contemplation of, the outdoors.

A central aim of this project was to explore and critically engage with the challenges faced by such practitioners in undertaking an action-research investigation of their initiatives’ wellbeing impact and identify support that would help to them to meet them. The following sections explore:

- why a focus on wellbeing impacts
- how a collaborative focus on wellbeing was devised
- why employ an action research approach
- the barriers and opportunities created by perceived contrasts between physically active, outdoors, practitioner roles and research practices
- how preconceptions about the nature of ‘research’ can impact on attitudes towards it
- and how such issues can be resolved through the support of partnerships, managers and colleagues in order to build research capacity amongst practitioners.

1.2 How to explore what’s good from woods?

The premise of GfW was that providers of woodland activities were well placed to investigate the nature of the wellbeing benefits their activities may provide. It was anticipated that practitioners’ existing familiarity with possible benefits and disadvantages of participation in woodland activity, as well as their access to research settings and subjects, might ease the development and management of the research. In addition, some types of woodland education provision such as Forest School actively encourage its practitioners to develop their reflective awareness of how participants have engaged with activity and such skills were expected to transfer well to research practice.

The project aimed to develop potential research capacity by collaborating with woodland practitioners to:

- develop a shared understanding of wellbeing
- test a framework developing research focus and undertaking research
- identify and develop appropriate research methods and approaches
- create strategies for analysis and development of findings.

This collaboration worked in several ways. Practitioner-researchers (p-rs) tested frameworks and methods proposed by the research team in response to their needs, modifying them to suit their context, with improved versions cascaded to successive p-rs and so on. In addition, p-rs established research methods and tools particular to their context, which the research team shared with successive practitioner-researchers for use and possible further development. The aim of this collaborative, iterative approach was to create a methodology specifically grounded within and suitable for the outdoor and woodland activity research context.
1.3 Why wellbeing?
The achievement and measurement of national ‘wellbeing’ had, as this project was devised, become an increasing focus and target of policy and service provision, NGO campaigning and academic research. Economic recession appeared to have increased attention to how and where to invest in order to best establish, protect and sustain national wellbeing. Within this context, interest in understanding and demonstrating how time spent in natural outdoor spaces contributes to wellbeing had similarly grown and activities taking place in the outdoors have increasingly been championed by practitioners, researchers and policy makers as potential methods of accessing health and happiness.

In the case of GfW, the concept of ‘wellbeing’ was embraced as a useful concept and language for developing a shared methodology and findings about the varied outcomes that different woodland activities may make to people’s lives. Reviews of the terms usage within policy and practice highlight its wide definition and use. It has been defined, for example, as ‘happiness’, ‘quality of life’, ‘life satisfaction’ or ‘welfare’ and can describe positive physical, social, psychological and emotional attitudes and health.

It was anticipated this breadth would allow GfW to develop a holistic portrait of the range of services being provided by the woodland activity sector and address the findings toward diverse audiences. It also meant that the project didn’t have to impose restrictions upon the aspects of health and happiness that practitioners’ research and arguably encouraged a diversity that reflected the breadth of provision being investigated. At the same time, the wellbeing concept at the heart of the project should still allow the results to find correspondence with other findings in this area. The potential transferability of the wellbeing concept was considered important in the light of critiques (Paton, 2003) of methodologies such as those employed in previous research on the impact of woodland activity (Murray, 2003, Murray & O’Brien 2005, Knight 2009). Such methods arguably make use of ideas and language specific to the environment under research, with some suggesting this limits their compatibility or comparability with other studies (Paton, 2003).

The wide interpretation of wellbeing has inspired an equally broad range of methods for assessing and measuring peoples’ experiences of it. The variety of methods for evaluating its nature and existence perhaps proved one of the most challenging aspects of trying to support practitioners to research what is good from woods. Whilst the project supported an action research approach to investigating wellbeing in woodland activity contexts, the practitioners were keen to be directed in understanding what wellbeing, during or following woodland activity, was composed of? What does it feel or look like? Was it different in woodland from elsewhere and how should they capture evidence of its presence?

1.3.1 What’s good from woods?
The GfW interpretation of wellbeing was developed using categories of health, happiness and associated indicators of feeling good drawn from existing evaluative tools. P-r’s analysing their data compared the evidence they collected with outcomes and experiences that existing measures suggest are indicative of social, psychological, physical, emotional or biophilic wellbeing. Where a good fit was made, they aligned it with these categories.
Pr’s also looked for experiences they felt fell outside of or expanded upon these categories and markers of wellbeing. This process enabled co-development of an understanding of wellbeing that both relates to the language and concepts used within existing models and with evidence grounded in the outdoor/woodland activity context.

### Psychological Wellbeing – positive functioning
Feelings of: being in control, competent (and seen by others to be competent), energetic, purposeful, developing oneself, connecting with others through shared beliefs and outlook, secure with personal limitations*

### Emotional Wellbeing
Experiencing: positive emotions and moods, absence of negative emotions and moods, feeling even-tempered, relaxed, optimistic about the present, optimistic about the future

### Social Wellbeing
Feelings of: being confident, accepted, safe and supported *within and through* social relationships, supporting others through social relationships

### Physical Wellbeing
Feelings of: physical health, confidence in and enjoyment of physical activity

### Biophilic Wellbeing - connection to nature
Feelings of: closeness to the natural world, being engaged in a relationship with nature

* Pilot domains and indicators of wellbeing
Practitioner-researchers also explored the people, processes and places in the wood that appeared linked to these outcomes, looking for evidence of which aspects of woodland activity make a difference to peoples’ experiences.

P-rs’ reflect on what might contribute to feeling good in the woods prior to their research commencing, 2011
1.4 Why a practitioner led action-research approach?

The theoretical, ideological and practical roots of the action research methodology employed by GfW are varied and cross-disciplinary (Charles & Ward, 2007:2-3). However, action research is characterised by its provision of a framework for people researching their own lived experiences in order to identify opportunities for positive change and further research (McNiff, 2003:3). Its cyclical design is intended to move beyond explanations of local conditions, towards advancing changes within them (Carr & Kemmis, 1986: 194).

The action research model, through colliding intellectual activity and practical outcomes, can potentially bring together two behaviours often perceived as separate impulses – that of the scholar and the activist (Somekh & Zeichner, 2009). As a methodology it responds to the current *zeitgeist* of increasing emphases on research ‘impact’ (embodied within the policy of Research Councils UK and the recent UK Research Excellence Framework) and address any perceived detachment of academia from pressing ‘real world’ issues (Charles & Ward, 2007:6).

The action research approach is also frequently aimed at democratising who undertakes and participates in the research, supporting the voicing of perspectives, knowledge and ideas that might otherwise remain unheard and unacknowledged (181-2, Carr & Kemmis, 1986: 164, Gaventa & Cornwall, 2008:176). The action researcher is an active member of the community under research, rather than a detached observer. Their ties to the field of research may give them privileged access to expertise and insight that can be articulated, examined and corroborated through the action research process (Charles & Ward, 2007: 5). The action research literature also frequently affirms a collaborative approach to the gathering and understanding of data, a process that can raise awareness of local circumstances and the potential for altering these (Ibid, 2007:2). This ideological focus upon the practical value of the research, participative problem solving and action appeared a good fit with the aims of Good from Woods: to enable practitioners to better articulate their value and increase it further through identifying best practice.

1.4.1 Developing a reflective research focus: collaboratively conceiving of wellbeing in an outdoor and woodland setting

The start of the action research process asked researcher-practitioners to identify the stakeholders in benefits from their or their organisations’ activity provision. Stakeholders included participants, for example, but also the teachers or GPs referring participants on to activities, or the parents and family of the participant taking part. P-rs were then asked to gather opinions from non-participating stakeholders about the anticipated or observed benefits/ disbenefits of participants’ engagement in their woodland based work. This collecting of perspectives was conceived of as a practical activity, finding out who could contribute to identifying and understanding wellbeing impacts. However, it was also envisaged as a reflective task, provoking consideration of the contrasts between p-rs’ understanding associations between participation in activities and wellbeing and that of others.

Through initiating the research in this way GfW aimed to support practitioner-researchers working with a reflective awareness of their beliefs and presumptions about wellbeing and its connection with their
initiatives. This process of triangulation was also aimed at making audible a wide range of voices (age, position, or level of approval aside) and through highlighting convergence and difference amongst viewpoints allowing persistent themes to emerge and influence the ongoing focus of the research.

This expansive development of the research focus exposed practitioner-researchers grounded understanding of the benefits of their initiatives, located perhaps in language and ideas common to their work environment, to other stakeholders’ hypotheses and concepts. It highlighted p-rs relative ease of access to their field of research (access that might require long negotiation for outsiders). It also drew attention to the ethical dimensions of the dual practitioner-researcher role.

GfW’s rigorous ethics procedure, required by Plymouth University to ensure informed and well managed participation by research subjects, increased critical consideration of how p-rs’ existing working cultures and relationships could influence the research process and findings. Practitioner-researchers who’d previously worked with their research participants, tutoring them for example, could be facilitated in their research by the trust established in this prior association, but p-rs showed strong awareness that participants might feel obligated to be involved in the research, or restricted from giving critical feedback, because they value the provider and activity.

This process, of reflecting on their position amongst the relationships and ideas that characterise their field of research, sometimes contributed to p-rs’ feeling more conscious of their dual identities within their workplace. Some of the complexity of the action-researcher pathway lies partially within the action-researchers’ ‘embeddedness’ within the environment that also forms the focus of their enquiry. Whilst, as described above, this can lead to beneficial access to the community, activities and ideas under research and potentially challenge ideas about how and by whom research is done, it can also present challenges. The research journey undertaken by GfW p-rs is explored below, including opportunities and barriers to the p-r approach and support mechanisms for making it work.

1.5 Supporting practitioner-researchers undertaking research on the outcomes of woodland based activity

1.5.1 What is research and how does it compare with practitioners’ existing roles?
During the early stages of GfW, it became clear that several, connected issues were challenging practitioners’ adoption of a researcher role and entry into the project. There were practical concerns amongst initiatives and practitioners over balancing the demands of research with continued delivery of woodland activities. Perceptions of the research as an ‘academic’ exercise, in contrast to the practical focus of practitioners chosen field of work, also influenced decision making over whether to become involved.

Concern about achieving a balance between research priorities and work was anticipated somewhat in the decision to pilot GfW with a strategic intake of practitioners. Practitioners piloting the GfW collaboration came from organisations and initiatives with established links to the GfW research team\(^2\). It was anticipated that these established connections would support cooperation and confidence in the academic and practitioner partnerships and willingness on both sides to shape and test the design of the project.

\(^2\) Plymouth University and the Silvanus Trust
The commitment of practitioners engaged at the pilot stage was enduring, but also evidenced the need to explore the time and energy constraints faced by practitioners within the methodological development of the project. Both the GfW research team and p-rs’ were keen to establish a how a research agenda might fit with practitioners’ current practices and working cultures. In trying to establish what this balance it became important to address a number of associated issues situated at the interface of the academic and third sector partnership.

Who can do research, where and how?

- How different is research from other practitioner’s activity delivery?
- Can research about a community of practice be produced from within that community, and can it be robust?
- Do practitioners need to distance themselves from their current activity delivery and community to take on a research role and produce findings with influence?

The first of these issues appeared to underpin a concern amongst some practitioners that commitment to the project might require too much ‘academic’ activity. Some were worried that engagement in the research would involve behaviour that contrasted the active and ‘practical’ role they had chosen for their work. For example, a number of practitioners described having deliberately moved away from study to a hands-on occupation and others worried it would involve too much time sat at a computer. Practitioners contrasted the physicality and outdoor nature of their work with a research role that was perceived to be ‘cerebral’, interior and static. In the initial stages of GfW, woodland activity providers sometimes understood the research role to require traits and skills unemployed in their current work and this perception also influenced some initiatives in their selection of appropriate ‘researchers’ from amongst their staff (those with an ‘academic’ background felt to be more suitable than those with fewer study based qualifications, for example.

‘I asked him [the manager of initiative] directly, what he thought of [a practitioner’s potential] involvement and about his little doubtful gesture. He agreed that he had had that reaction and it was because [that practitioner] had no academic background’ [RJ 30/04/2010]

Some practitioners’ understanding of what ‘research’ involves possibly drew on their previous encounters with academic institutions, communities and cultures. Research was variously perceived as intellectual, indoors, scientific, quantitative and bureaucratic. The strength of these ideas appeared to have an influence on who practitioners understood could do research, where and how, but also what kinds of research result has value.

In order to better understand how perceptions of research attitudes and practice might influence the uptake of the practitioner-research role, GfW asked six potential partners what behaviours and ethos they associated with research, and which with woodland education/activity. The results indicated significant parallels between the qualities practitioners attributed to themselves and researchers, although contrasts
were also evident. When asked what skills and personal attributes might be useful in undertaking research, the majority identified observation and communication skills as key, as well as the ability to reflect, alongside substantial organisational abilities.

‘Ability to plan thoroughly, identify and predict clear outcomes then analyse what actually happens... Observation of people and what they do and say and reflection afterwards... Allowing people to discover, react and inter-react without interrupting them unnecessarily or leading them to outcomes that you predict. It is essential to inspire confidence and dispel insecurity so that people feel comfortable in possibly unfamiliar surroundings.’ (P1).

‘Sensitivity to group and individual dynamics, good observation skills, concise and accurate recording skills, listening and open, non-judgemental attitude’ (P2).

‘Organisation, forward planning, computer skills. Good communication. Ability to gather and make sense of data... Friendly, approachable and persuasive to encourage people to engage with the research.’ (P3).

‘Ability to frame relevant and focussed questions. - Knowledge of sound methodologies. Knowledge of previous research in the field – to inform own research. Verbal and written presentation skills. Awareness of research ethics... Active Listening skills. - Flexibility – willingness to change tack or start again.’ (P4).

‘I think that it is important to have clear aims and objectives when carrying out research. It is also important to remain organised throughout a project’ (P5).

‘Methodical, focused, applying hypothesis to area of study or letting issues and ideas emerge’ (P6).

Similarly, when asked what skills are significant in their current, woodland-based work practitioners highlighted communication, observation and organisational abilities. However, notably, these qualities in their practice were tied to leadership, creativity and practical skills. Adaptability and flexibility were also mentioned more frequently.

‘The ability to put people at ease in an unknown setting is useful, as well as a clear awareness of their needs at all times. Flexibility is essential as families can be unpredictable, as can the environments I use for learning. Creativity allows for changes of plan and making the best of any situation.’ (P1).

‘Ability to engage people and encourage them to participate. Listening skills and observation, to really see what is happening and the dynamics of the individuals and groups. Sensitivity. A strong sense of self, and sense of leadership, in order to be respected and listened to (particularly with children/teenagers)’ (P2).

‘The ability to get on with people from all different backgrounds, ages and abilities. A sense of humour. Good organisational and planning skills. Practically minded’ (P3).

‘The ability to relate to young people, to engage them with the natural world and to help them reflect on the outdoor experiences they have had. Business management – ability to plan and project possible scenarios. Manage budgets and staff...’ (P4).

‘The qualities that are useful within my position are to always remain flexible, adaptable and organised. These skills are vital in delivery of a high standard of work’ (P5).
‘Practical outlook and willingness to get mucky and have a go. Leadership and confidence with groups. Listener, problem solver, solution focused’ (P6).

This research exercise provided evidence that practitioners saw some skill sets as significant to both research and practitioner roles. Subsequently, the transferability of these capacities was promoted by GfW to initiatives interested in being involved. However, whilst these aptitudes and traits could be emphasised as research relevant, the influence of ideas around who can do research and which practices and knowledge can be employed to achieve it, continued to be felt across these partnerships. Within the survey evidence for example, the research role seems be associated with a sort of tidying, bringing focus, order and accuracy to the field of work. By contrast the practitioner job appears to be one where you might get messy, both literally and figuratively, interacting strongly with environment and people. More specifically, the practitioner is imagined as firmly embedded in their setting whilst the researchers’ clarity appears to be associated with a more emotional neutral approach. This division might be linked to a wider western cultural viewpoint, noted above, which sometimes understands intellectual and practical labour to be the domains of two different types of people.

A comparable questioning of who, how and where research can be done was also evidenced within academic communities reactions to GfW. When introduced to the project, conference and seminar audiences recurrently asked how research questions, methods and tools developed within the research field could be balanced, or robust enough to have impact beyond it. Practitioner led research was seen by some as at risk of being unwittingly biased and ‘tautological’ [A1]: establishing what it desired to see prior to enquiry and then only seeing that evidence. Academics also questioned how such research could move beyond its immediate context if its questions and methods were entrenched in local ideas and relationships. Some predicted that such research would use qualitative, non-standardised methods that would also limit the influence of the results beyond its community.

**Achieving research from within the field**

During the pilot stages of the research both academic and woodland activity provider communities were concerned that practitioners’ starting point, amid the expertise and practices of their field of research, might be ill-suited to producing clear research. This question can be detected at pinch points throughout the project’s lifetime, but also in its successes.

Academic communities emphasised the significance of p-rs’ position in the field, detachment and objectivity as a theoretical issue. For practitioners participating in the pilot stages of GfW, these issues were sometimes expressed in a need to try and gain distance and separation from the research environment in order to gain clarity. Sometimes p-rs experienced embedding in the field as a challenge to development of a ‘research’ perspective.
‘After our meeting yesterday, [the p-r] felt enthusiastic but also a bit overwhelmed at all the different aspects of forest school [p-r] could potentially explore. [The p-r] wants to talk to the Head to confirm what her interest in the research is’ [RJ 15/07/2010].

With their wide knowledge of the research field, generation of a ground up perspective, tools and approaches to the research sometimes appeared a dauntingly broad task. Feeling intimated in this way was sometimes associated with a perceived lack of research skills.

‘My limited research experience meant that each step was new and a challenge. I struggled with the openness and fluidity of the task and the changeable nature of the project at the beginning’ [R9].

The GfW research team were keen to support the transfer of the flexibility, creativity, leadership and expertise that p-rs expressed in their woodland activity provision to the p-r role, anticipating their embedded position might reveal perspectives and ways to achieving them that an outsider understanding might not. By contrast, some practitioners were keen to achieve a new and more distanced viewpoint; one that could arrange and find order in their field of research. Both communities can be seen as responding, to some extent, to perceived differences in the attitudes, traits and responses of those who undertake intellectual and practical work.

[The p-r] would like if possible to create some sort of pro-forma set of questions that he can return to again and again throughout the year- but [the Project Researcher] emphasised that there is also room for creativity and appropriate [to forest school ethos and tasks] tools within his approach’ [RJ 03/09/2010].

In response to both wider academic communities and p-rs support for tools with which to achieve more impartial perspectives, the research team increasingly formalised the action research structure and selected methods. This included the first cycle of research, broadly exploring opinion within their community of practice, as described above. This exercise was aimed towards highlighting p-rs relationship to the opinions and ideas present within their field of research and draw attention to the challenges and opportunities of their situation.

‘I tried to address [p-r]’s feeling of overwhelm by reassuring her often that this stage of the research cycle was to go wide and then draw in to a clearer research focus, informed by this first go round’ [RJ 17/09/2010].
1.5.2 Transition to and confidence in a p-r role

During the pilot phase of GfW it became evident that for some practitioners the p-r role was associated with behaviour and activity that contrasted with those familiar to their woodland based service delivery. These perceived contrasts challenged the transition to a p-r role, both practically and emotionally.

’[I experienced] challenges with changing my role within [initiative’s] existing ethos of hardwork! (from active, productive worker to more passive reflective research role)’ [R2].

Others however viewed their existing skill sets as translatable to the p-r position and task and were more confident as a result.

‘great meeting with [woodland activity provider] yesterday. Very positive – I think that because they are confident in taking on the research role, because [initiative’s manager] sees its value, they are also very confident in thinking about how they can adapt techniques they use in their work for research purposes’ [RJ 28/09/2010].

These differences, in the extent to which a practitioner anticipated adapting existing skills to a p-r role or adopting new behaviours and traits, can be associated with several factors. One of these was how closely p-rs anticipated a research goal and endorsed it.

**Clear and valued research goals**

Confident transition to a p-r role was associated with having a clear research goal and valuing its potential impact.
P-rs who could anticipate and value potential research outcomes, close to the start of their involvement, appeared to associate the p-r role more closely with their existing skills and adopt it with more confidence. Those who felt less clear about the end result of their involvement seemed less likely to align ‘researcher’ attributes and approaches with their existing practices and behaviours.

‘I did not see clear goals and targets and found it difficult to keep motivated...although there was enthusiastic and professional support, I felt out of my depth...confused as how to proceed quite a lot of the time. I was not sure how I was going to use the data I was collecting, and therefore lost motivation’ [R8].

These project participants tended to experience the move into a p-r role as a more significant process of change and were also more likely to want intervention and direction from the research team. Initial motivation for joining GfW fairly frequently came from managerial staff that then identified other employees as candidates for the p-r role. Whilst the role was referred to another, managers’ research objectives may not have been as clearly transferred. In these instances clear, valued research goals were sometimes less likely to act as the driver to p-rs’ involvement or ease transition to a p-r role.

[Managers of potential p-r]... spoke a lot about what [PR] required and what would benefit [p-r]– etc. However, when I speak to [p-r] it is obvious that [p-r] feels at quite a remove in some ways from them and is struggling to feel connected to the research [Case study 8. RJ 10/12/2010].

‘[Manager] was very enthusiastic about the research and possibly really wanted to do it, but didn’t have any time...found these other members of staff who were slightly reluctant... But the impression is that other parts of [p-r]’s work...are of more significance, because there are more significance to [p-r]’ [Case study 2. RJ 14/12/2010].

‘[Manager] from [organisation] rang...He remains really enthusiastic...but said that [p-r], who he wants to take the research forward ‘needs to buy in’ to doing the research and it made me think about this issue of management again...They (the managers) are the ones that can see the need for the research, but they are not the ones doing it... Managers need to give sufficient support and time to the member of staff researching to allow them [PR] to feel they can get hold of and address processes they will find alien or difficult [Case study 5. RJ 22/12/2010].

On other occasions motivation to take part in GfW came from non-managerial staff within larger enterprises. In these instances, employees sometimes struggled to align possible research objectives with the existing priorities of their organisation. Some of these p-rs also experienced associated challenges in confidently taking on the p-r role, particularly integrating ‘practical’ delivery with ‘academic’ goals.

‘It seems to be quite tricky for [p-r] to get hold of [manager] and [manager] is supportive of the research, but [p-r] is the one driving it...So [p-r] doesn’t have... [ manager making] any demands of him in that area [research] but lots of demands on him in other areas, so he’s more than likely going to prioritise those other areas, in relation to the research’ [Case study 9. RJ 14/12/2010].

Becoming a p-r was a practical shift for many, as it involved dedicated time to research related activities, even when data collection was integrated to an extent with woodland activity provision. For some, it was also experienced perhaps as a more personal shift; from everyday practices and knowledge to less familiar behaviours and ideas.
'The camera was used...flipcam too during this part of the session...took a lot of still photos and made notes - sitting as an observer whilst [Forest School Leaders] led. This felt very awkward; next time I’d like to be able to lead some reflective activities...morning session felt quite chaotic; interesting to observe rather than try and put right [R7]'.

Some p-rs found relationships with their working community were altered by this new role. A number of woodland activity providers were used to interactions with activity participants being grounded in practical skills and subject specific expertise. Some lost confidence when distancing themselves from these abilities in the p-r role and taking up new behaviour.

‘Questionnaire carried out...it felt like a poor evaluation tool for this situation...a lot of peer pressure, they [participants] were asking each other what their answers were, what to put for each question...some weren’t taking it at all seriously and were thinking up silly answers...I admit I dread having to do it again at the end, I felt a bit embarrassed that I was giving this questionnaire out, and so many of the questions feel totally irrelevant that I don’t feel any ownership over it or connection to it or its usefulness. I worry I have developed a reputation for being boring, papery and nosey and prying and concerned about how much fruit they eat each day and other ‘big-brother’/ naggy things!? [R2]’

Familiar ways of gaining influence and trust in relationships and being flexible and creative with methods could feel less appropriate or accessible when a p-r was also concentrating on exercising new skills and attitudes. But for some adopting behaviours they associated with research, such as paying concentrated attention and using listening skills, also opened up new types of relationship with service users.

‘I’ve built up a good relationship with them [young research respondents]. I know them quite well and feel they would open up to me, more than I would have thought, so just because I’ve spent time with them and helped them on things and things like that so... And noticing that I am making more effort to do that because I know that having a good relationship with them will be beneficial to this [research] so that’s interesting to notice and probably will actually in a sense improve their experience of their time here, because I’m making more of an effort to really engage with them and listen to them. Even if it’s for selfish reasons, of trying to get to know them better so that I’ll have a good, um...relationship and am more able to understand what it is their getting out of being in the woodland...it’s that positive knock-on effect that um, that seems like quite a good thing really! [R2]

Importantly, p-rs position within the field did provide advantages when they felt able to draw on their existing understanding of and relationships within this research setting.

‘Being personally involved with [initiative] really helped me to ’get into’ the research, and I feel that the process would have been more laborious had there been ’outside’ researchers - it was very valuable that we all started with a shared understanding of the [initiative]’ [R21].

‘my good existing relationship with the facilitators [of woodland activities] and participants...my familiarity with [initiative] and the woodland [were factors facilitating effective working in the p-r role] [R2].

As anticipated, practitioners did adopt the p-r role most confidently when their existing skills and abilities were perceived as relevant to it.
Integrating research approaches with existing skills and abilities

A p-r role was more confidently adopted when practitioners felt existing skills and abilities were relevant and could be used within it.

‘I took on the role of facilitating focus groups and interviewing [initiative] members. I have years of experience facilitating people providing information about themselves in groups and individually, so I felt very at ease in this role...Being methodical, well-organised, thorough and with an eye for detail are traits of mine which have helped me work effectively in the p-r role’ [R20].

‘I have a background in project management, so took on the role of co-ordinating the team effort - making sure we kept to the timetable, organising invoicing etc. I found that my previous experience of working with children was helpful when co-facilitating the workshop in the wood [R21].

‘In my working life I have facilitated and led small scale workshops as well as national scale projects and enjoy being a part of a team, supporting other team members and learning new insights from and with them [R22].
1.5.3 Colleagues and managers engagement in the research: establishing a micro-research community

Taking on the p-r role and associated changes in behaviour and goals could also affect p-rs’ relationships with peers within their initiative, sometimes introducing anxiety.

‘We were aware at the outset that there might be a tension between the different roles we were occupying in relation to the [initiative]. We are all members of [initiative] and three of us are Directors. Thus, we each have a vested interest...We made the decision to be very clear when carrying out our roles as researchers that we were not available to answer any questions as members or Directors of the [initiative]. This seemed to work well. The fact that no contentious issues or areas of conflict emerged during the research facilitated this separation between the roles’ [R20].

‘It was my idea to do the research, and whilst all the staff were supportive and interested, they were more distant than I...In some way the culture of research (and organisational learning) needs to be part of what the organisation does [prior to research], so that this practitioner-researcher role is not seen as an intrusion, a burden or even an extra pair of hands with sessions’ [R7].

‘It’s challenging being at [initiative] with a culture where we do lots and don’t sit and reflect and research all that much...I feel self conscious as maybe we don’t respect this kind of ‘work’ so I feel challenged by people’s judgements because I’m not seen to be ‘grafting’ like the others. I feel it would be better if the research was less explicit but more deeply interwoven in the activity, this feels like best practice’ [R2].

One p-r experienced unease in shifting from being an active team member to a passive observer and recorder of colleagues’ activity.

‘I think there might have been elements of discomfort [amongst colleagues] about being, because they knew that I was, some of the time I was watching the way that they were interacting with the kids which is what I was doing...So, yeah, but I didn’t ask them [colleagues], perhaps I should have asked them? [R7].

Again, the dividing of certain practices and expertise as either ‘intellectual’ or ‘practical’ work could contribute to making a p-r feel like an outsider in the once familiar field.

‘...actually if I’d asked them [colleagues] and said “look this is what I really need from you guys, I’ve already said this isn’t working, can you help me to make it better” then ... I probably would have got something from them, but now the question that’s coming into my head is why did I not feel confident enough to do that?...I think part of it is about doing, being perceived as somebody who’s not doing, but is thinking and reflecting, because my perception is that those are not activities that are valued there [R7-telephone interview].’

‘I feel that I could have gotten better answers if I had been part of the facilitation team and then asked questions after being part of the team that enabled the experience but with such a short session and with the type of participant I was talking to, families with little children, there was no way to interview the participants after the session’[R8].
What appeared to work best, and was aspired to by the many p-rs, was a research practice that: married research with more familiar behaviour and skills; where, importantly, research objectives were understood and respected by colleagues and managers; and p-rs felt they were achieving clear outcomes on behalf of their organisation and themselves. It seemed however, that these conditions for success could often only be clearly appreciated by p-rs following their negotiation of the challenges and opportunities of the dual role. Experiential learning was often key in p-rs development of a blueprint for the role. The involvement of two or more members of staff from the practitioners’ initiatives clearly helped support transition to the p-r role and confident p-r practice. When paired with other p-rs, practitioners tested and challenged their ideas and developing perspectives with one other and provided reassurance when new approaches felt awkward or unclear. In addition, each p-r brought different career histories and transferable skills. This increased the likelihood that research tasks could make use of existing abilities and attitudes and so be made to feel familiar and comfortable. Increased integration of practitioner and researcher behaviour and mutual support underpinned the development of a more robust micro-research culture within initiatives. Projects two+ p-rs maintained more consistent momentum than single practitioner led research. Two+ p-rs shared the burden of work, helping each other break down and tackle complex or less familiar activities that might otherwise obstruct progress.

‘Working as a pair of researchers was of benefit. We each brought different skills and experience to the project and divided tasks according to these strengths. We also supported each other with tasks that were more challenging’ [R1].

‘Working with a colleague…on the project greatly enhanced our ability to try out different research methods, gather different types of data, gather the amount of data that we did and analyse the data more thoroughly’ [R5].

‘In deciding which task to take on in the research project, each of the four of us played to our strengths…very grateful to be working with three others… I was able to draw on their practical knowledge as well as air my concerns and be guided and reassured by them’ [R20].
GfW aimed to involve two p-rs per collaborating initiative from the outset; however most organisations struggled to release two employees or volunteers to involvement. As it became evident that single p-rs were less likely to feel comfortable and confident in the role, GfW asked initiatives’ managers to more actively oversee the research. GfW formalised this need for managers to provide sustained and focused support for p-rs involvement within the agreements contracted between their organisation and Good from Woods.

This nudge for increased organisational involvement appeared to work most effectively in larger, longer established organisations where managers, importantly, had to justify commitment to the project at higher and strategic levels. Organisations working with fairly formal, hierarchical structures of staff responsibility appeared most likely to agree to committing time to active management of the research. These larger scale employers, with clear internal bureaucracy, tended to spend more time envisaging and planning research objectives – ones that provided a rationale for staff time spent on research - and initiate clear lines of responsibility for achieving these outcomes. Managerial engagement helped foster and sustain micro-research cultures within p-rs’ organisations.

Smaller and/or less established organisations were sometimes less likely to envisage how and where research results would be used within their organisation. It was also sometimes less clear who would supervise or be accountable for success of the research. Sometimes, the flatter nature of management within smaller organisations appeared to result in p-rs feeling less able to ask for support from peers and managers. Used to defining themselves as active ‘doers’, needing limited supervision, some p-rs were reluctant or struggled to alter this image amongst their colleagues. Again it appeared that perceptions of the differences between ‘thinkers’ and ‘doers’ (intellectual and practical capacities), influenced these issues.

Smaller or less established initiatives were also more likely to experience shifts in priorities, commitments, funding and staffing that threatened supervisory, peer and p-r focus upon the research.

Educational institutions such as primary schools or further education colleges sometimes appeared an exception to these general patterns. Sometimes large, long founded organisations, with well-defined patterns of responsibility and accountability, they nevertheless struggled with the sudden shifts in aims, obligations, financial support and personnel that challenged embedding of micro-research cultures within smaller organisations. Without strong peer understanding of and support for research goals, such changes presented pinch points at which p-rs struggled.

‘no longer working at [initiative] [p-r] no longer has such a stake in the outcomes, how does GfW build into [their] future?...[to], paraphrase [the p-r], “just won’t bother” if can’t see its relevance. [Pr] argues that it’s up to [GfW] to make it seem relevant and useful for [p-r] in these circumstances’ [RJ 16/04/2012].
1.5.4 University- Third Sector collaboration

P-r collaboration with the research team was an important factor in research goals being achieved.

When asked what helped effective working in the p-r role, the involvement of the research team was very frequently cited.

*Support, guidance and advice from Project Researcher and Mentor at Plymouth University*’ [R1].

‘Help from Silvanus Trust project lead to discuss research methods/bias – how to go about doing the research’ [R4].

‘Project Researcher’s support and experiences’ [R2].

‘Regular guidance, feedback and support from the Project Researcher at the Silvanus Trust (face-to-face meetings, telephone and Skype discussion, emails). Also when the Project Researcher accompanied us on our final practical session with our group’ [R5].

‘Having a person outside the organisation to support the process really helped the research to bear fruit... without someone guiding the way I think I would have given up somewhere in the middle’ [R7].

Forms of support p-rs accessed from GfW included frameworks for guiding the research process, introduction to research approaches and tools, and individual advice and guidance. Some p-rs’ felt collaboration with the research team was fundamental to achieving their research goals.

This collaboration similarly grew the research team’s understanding of which research approaches and data collection methods are a best fit for the outdoor, woodland activity provision context. Project learning (including methodological perspectives and methods developed by p-rs in the field) refined guidance and resources provided to each new intake of p-rs, who in turn developed it further.

P-rs and the research team collaborated particularly closely at the start of the project during co-development of the action research approach, guiding frameworks and analysis tools. As the project evolved and more practitioners were enrolled, p-rs were also able to use each other as a support network to some extent. In some instances GfW asked p-rs who had successfully undertaken research to partner with single practitioners, new to or struggling with the research, to provide the peer support that was evidently so valuable.

P-rs from smaller, less established initiatives and/or those unable to release two members of staff to the project were more likely to partner closely with the research team in taking their project forward. Those with little research experience were also more inclined to co-develop their work with the Silvanus Trust and the Plymouth University mentor. By comparison practitioners who identified themselves as having existing research skills were more likely to develop approaches and methods with less consultation.

‘I have for many years adopted an action learning approach to research and project management’ [R22].

‘I have a research background so was comfortable with the tasks we needed to do and also felt I could be realistic about what was achievable. I have designed and analysed several on-line surveys for various projects, using Survey Monkey, and this experience was useful in being able to plan the survey element of the research. My experience also helped in spotting potential pitfalls in using survey questionnaires for data gathering’ [R23].
Few p-rs identified themselves as having well established research skills prior to involvement, but those that did were able to build on these by embracing the mixed methods approaches that GfW tended to foster.

‘I was confident that we were going to be able to design a project that would provide information which we could use to answer the research questions we had, but was aware that the methods I had used to conduct research in the past would only give us part of the story. The challenge was getting to grips with how my fellow-researcher's methods would work’ [R23].

P-rs were also more independent of the research team when they could get reassurance and support from peers or family with research experience.

‘I have also used NVivo to code and analyse transcripts, which was invaluable in terms of saving time, and drew on my partner's research experience (and software!) for this’ [R21]

‘Having not done any previous research I felt completely at sea at times and equally very grateful to be working with three others who all have research experience. I was able to draw on their practical knowledge as well as air my concerns and be guided and reassured by them’ [R20].

Conscious of the time limited nature of the GfW project and University-third sector partnership, p-rs were keen to establish a set of accessible set of tools that could support practitioners in the sector to take up research practices, once the project came to an end. GfW supported practitioners to take this aim forward through their development of a research ‘toolkit’ for the sector hosted online at www.goodfromwoods.co.uk. Practitioners’ blog of the experience of creating the toolkit can be found on the site. The toolkit can be explored to provide a good understanding of how methodological approaches and methods, including the GfW wellbeing domains and indicators, were used, developed and valued by p-rs.

University and third sector collaborative working

Collaborative working between p-rs and the research team was a significant factor in confident achievement of GfW research and outcomes.

These partnerships underlined to communities the benefits, academic and practitioner, of collaborative working.
During development of the GfW toolkit, p-rs explored the value of having established links to someone with research experience, when taking on the p-r role. The experience of collaboration has underlined to both p-rs and the research team the mutual benefits of academia partnering practitioner communities to conduct research.

P-rs sometimes struggled with aspects of partnering to a large institution. This was most frequently an issue associated with the requirement for each project to gain ethical approval from Plymouth University. The procedure of application and the ethics strategies which gained approval were felt to conform to ethos and administrative cycles belonging to the University and were perceived to result in an unnecessarily lengthy
and complex process. P-rs sometimes felt frustrated that the process did not feel more responsive to their viewpoints, working patterns and context.

‘documents for stakeholders and participants such as consent and information forms could have been written in more user-friendly/less ‘researchy’ language’ [R1].

‘collected a lot of consent forms but [gathering them from] parents remains a problem. Am I to follow children home or plea with parents over the phone?...they [parents] seem to be too busy with other children + complicated lives’ [R30].

‘Email and call...about the [information, consent and application] form...I had a big rant about the University not being flexible; we (the practitioner researcher) are expected to do all the flexing...I think we are getting there’ [R7].

However, p-rs equally found advantages in their work being associated with the public profile of a large academic institution. One set of practitioners, for example, found that management within their initiative seemed to give their work and its outcomes more gravity once it became associated with a University partnership. Another initiative felt that their connection to the University increased both their legitimacy in the eyes of others and their own conviction in their abilities.

1.5.5 Achieving research: using blueprints and getting messy
As described above, experiential learning, gained during participation in GfW, often proved central to practitioners’ conceiving what a confident, comfortable and integrated p-r role might look and feel like. These learning experiences however, could feel uncomfortable, unclear, challenging and messy.

‘I have attached the write up with the analysis finished (I think). I will now go through and tidy it up – fill in project information, edit it into real English not just my mad ranting and ravings...I feel that my brain has expanded which is a great thing...Right, now I’m off to find some livestock to organise and care for. Something tangible to do’ [R8].

These struggles for clarity and the energy with which to achieve it, were sometimes described in terms of the contrast they made to physical labour. At other times the experience of researching was translated with a metaphor based around physical engagement and challenge.

‘I can see the light at the end of the tunnel and it’s getting stronger!...I’d love your help on this as I am so close to the data now that I can’t see what stands out... I can prioritise these points with open eyes and a fresh look...Thanks in advance for your help with this last little hurdle’ [R8].

‘Thanks for the reassuring chat yesterday. I think it has given me a new impetus ...It is very interesting what a roller coaster this research project has been - I do hope that you are able to capture the process that we are going through as much as data and indicators! [R7].

‘R5a: ‘I enjoyed doing, I sort of, even though it was really frustrating, I kind of enjoyed doing the analysis. And I didn’t expect that either, to sort of get quite into doing... You know by the end I was thinking (intake of breath) ‘Oh I really want to be a researcher!’
R5b:...But there were those times and I think you identified them, it reminded me a bit of what’s that bit you get to when you’re giving birth? What do they call that bit, transition?..There were times like that! When you thought “oh I just really don’t know what I’m doing here, or why I’m doing it or where I’m going?” And you were always very good [Research team member] at telling us that that was all fine’

Moments of confusion and lack of clarity sometimes led to p-rs asking for the imposition of increased structure, guidance and signposting from the GfW research team. But such moments, as the above quotes suggest, could also be turning points. The comparison of such moments with ‘transition’, as above, is an interesting one. As a verb transition means ‘To make or undergo a transition (from one state, system, etc. to or into another); to change over or switch’ (OED, 2015). But it carries additional meaning in the sense that the practitioner is using it as describing part of the birth process. Transition is as it suggests a transitional point, in this case between two phases of labour (Giving Birth Naturally, 2015). It is a moment where the mother often doubts they can carry on with active labour, but in fact indicates that this stage is nearly complete (Ibid). Mothers often request interventions at this moment, unaware the doubt they are experiencing suggests they have nearly moved into the next, perhaps calmer, often shorter, stage of giving birth (Ibid). It’s a great simile for the bewildering, but frequently defining or crossroads moments in p-r research journeys!

Practitioners taking on the p-r role particularly needed reassurance at these key moments, which often turned out to be the transition to the next stage of the research process.

‘As I began to fully understand the GfW project and the notion of wellbeing indicators, outcomes and reporting process, I felt less confident that I had any material that would be of any use to either GfW, [Initiative] or [Stakeholders]. This led to a big dip in focus in the middle of the reporting work. However, [Project Researcher] helped me to see that the data that I had gathered were going to be useful, and...already held some useful insights’ [R7].

Whilst many practitioners understood the value of getting ‘messy’ in their woodland activity provision role, it wasn’t an experience they associated with research practices. This may be because this aspect of researching is often underemphasised and unexplored in the literature. As Cook (2009) suggests in her reflections on action research:

‘We saw a gap between our more convoluted practice and published models of neat research. This led to doubts as to whether we were doing ‘proper research’ or whether we were doing ‘research properly’. Perceptions of self as researcher tended to be linked to portrayals in the literature of neat and tidy research models’ (Cook, 2009:278).

P-rs frequently anticipated that advice and blueprints could underpin smooth transitions into that role and certainly the co-development of these was central to encouraging self-assurance and momentum in their projects. However, perhaps it is also important to recognise that regardless of such tools there are likely to be other types of ‘transition’ during the research journey. These are the important moments of doubt, when the weight or complexity of tasks seems impenetrable, but when often resolution is in reach.

Getting Messy and achieving research

P-rs who are supported to move through moments where the research seems complex and confusing sometimes find these feelings are precursors to increased confidence and understanding.
1.6 Summary of Factors influencing practitioners confidently researching:

**What challenged adoption of integrated practitioner-researcher role:**

- Perceived/felt disjuncture between thinkers/doers, theoretical knowledge and practical skills.
- Unclear envisaging of research goals and objectives by p-r and their organisation: how research findings would be made use of.
- Low peer engagement with research methods and goals within organisation: fragile micro-research culture
- Lack of supervisory responsibility for achievement of these outcomes within p-rs organisation
- Shifts in priorities, commitments, funding and staffing within p-r’s organisation
- Frustration in aspects of collaboration with academic partners
- Feeling overwhelmed by research tasks and data: Getting ‘messy’

**What supported adoption of integrated practitioner-researcher role:**

- Clearly envisaged research goals and objectives by p-r & how research findings could be used by p-r’s organisation.
- Clear organisational planning for how p-r’s research findings could be used
- Involvement of 2 + staff as p-rs: sustaining micro-research culture within organisation
- Established lines of supervisory responsibility for achievement of research outcomes within p-rs organisation: sustaining micro-research culture
- Experiential learning
- Reassurance/guidance offered through collaboration with institutions/individuals with research experience
- Support to see that ‘getting messy’ is part of the research journey
1.7 Impacts of Good from Woods
The Good from Woods research project has resulted in a wide range of impacts for collaborating organisations and individual practitioners. These range from:

- altered understanding of how participants experience woodland based activities and the wellbeing benefits associated with these experiences,
- increased confidence in explaining the wellbeing benefits of participation in these activities and initiating new projects that build on these benefits
- changes to practice (both to activity delivery and approach to research)
- influencing wider policy and practice.

Most significantly the project’s impact on understanding, practice and policy means that there will continue to be future beneficiaries of learning and change in these areas.

**Impacts for Project Administrator: GfW Research Team Case Study**

**Formation of strong links between the Silvanus Trust and Plymouth University:** Silvanus has benefitted from the Universities mentorship and grown its research expertise. ‘This has increased our capacity to undertake research both in partnership with Plymouth University, and independently, contributing towards winning research and evaluation contracts’.

**Learning from Plymouth University’s research ethos:** The Trust now has a strong understanding of research ethics and has implemented this in funding bids and research projects/evaluation work.

**Increased understanding of supporting practitioners in action research in an outdoor setting:** ‘we know how to support other organisations and individuals in accomplishing this effectively’.

**Increased organisational awareness and knowledge of the social cohesion and wellbeing outcomes of woodland based activities:** This learning has and will continue to be used to seek funding for future projects and ‘inform our in house provision of CPD opportunities and outdoor learning experiences’.

**Impacts for Collaborating Initiatives: Stroud Woodland Co-op**

**Influence on understanding and practice:** Expectations for impact were to ‘Help us to know what motivates people to be part of the co-op and to re-assess the way we do things’. The findings met this expectation and are being used to inform the way the cooperative operates, with ‘even more emphasis on building a sense of community’.
**Impacts for Collaborating Initiative: Nature Workshops Case Study**

**Increased research capacity and profile:** Nature Workshops anticipated involvement in GfW ‘would raise our profile as an action research agency and improve our skills’ and felt this aspiration had been realised. Connection with Plymouth University had a positive impact on the organisation, cementing ‘a belief in ourselves as a bona fide action research agency able to name drop the University at every opportunity’.

**Expanded organisational networks and connections:** ‘To be part of not only GfW but also the Outdoor Learning group in general and all the great connections and linkages we make with this’.

**Shareable research findings:** Nature Workshops findings have been shared with a wide range of audiences including those in forestry, health, forest education and education sectors.

**Influence on understanding and practice:** Involvement in GfW had an impact on how Nature Workshops seek funding, understand and evaluate their and others’ work, and how they value their own work.

**Sustaining provision of woodland activity:** ‘Participation with GfW has won us contracts and still does and will do for a long time. This means as a small not for profit we can continue our work but more importantly it means more vulnerable people will be able to access the natural world for well being and improved life chances’.

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**Impacts for Collaborating Initiative: The National Trust Case Study**

**Influence on Understanding and Practice:** Besides reporting within the Trust’s internal networks, the findings of the research were fed into the evidence collection for their *National Childhood Inquiry*. The results of the Inquiry were summarised in ‘Reconnecting children: with nature’ launched at the Natural Childhood Summit held in partnership with Play England and the NHS Sustainable Development Unit, amongst others. The Summit, drawing its remit from the Inquiry, recruited partners into a collaborative campaign ‘The Wild Network’ in association with the release of David Bond’s ‘Project Wild Thing’ documentary.
Impacts for Collaborating Initiative and Practitioners: Woodland Trust Case Study

Influencing Policy: The research has been linked with other research to produce a report then fed into policy documents and shared with key organisations such as Campaign to Protect Rural England, and government officials. These have recently been presented to the Secretary of State for Education ahead of the launch of the scheme ‘Schools into Woods’. The research is felt to back up why the Woodland Trust have done so much tree planting with children, giving authority to their message and promoting confidence in the organisation’s opinions.

Influence on current and future practice: Following re-structuring of the organisation, the research findings were used as part of an introduction to new management. “The findings were very powerful with senior management. They were shown the headline data and figures which were immediately understood.” All of those involved in organising and running WT tree planting activities have been briefed on the findings to raise awareness of what aspects of the activity are important to young people and what messages they take from it. It is also hoped that the research will feed into future planned work looking at how to revitalise woodland culture in Britain.

Expanded understanding of research practices: The staff member initiating engagement in the research feels it has improved their knowledge of the research process including understanding of ethical requirements; research constraints; and constructing questionnaire/interview questions. This knowledge has been applied when commissioning research.

Increased research capacity: One p-r is now keener to research final project outcomes, as opposed to evaluating them against initial aims, ‘I want to make an honest representation of projects’. She feels robust research has led to her current project receiving more funding than it would have with less thorough evaluation evidence. ‘I didn’t expect the project to have an impact in the beginning’... ‘It was a very useful project, I’m pleased to be involved in it and have learned a lot from the process.’

Transferable Learning: Both p-rs gained experience of working with teenagers through the research and identified appropriate language and methods for use with this group. Both have gone on to work with teenagers, either in a professional or voluntary capacity, and feel that this experience was of help.
Impacts for Collaborating Practitioner Researcher: Embercombe Case Study

**Influence on understanding and practice:** The research has made the practitioner-researcher more aware of the healing nature of the work she does. She feels that this ‘*growing understanding should lead to greater effectiveness*’. The p-r now also has more confidence in working with difficult, less engaged groups. The research findings provided the p-r with assurance that even those participants that ‘*don’t seem to be getting it*’ are engaging on their own level and accessing wellbeing outcomes.

Impacts for Collaborating Practitioner Researcher: Otterhead Case Study

**Influence on understanding and practice:** The research findings raised the p-rs awareness of the importance of play for all ages, not just children. This has resulted in changed practice with a greater emphasis on play based activity. The p-r is now doing a lot of work with families and adults, and applying these findings to those sessions.

**Sustaining provision of woodland activity:** Carrying out the research process increased the p-rs ‘*confidence in talking about wellbeing, which is useful when talking to funders, commissioners and customers*’.

**Transferable learning:** Involvement with GfW stimulated a peer member of staff to undertake a foundation degree course, which he has now completed.

Impacts for Collaborating Practitioner Researcher: Fort Apache Case Study

**Increased research capacity:** The project researcher went on to do a second project for GfW, which allowed her to build on her research experience and apply it to another setting.

**Impact on research participants:** The p-r feels that young peoples’ involvement in the research had a short term, positive impact on how they viewed themselves and Fort Apache, but it is not clear whether this has longer term implications.

**Sustaining provision of woodland activity:** The research findings have been used by Play Torbay within funding bids.

**Transferable learning:** The p-r has recently applied for a grant to explore and carry out her arts practice research approach, ‘*Taking part in Good from Woods was a major influence in developing this idea*’. Following the Fort Apache project, the p-r exhibited artwork at a ‘Soil Culture’ event, which she felt was inspired by the project. She also secured a contract which she felt she would not have got without the p-r experience. ‘*I don’t think my approach would have been as rigorous. I also don’t think I would have got the job without this experience and link with the University*’.
Impacts for Collaborating Initiatives: Mayflower Academy Case Study

**Influencing understanding and practice:** Because the research was carried out as part of a wide partnership between Plymouth based projects, all focused on increasing young people’s engagement with the natural world, its findings have fed into the results of each of these initiatives, including the local ‘Stepping Stones to Nature Project’ and the Southwest wide ‘Natural Connections Demonstration Project’.

The Mayflower Academy head teacher, where the research took place is keen to promote the findings of the research and to carry on and expand provision at the school for learning in outdoor natural environments.

**Expanded organisational networks and connections:** The networks created via the research project brought about new collaborations, such as one between the midwifery and education departments at Plymouth University which was felt unlikely to have happened otherwise.

**Increased research capacity:** The research process gave both p-rs further experience of carrying out action research with young people and ‘highlighted the need to be flexible in planning and delivery’ of research. This skills gain is thought to have contributed towards both p-rs gaining further employment subsequently. One P-r has a lecturing position at a Plymouth University and the other is working on community based action research and keen to carry out further research in the future. The latter p-r feels they have new delivery skills and different methods for evaluating their work. ‘[GfW] completely changed my approach to work’.

Impacts for Collaborating Initiative: Forest of Avon Case Study

**Influence on understanding:** Forest of Avon have gained a better understanding of the aspects of their work explored by their GfW projects and its relevance to others. This impact is reflected in a change of scope in their media profile (website content and content of tweets) to include information and research about the wellbeing impact of outdoor/woodland activity.

**Influence on practice:** One p-r felt that doing the GfW research and its results had given her the confidence to propose a new project at the mental health hospital she works at as an Occupational Therapist. The hospital which treats patients with acute and long-term mental health issues, now incorporates nature walks run by the pr into their weekly timetable of activities.
1.8 What next?
The GfW collaboration built up a strong network and resource of practitioner-researchers in the outdoor and woodland activity provision sector. The research partners and p-rs are keen to find opportunities to:

- share and publicise p-rs findings
- cascade research learning and skills on to others in the woodland/outdoor activity provision sector
- explore how findings on supporting the p-r role may correspond and be of use in the rapidly expanding field of ‘citizen science’
- have data collected further analysed and reported
- build on findings with further research and initiatives reflecting best practice results
- find opportunities to keep the network created during GfW active and engaged in identifying what’s good from woods.

Woodland at GfW case study site
2. The practitioner-researcher research summaries

2.1 Introduction to practitioner-researcher case study research

GfW p-rs found that Woodland-based activity provides opportunities for enhancing social, emotional, biophilic and physical wellbeing. Indicators of wellbeing and the activities that were linked to them are summarised below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Psychological</th>
<th>feeling relaxed, competent, capable, purposeful, in control &amp; developing oneself</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>via positive interpersonal interaction &amp; regard, learning, meaningful &amp; absorbing activities, increased influence over own and cooperative actions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>feeling socially supported &amp; supportive, sharing a purpose</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>via meaningful, intergenerational &amp; redefined interpersonal connection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>feeling happy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>via chances to participate, play, create, imagine, engage, relax, be outside, away from everyday settings and in the woods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biophilic</td>
<td>feeling engaged with the natural world &amp; close to nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>via appreciative engagement with nature, opportunities to nurture &amp; act in the interests of the natural environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical</td>
<td>raising physical activity levels &amp; feeling physically confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>via playful, creative, exploratory, purposeful &amp; unrestricted movement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Findings were generated using a range of research methods (from interviews and surveys, through art and play, to digital tools) across diverse groups of people (such as families learning and people facing mental health challenges) using the GfW common analytical framework to understanding wellbeing. Evidence across these studies show that woodland-based activities can influence participants’ feelings of social, psychological, physical, emotional and biophilic wellbeing and shed light on how such outcomes are achieved.
Psychological and Social Wellbeing

- Several studies point to woodland-based activity as inspiring experiences of self-confidence and competence in groups who may struggle to access similar feelings in other contexts. Students with learning difficulties, for example, can experience themselves as capable and skilled managers of their environment and social relationships, whilst being trained in coppicing skills (Ruskin Mill GfW).
- Young people undertaking woodland activity with a useful end product (such as harvesting wood), can feel an increased sense of purpose (Embercombe & Ruskin Mill GfW). Sometimes young people don’t enjoy doing work that is physically hard or being carried out in difficult conditions at the time. However, in the longer-term, such events may be recalled more positively as a challenge successfully met (Embercombe GfW).
- In a Forest School context, adults and young people with learning difficulties demonstrate abilities and attitudes to their carers that are less evident to these staff in other learning and recreation environments, contributing to better understanding of competence (Forest of Avon GfW).
- Co-owners of community woodland can experience a sense of shared purposefulness in their collective management of the wood and feel more in control through being able to mutually determine the welfare of a natural space (Folly Wood GfW).
- Positive interactions with adult tutors during woodland based activity can help young people to feel safe, supported, capable and competent (Embercombe GfW).
- Families can feel they are providing their child with beneficial experiences, through involving them in woodland activity. Being supported to take them outside in the woods can help parents to feel good about their parenting choices and to experience pleasure in witnessing their children’s engagement with the natural world (National Trust GfW).
Emotional and Biophilic Wellbeing

- A woodland setting can emphasise a sense of getting away from the concerns and trappings of peoples’ everyday lives, help people feel relaxed and support development of interpersonal connections (Embercombe GfW, National Trust GfW).
- Woodland settings stimulation of spirited, collaborative, creative and imaginative play appears to support young people from different backgrounds to feel good (Fort Apache, Forest of Avon, Otterhead GfW).
- The act of caring for the natural world can help people feel good. Members of community groups who co-own woodland value their contribution to preserving and enhancing a natural habitat and its availability to other people. This can occur even if they aren’t a regular user or caretaker of the wood (Folly Wood GfW).
- Teenagers who planted trees as children may recall the experience as providing an opportunity to nurture nature and feel good when recalling tending of the environment. This sometimes stands in contrast to expressed frustrations about their influence upon bigger ecological issues such as climate change (Woodland Trust GfW). Both this study and other GfW research with young people reveal how woodland experiences can provide immediate experiences of feeling good, but may also act as an extended resource for wellbeing, creating good memories and signposting them towards future good outdoor experiences (Embercombe GfW).
- Another perceived longer term impact of young people participating in Forest Education can be feeling good about valuing and caring for the environment and their raised environmental consciousness (Nature Workshops & Otterhead GfW).
- Children may deliberately choose to ‘prescribe’ themselves time spent in the woods, using interaction with natural spaces as a way of feeling happier and relaxing away from existing stresses and anxiety (Fort Apache GfW).
- Adults taking part in arts-based experiences in the woods may be encouraged into an appreciative engagement with natural spaces that makes them feel good (CCANW GfW).
- Learning more about the natural world can help people feel good (Embercombe, National Trust GfW).
Physical Wellbeing

- Children taking part in Forest School activities in a woodland environment as part of their school curriculum are more physically active during this time than they are during school grounds and classroom-based lessons. These increases in physical activity may be significant in maintaining children’s weight at healthy levels (WHY project GfW).
- Observations of people taking pleasure in self directed energetic activity are common to several of the studies, as is feeling good from more physically relaxed behaviours (Embercombe, Fort Apache, Otterhead GfW).
- Several GfW studies highlight the way in which woodland activities appear to support people to experience and present themselves differently allowing them to engage in different or increased activity. Teenage girls, for example, can feel more comfortable getting ‘messy’ in the woods, than they would in other settings (Embercombe GfW).
- Reframing sport by translating it to a woodland environment may empower adults to re-connect with sporting skills and activities they previously felt excluded from (CCANW GfW).
2.2 Summary Reports from Good from Woods Local Partners

This section contains all of the summary reports of the GFW local partner studies. These are all also available at www.goodfromwoods.co.uk. One local partner did not complete summary reports for her work, so the background, methods and results sections of her main reports are attached as appendices.

Embercombe – Young Leaders Project

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The project:</th>
<th>Young Leaders Project (YLP)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The organisation:</td>
<td>Embercombe</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The project researcher:</td>
<td>Jessie Watson Brown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant group:</td>
<td>'disadvantaged' young people aged 17-21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number taking part:</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity features:</td>
<td>physical; work; tree management; residential</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Top 3 messages:

1. A change in context (people, place and activity) and getting away from daily lives was important in facilitating experiences of wellbeing, especially for these underprivileged participants. Woodland environments in particular provide this sense of contrast to daily life.

2. Performing meaningful work-based tasks combined with experiences of praise and appreciation from staff provides participants with a sense of competence and purposefulness, and is particularly significant in contrast to an absence of this in their everyday life.

3. For successful understanding of the impact of programmes on participant wellbeing, designing research into the framework of programmes, and building relationships with the participants are both important strategies.

Background

Embercombe is a charity and social enterprise on a 50 acre site in Devon. There are 8 permanent members of staff, a number of freelance staff, and a transient community of volunteers.

The site consists of broadleaf woodland, open pasture, market gardens, yurt villages and various buildings for accommodation, catering and indoor spaces.

Embercombe exists to 'touch hearts, stimulate minds and inspire committed action for a truly sustainable world'. The activities run at Embercombe span a huge range. They include; residential and day visits for schools, working and playing on the land, in the woods and gardens; working with 'disadvantaged' teenagers; inspiring young adults to make change in the world and themselves; working with corporate training programmes looking at embedding ethics and sustainability into business; volunteer and apprenticeship programmes and much more.

Research focus

The research was conducted to find out what factors in the experience at Embercombe were associated with certain wellbeing outcomes. In addition, to find out whether participant experiences were similar to
facilitators’ expectations in terms of particular wellbeing outcomes. This would show whether the way Embercombe runs programmes achieves the outcomes expected. Any information found would go on to improve practice.

**Context**
The research took place between early 2010 and early 2011.

YLP is a year-long, 3 days a month programme. There were 7 participants (3 female, 4 male) aged between 17 – 21 from ‘disadvantaged’ urban backgrounds such as care homes, referred by Young Devon, an organisation that works with disadvantaged youth. About 15% of activities take place in woodland, these were mainly task-focused such as coppicing, coppice timber processing, and tree planting. Other activities on the programme include cooking, gardening, building, creative activities and team-building exercises.

The research took place in Embercombe’s woodland – a hundred year old broadleaf woodland of medium density, mainly composed of oak, hazel, birch, ash and hawthorn trees. The woodland is sloping and muddy, away from buildings on the opposite side of the site. Tree size varies between very big oaks, hazel coppice and recently planted small saplings. There is a groundcover of bracken, ferns, brambles, and bluebells. It is privately owned by Embercombe and frequently accessed by Embercombe participants.

**Expectations**
Stakeholders expected the following wellbeing outcomes to be experienced by participants:

- feelings of being engaged in a relationship with nature
- developing themselves
- feeling competent
- supporting others through social relationships
- feeling safe and supported within and through social relationships,
- and experiencing positive emotions and moods.

Stakeholder expectations were that it was through being in the woods that would bring about these types of wellbeing. Two key stakeholders consistently mentioned 'doing activities' and 'working' as the main activities that contribute, whereas the other two stakeholders rarely did so, their focus being more on having 'time-out' and just 'being'.

One expectation from the two social worker stakeholders who work with the participants in their daily lives, was that 'being away' from daily life would have a positive impact on the participants.

**Methods used**

- Audio-recorded individual interviews with a number of prepared questions and prompts at convenient points within activities to ask about their experiences, this worked well as participants were free to talk with less worry of peer pressure.

- Audio-recorded interviewing in small groups was more effective as it was more a discussion rather than an interview, the latter being intimidating especially for less confident participants. Although the louder participants tended to dominate and guide the discussion, overshadowing the quieter ones. Facilitated, all-group discussions worked well where everyone got a chance to contribute because it was led by another familiar member of staff.
Analysis was carried out by reviewing the data, and coding to a set of 'wellbeing indicators' – available in the full report or online. This analysis looked for indications that participants were experiencing wellbeing, and trying to identify who, what and where led to these experiences.

**Summary of findings**

This table outlines the main findings of this research (ranked in order of perceived significance):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wellbeing outcome</th>
<th>Associated factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Feeling Relaxed                                                                  | • being away from daily lives and worries  
• being in the atmosphere of the woodland  
• working in the woodland                                                               |
| Experiencing an absence of negative emotions and moods                            | • being away from worries and stress of everyday life  
• being in woods and outdoors supports absence of negative moods |
| Feelings of confidence in and enjoyment of physical activity                      | • participants talk about working and hard work in positive way  
• contrasted to their normal lives with little work, participants felt sense of achievement and therefore enjoyment and confidence  
• not always felt immediately, but with hindsight |
| Experiencing positive emotions and moods                                           | • combination of participatory work-based activity, in the woodland setting  
• being in a peer group  
• learning skills and trying new things |
| Feelings of being engaged in a relationship with nature                            | • activities and skills learnt  
• being in nature and outside was mentioned in comparison to the cities and technology of their everyday lives  
• making a positive impact on their environment |
| Feeling competent and purposeful                                                   | • doing things previously not done or thought possible and trying new things  
• from a sense of achievement in contrast to everyday life:  
• being seen by others to be competent  
• being in the woods, particularly work-based tasks  
• Embercombe staff give the context of helping the woodland and positively impacting the environment |
| Feeling safe and supported within and through social relationships                 | • The group, particularly away from usual surroundings and social norms  
• relationships with Embercombe staff and the feeling of safety and support they get through this |
Developing oneself

Two aspects:

- learning and developing themselves skilfully
- personal development
- being away from their everyday lives, and worries
- being in the woods and being at Embercombe

Feelings of closeness to the natural world

- being in the woods
- the contrast of closeness to nature at Embercombe with cities and technology

Results

The data is divided into the following wellbeing categories which are listed in order of perceived significance (with number of participant mentions in brackets).

Feeling relaxed (29 instances)

Participants tended to be relaxed for one of two main reasons; being away from worries, and being in the atmosphere of the woodland. Half the participants mentioned that being away from their daily lives, particularly their daily worries, gave them the opportunity to relax. Most participants mentioned the woodland atmosphere as having a calming effect on them. Half the participants also mentioned working in the woods as having a relaxing effect.

Participants also mentioned a sense of calmness and being relaxed even whilst doing hard work; "I've got a load of physical energy, but it's just calm, it's just like...the wood, the woods in general just makes me calm." (6MP P3)

Experiencing an absence of negative emotions and moods (23 instances)

This was mainly about being away from worries and stress. Almost all participants mentioned that being away from their everyday lives contributed towards an absence of negative emotions and moods, in particular away from stressful aspects of their lives like finances and housing. A number of participants continued by talking about being in the woods or outdoors as supporting them to not be in a negative mood.

"peaceful, I don’t have half the stresses I normally put on myself unnecessarily, cos it wasn’t there to remind me, which was nice. So I didn’t worry and go off on things and get a grump on cos things weren’t going my way – quieter mind" (4FP P1)

One participant mentioned that working helped her have an absence of negative emotions.

Feelings of confidence in and enjoyment of physical activity (22 instances)

Participants talked a lot about working and hard work, mostly in a positive way. They don't appear to have a huge amount of immediate confidence and enjoyment in the physical activity, but they hold the bigger picture and feel hard work is beneficial for them, and they do show signs of enjoyment.

A key point that is made by a number of participants is the comparison of doing the hard work in the context of Embercombe with doing little in their daily lives. This contrast seems to encourage a sense of achievement and therefore enjoyment and confidence.
There are, however a number of cases in which hard work seems to prevent participants from achieving this wellbeing outcome, but again it is not definitive, as they then look back later and say what fun it was and how good for them it is. One female participant was an interesting example of this. Her observed behaviour was of lack of enjoyment and confidence in the work, and she commented: "I’m not really a very physical person and like to just sit... me and physical activity don’t go together [laughs]" (2FP P1). But a month later her view has altered, and she has a more positive outlook on the situation: "I guess I just carried on through it and just sort of like ‘got to do it, so do it’, and not make excuses" (2FP P5) and "I just enjoyed it more, I just think I’ve sort of just put all that... being such an effort behind me and getting on with it..." (2FP P5)

**Experiencing positive emotions and moods (47 instances)**

All the participants talked mostly about working in the woods as contributing to positive emotions and moods, this seems to be a combination of a woodland setting and a participatory, work-based activity. Others mentioned the group contributed towards this wellbeing, and some mentioned learning skills and trying new things.

This is by far the most frequently experienced wellbeing by participants. It seems that using words like 'fun', 'laugh' and 'happy' are easy ways to describe something as a positive experience. Generally conversations started with the participants using these broad types of words, but with questioning, they progressed into more deeper, specific comments. It is possible that they were saying things like 'it was fun' as a way of avoiding a truthful, thoughtful answer. This could be either to protect themselves from exposure, or to 'please' the researcher.

Only one female participant mentioned negative emotions: "wet and miserable and hard work [unclear] and it was fun" (2FP P1) However, during the second event she seems to have changed her view slightly: "just enjoyed it more, I just think I’ve sort of just put all that... being such an effort behind me and getting on with it... because there’s no reason to not do it..." (2FP P5)

**Feelings of being engaged in a relationship with nature (21 instances)**

Participants mentioned activities and skills learnt as supporting them feel this wellbeing outcome. Nature and being outside was mentioned in comparison to the cities and technology of their everyday lives.

One participant said "I just love the nature, I love getting outdoors, rather than being cooped up inside all the time." (6MP P8)

It was mentioned by the participants that they enjoyed making a positive impact on their environment:

"it’s all nice and tidy now and it’s nice to be impacting the environment hopefully in a friendly way." (3MP P1)

**Feeling competent and purposeful (40 instances)**

Participants showed a sense of feeling competent and purposeful through a number of different ways:

- doing things previously not done or thought possible and trying new things:

"good environment for learning and trying new skills... they’ll just walk you through it and before you know it you’ll feel like you’ve been doing it for years" (4FP P2)
• from a sense of achievement in contrast to everyday life:

"you feel like you've achieved something instead of sitting around at home doing nothing" (4FP P7)

• being seen by others to be competent:

"people don't treat you like you are really stupid" (4FP P2)

All participants except one mentioned being in the woods as a contributing factor towards feeling competent, and mentioned working in the woods as a something that contributed to feelings of competency. This appears to give participants a sense of achievement and having done something useful, therefore helping participants feel competent. Embercombe staff give the context of helping the woodland and positively impacting the environment, and this supports the participants to feel purposeful in both a small scale (Embercombe) and larger scale (world). Participants tended to contrast this with their everyday life, it seems they were given the opportunity to feel competent through the work they were doing, "instead of just sitting around at college" (5MP P1).

Only one participant showed signs that she was not feeling competent:

"I just find it quite like hard work I think, I think I was struggling a bit like, ... just it was a lot of effort" (2FP P5)

**Feeling safe and supported within and through social relationships (19 instances)**

The group seems to be most important for this wellbeing indicator, which is frequently mentioned by most participants, particularly in relation to the fact that they are away from their usual surroundings and social norms, and that this allows people to 'be themselves'.

"getting to know each other the groups, ... Because outside really, is where [there's] technology... and it's all about what you look like and who you are really, but here everyone just lets go and does the work and enjoys doing the work and being who they are really." (1MP P2)

Embercombe staff are mentioned by a couple of participants, in particular the relationship participants are able to have with them and the feeling of safety and support they get through these relationships.

** Developing oneself (11 instances)**

There seem to be two aspects to this wellbeing indicator; that of learning and developing themselves skillfully: "more mentally aware of things and that, sort of trains your brain better than Nintendo DS Brain Trainer" (5MP P1), and the other of personal development: "being in the woods... gives you time to think" (2FP P7). The main theme that is consistent throughout the 4 participants who mentioned this type of wellbeing was that they were away from their everyday lives. Being away from worries in their lives was particularly commonly mentioned. Being in the woods and being at Embercombe were also mentioned.

**Feelings of closeness to the natural world (9 instances)**

Most participants who mentioned this talked about being in the woods: "I just get drawn to [the woods]" (6MP P3). Participants also mention the contrast of closeness to nature with cities and technology: Favourite thing? "The fact that it's in the middle of nowhere and it cuts you off from all civilisation... all sort of technology" (1MP P2)
Participants also expressed a general enjoyment of nature: "I just love the nature, I love getting outdoors, rather than being cooped up inside all the time." (6MP P8)

Reflections
Reflections on the results:

- An important factor for YLP participants was being away from their daily lives, technology and built environments. Woodlands appear to provide an outdoor environment conducive to feeling 'away', due to their proximity to 'wildness', compared to cultivated gardens, for example. Being away appears to be a process by which participants were able to access a number of the wellbeing indicators mentioned above.

- This change in context seems to have so much impact because it is multi-faceted, a change in environment, social interactions, with for example staff of different generations, a change in activity, and a change in the way they are treated.

- By doing work in the woods, participants were able to feel purposeful and competent. This was often contrasted with their everyday lives, in which they get little opportunity to feel this way. This was supported by the framing of the work tasks in the context of Embercombe, so the participants knew they weren't just chopping trees down, but that their work would have a positive effect on the woodland and the people at Embercombe.

- Embercombe's design of the programme doesn't focus on the physical outcome of being in woodlands at all really, but more that the physical work is a means to an end, of psychological and social wellbeing. This is reflected in participant experiences.

- Participants felt they were building a positive relationship with nature through working in and caretaking the woodland.

- Stakeholder expectations generally were similar to participant experiences, which suggests that the programme is effectively achieving its aims. The main differences in expectations and experiences were that stakeholders had more expectation around participants developing a sense of self understanding and dealing with issues, both of which weren't mentioned by participants. In addition, social relationships were more important for stakeholders than for participants. Participants’ sense of relaxation was an unexpected outcome not particularly mentioned by stakeholders.

Participants were revisited 6 months after the events, and asked about their experiences on the programme. Most wellbeing experiences endured in their memory, particularly how being away from their worries and daily lives helped them feel relaxed and positive, and that the change in context supported them to feel more competent and purposeful and accepted, in comparison to experiences in daily life. However, connection to the natural world was not mentioned in follow-up interviews, and seems not to have endured in participant memories.
Reflections on the research:

There was sometimes a lack of cohesion between the programme aims and activities, and the research agenda. Therefore it was difficult to build in time to do the research. This could be avoided by clear communication between researcher and programme leader, prior to designing activities.

- Participants showed a huge willingness to share their experiences and a sincere, simple eloquence about how they were feeling. I feel this was supported by the fact that the researcher had already built up a trusting, friendly relationship with the participants over a number of months prior to research.

Action points

- Building research techniques into the programme design would ease the process of reflecting on participant experiences.

- Building a good relationship with participants is conducive for open sharing when reflecting on experiences.

- A sense of change in context is important, particularly when working with participants from disadvantaged backgrounds who may find beneficial wellbeing in being in a contrasting situation to their daily lives.

- Embercombe is successfully facilitating experiences that are providing a variety of types of wellbeing for participants, many of the stakeholder expectations correspond with participant experiences.

- Providing activities that are physical and work-based, framed in a context of long term benefits, facilitates participants to feel confidence and purposefulness

- For Embercombe and other organisations to continue researching wellbeing from woodland activities, there would need to be careful consideration around who would do the research, and were resources and funds would come from for this time.

- The wellbeing categories could be used to design programmes, with the potential that all aspects of a person’s wellbeing are intended to be met.
Embercombe – Hereford Steiner School residential

The project: Hereford Steiner School residential

The organisation: Embercombe

The project researcher: Jessie Watson Brown

Participant group: Class of 15 year old Steiner School pupils

Number taking part: 25

Activity features: physical; work; woodland management; firewood collection; creative; residential

Top 3 messages:

1. Time spent in a woodland environment by young people can provide access to positive emotions in the present and access to memories of past positive experiences of wooded spaces, potentially encouraging a reinforcement of individual’s capacity to access wellbeing from natural environments.

2. In highly pressured peer environments, positive relationships with adults can support participants to feel safe and supported.

3. For difficult to engage participants, building research into the activity is an effective research tool. Structured group discussion supports sharing of feelings as responsibility for amount of disclosure is the same for all involved.

Background

Embercombe is a charity and social enterprise on a 50 acre site in Devon. There are 8 permanent members of staff, a number of freelance staff, and a transient community of volunteers.

The site consists of broad leaf woodland, open pasture, market gardens, yurt villages and various buildings for accommodation, catering and indoor spaces.

Embercombe exists to ‘touch hearts, stimulate minds and inspire committed action for a truly sustainable world’. The activities run at Embercombe span a huge range. They include; residential and day visits for schools, working and playing on the land, in the woods and gardens; working with ‘disadvantaged’ teenagers; inspiring young adults to make change in the world and themselves; working with corporate training programmes looking at embedding ethics and sustainability into business; volunteer and apprenticeship programmes and much more.

Research focus

The research was conducted to find out what factors in the experience at Embercombe were associated with certain wellbeing outcomes. In addition, to find out whether participant experiences were similar to facilitators’ expectations in terms of particular wellbeing outcomes. This would show whether the way Embercombe runs programmes achieves the outcomes expected. Any information found would go on to improve practice.
Context
This was a ten-day, one-off programme taking place in March 2011. There were 25 participants (12 female, 13 male) aged between 15 – 16 years from Hereford Steiner School. About 40% of activities took place in the woodland, which were mainly task-focused such as firewood collecting, tree planting and creative activities. Other activities on the programme included cooking, gardening, building and team-building exercises.

The research took place in Embercombe’s woodland – a hundred year old broad leaf woodland of medium density, mainly composed of oak, hazel, birch, ash and hawthorn trees. The woodland is sloping and muddy, away from the main buildings on the opposite side of the site. Tree size varies between very big oaks, hazel coppice and recently planted small saplings. There is a ground cover of bracken, ferns, brambles, and bluebells. It is privately owned by Embercombe and frequently accessed by Embercombe participants.

Expectations
Stakeholders expected the following wellbeing outcomes to be experienced by participants:

- feeling safe and supported within and through social relationships
- supporting others through social relationships
- experiencing positive emotions and moods
- feelings of being engaged in a relationship with nature
- feeling purposeful and competent
- developing themselves

Stakeholder expectations were that it was through being in the woods that would bring about these types of wellbeing. Two key stakeholders consistently mentioned 'doing activities' and 'working' as the main activities that contribute, whereas the other stakeholders rarely did so, their focus being more on simply spending time in the woodland.

Two stakeholders focussed on the social interactions of the group, mentioning the peer pressures they felt are experienced by this age group, and expected the woodland activities, and the whole residential, to have a significant impact on participants in this aspect.

Methods used

- Audio-recorded individual interviews with a number of prepared questions and prompts at convenient points within activities to ask about their experiences. This worked well as participants were free to talk with less worry of peer pressure, particularly peers overhearing and reacting to ideas and opinions.

- Audio-recorded interviewing in small groups was less effective as participants appeared stifled by the Dictaphone and peer pressure to conform with social expectations.

- Notes taken during group check-in/check-outs at start and end of each session which were structured by giving a set beginning of a sentence, then each person would finish that sentence. This format was repeated using a number of sentence starters. For example "I am expecting ..." at the beginning of the session or "I now know ..." at the end of the session.

- Measurement games were used, but did not provide much meaningful data.
Participants were given blank maps of the Embercombe site and asked to annotate according to their experiences which worked well because it was anonymous.

Behaviour observation was a useful method as participants were often unwilling to disclose much information through talking.

Analysis was carried out by reviewing the data, and coding to a set of 'wellbeing indicators' – available in the full report or online. This analysis looked for indications that participants were experiencing wellbeing, and tried to identify who, what and where led to these experiences.

**Summary of findings**
This table outlines the main findings of this research (ranked in order of perceived significance):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wellbeing outcome</th>
<th>Associated factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Safe and supported within and through social relationships                         | • Mostly through relationships with Embercombe staff and peers  
• Some mention activities like log moving – often co-operative and team-focussed tasks |
| Closeness to and engaged in relationship with the Natural World                    | • Spending time alone  
• In the setting of the woods and outdoors  
• Variety of situations from active log moving to more passive sitting in the woods. |
| Positive emotions and moods                                                       | • The setting of the woodlands  
• Some mentioned that it was working and the log carrying that was fun  
• For others, hard work and work-based activities appeared to prevent them from achieving positive emotions and moods. |
| Feeling Relaxed                                                                   | • Being in the woods and outdoors  
• Creative activities like sign-making and drawing  
• Sitting in the woodland, or going there to have time-out from the group |
| Developing oneself                                                                | • Activities such as wood chopping and work-based tasks  
• Through learning new skills and knowledge  
• Being outdoors and in the environment of Embercombe |
| Feeling Competent                                                                 | • Active tasks including log moving and chopping |
| Feeling purposeful                                                                | • Activities such as log moving and chopping  
• In the setting of Embercombe |
Results

Safe and supported within and through social relationships (18 instances)

This was a particularly interesting aspect of the participants' experience. Although not most frequently mentioned, this seemed particularly significant in observation of behaviours and attitudes as the programme advanced. So for example, to begin with there was little sharing of feelings by participants, either as part of activities encouraging this, or as part of the research. It appeared that participants either felt little in relation to the subjects under discussion or else uncomfortable sharing those feelings with peers. However, the end of the programme saw participants openly express themselves. The observed shift in group interactions was reflected in participant presentation comments such as "very good teamwork" (9F) and "I have got to know and trust the classmates more" (3M).

Because of the lack of openness it is difficult to tell exactly what or who caused this wellbeing, but it appears that participants felt safe and supported within social relationships particularly through their interactions with Embercombe tutors and staff, one participant saying “the biggest thing was the [staff] – so friendly” (3F). It appears that participants appreciated escaping the peer-centric world of their class and interacting with people at Embercombe – of different generations and lifestyles.

There wasn’t a clearly noticeable difference between how peer pressure was experienced or managed by participants when they were in the woods and when they were doing different activities elsewhere.

There was also a wider context to this wellbeing, in that the programme appeared to allow participants to understand how supported they are by others in their lives and foster a sense of appreciation of the work that gets done on their behalf. This sometimes resulted in a desire to support others in the future (reflected in such comments as wanting to 'help mum more' following their time at Embercombe).

Closeness to and Engaged in Relationship with the Natural World (21 instances)

Being outdoors and in the woodland at Embercombe seemed to be important in feeling this wellbeing, and in particular these settings reminded the participants about previous times when they felt connected to the natural world.

Participants expressed both a current connection to and a learning or developing connection to the natural world, and some were inspired by memories of connection and interested in developing more of a connection to nature; "I used to be outside loads, now I just watch TV. I want to go back to my old ways of being outside more" (11F) and "I connected to my old outdoorsy self when I was making the face on the tree – I feel so much like my old self and that’s significant" (2F).

Through learning, participants expressed a greater understanding and awareness of the woodland environment such as "I find it’s like when we were made aware of the orchids I was suddenly really looking closely at where I was walking and things" (2F) and “I now know... more about plants” which means you “notice plants more” (7M).

The woodland environment was seen by some participants as a place to be alone. The woods seem to have had a significant impact on one participant: "I went to the woods to think and be with myself, to think about... find out who I was, run around and kicking a few trees, then I got back and wrote loads down, sitting in a ditch by a stream" (10M).
Positive emotions and moods (47 instances)

This is by far the most frequently mentioned wellbeing indicator by participants. It seems that using words like 'fun' is an easy way to describe something as a positive experience, and an attempted way to avoid peer judgement. The woodlands were frequently mentioned in relation to this indicator, and this is reflected in participant statements such as:

“I find it nice being outside, lifting the logs wasn’t my favourite part about it. …I just like being there, taking it all in.” (2F)

This suggests that participants felt positive emotions and moods from their environment, but not necessarily the activities they were doing.

In fact, a number of participants mention hardwork, and the work-based activities as preventing them from achieving positive emotions and moods.

In contrast, some participants mentioned that it was working and the log carrying that was fun and giving them access to this type of wellbeing: “hardwork but really fun”.

Feeling Relaxed (29 instances)

For participants, it was being in the woodland and outdoors that contributed mostly towards feeling relaxed. One participant expressed that the woodland has “a peaceful kind of feel to it”.

It was the less active woodland tasks that participants said helped them feel relaxed, such as sitting, and creative artwork sign-making. One participant said “it’s relaxing and calm sitting in the woods” (1F), especially compared to the more energetic activities like firewood collection.

Developing oneself (17 instances)

Participants talked about developing themselves in two different ways; personally:

Being at Embercombe has... "made me a better person" (9M) and "brought part of me alive I didn’t know was there" (11F) and "made me think a lot" (7F) – these comments could be tied to Embercombe more generally than woodlands in particular.

and through learning and skill development:

Many participants found the wood chopping both the most enjoyable and the most challenging activity, because you are "getting better at something". Another participant expected to "learn new and interesting things about plants and the forest" (8F).

Competent (13 instances)

Participants expressed feeling competent when talking about active tasks in the woods, such as the log moving, which one participant said was "satisfying" (3M) and chopping, of which they said "You go from being bad, to good at it", which implies the sense of skill development they felt was making them feel competent.
Feeling Purposeful (6 instances)

Through the active tasks in the woodland, participants became aware of their potential to have a positive, meaningful impact:

"Initially, seemed pointless. After, now, I see the point, see the bigger picture. You feel you can affect something" (3F)

"looking back and seeing how much you’ve done? I feel like that too, when you see, you look back and think ‘my God, we’ve moved ten times my body weight in wood’ really satisfying" (2F)

From participant comments, it appears participants were supported to feel purposeful in the setting of Embercombe, and through guidance from Embercombe staff.

Reflections

- Stakeholder expectations were similar to participant experiences, which suggests that the programme is effectively achieving its aims. In particular, experiencing positive emotions and moods and feeling safe and supported through social relationships were important to both groups. However, stakeholders had higher expectations around social relationships than the participants mentioned, although stakeholders may have felt more comfortable sharing this verbally than participants did. Participants’ sense of relaxation was an unexpected outcome not particularly mentioned by stakeholders. Stakeholders expected more wellbeing to be experienced as confidence and enjoyment of the physical activities.

- It is difficult to distinguish whether when students commonly reported generalised positive feelings from spending time in the natural world’ (‘fun’) they were being afforded a different type of wellbeing from when they described the pleasure of being engaged in a relationship with particular aspects of the natural world. So for example, when participants responded that they were having ‘fun’ in a natural context this could have been derived from interactions with the natural world they may have struggled to articulate. Alternatively, it could have been related to the natural environments capacity to stimulate ‘fun’. Both could be described as being close to or engaged in a relationship with nature, but the research methods used in this study sometimes struggled to provide students with the means to express these relationships in more detail. What was perhaps noticeable by the end of the programme was that several students appeared to have an increased recognition of the possibilities of a relationship with the natural world which allowed them to express such details more confidently and articulately.

- Participants spoke about memories a number of times. It could be that students had experienced past positive engagements with nature which increased in relevance as they spent time in Embercombe’s woods. This may have been significant in the context of these respondents past and ongoing education in a Steiner school which perhaps focuses more on outdoor activities than educational settings. Time spent in a woodland environment by young people can perhaps provide access to positive emotions in the present and also access to recollections of past beneficial experiences of wooded spaces, possibly encouraging a reinforcement of an individual’s perceived ability to access wellbeing from natural environments.

- It is interesting that some contrasted the way in which their teenage lives and technology had reduced their capacity to engage with nature and contrasted this with a nostalgic more natural, un-
technological childhood. This could be both a nostalgic impulse, but also could represent the priorities peer relations and modern life were compelling, to some extent. The fact that they want to re-engage with either a real or imagined previous connection with nature could have real consequences for future actions in this sphere though.

- The research acted as a barometer for social pressures. I initially observed a lot of peer pressure in the group, which made researching difficult as it appeared to close down open sharing and communication of experiences. The level of peer pressure seemed to reduce as time went on, and the final activities of the programme were full of open expression.

- Embercombe’s design of the programme doesn’t focus on the physical outcome of being in woodlands, but more that the physical work is a means to an end, of psychological and social development and wellbeing. This is reflected in participant experiences.

Reflections on the research:

- There was sometimes a lack of cohesion between the programme aims and activities, and the research agenda. Therefore it was difficult to build in time to do the research. This could be avoided by clear communication between researcher and programme leader, prior to designing activities. This was addressed through communication between leaders and researcher and by adding the check-in/out at either end of a session.

- Many participants were very difficult to engage in the research, particularly in terms of sharing feelings and emotions. A number of different techniques were used; some were much more effective than others. The simple techniques such as individual or group interviews were most effective, whereas games and ‘fun’ research techniques provided vague information and appeared to make participants feel uncomfortable (due to peer pressure to remain ‘cool’) and therefore didn’t work in the favour of future engagement in the research. In addition, the researcher sometimes felt similarly uncomfortable managing some games based research methods and the participants seemed to pick up on this.

Action points
For Research:

- Engaging disengaged participants
  - providing clear structure to spoken group sharing can take the pressure (social and emotional) off the participant, and ensure each participant is sharing equally.
  - unwilling participants require the researcher to step up and be prepared to let go of their inhibitions and step out of social boundaries
  - clear communication between researcher and programme leader is required, prior to designing activities, so that research is embedded in the programme.

- For Embercombe and other organisations to continue researching wellbeing from woodland activities, there would need to be careful consideration around who would do the research, and were resources and funds would come from.
For Outdoor Education Practitioners:

- A pivotal aspect of this programme has been the positive relationships with adults, particularly Embercombe staff. This provides further evidence of the potential benefits to participants in outdoor education of the inter-generational relationships formed in that context through this relationship.

- Embercombe is successfully facilitating experiences that are providing a variety of types of wellbeing for participants, many of the stakeholder expectations correspond with participant experiences.

- Providing activities that are physical and work-based, framed in a context of long term benefits, facilitates participants to feel competence and purposefulness.

- The wellbeing categories could be used to design programmes, with the potential that all aspects of a person’s wellbeing are intended to be met.
Ruskin Mill Trust – coppicing

The project: Ruskin Mill coppice

The organisation: Ruskin Mill Trust

The project researcher: Richard Turley and Rachel Tomlinson

Participant group: Ruskin Mill College students (16-25 years)

Number taking part: 13 students

Activity: Coppicing an area of woodland in the college grounds. Coppicing is an important part of the yearly cycle of woodland management at the college as well as being valued for education and therapy.

Top 3 messages:

1. Students’ feelings of competence and sense of purpose were identified as an important benefit of coppice work. For students, doing a ‘proper job’ with lasting effects appears key to their sense of achievement. The college is looking at ways to become more conscious of the significance of tool use for students and identify ways in which progression can be integrated into students' learning.

2. Coppice staff identified the importance of working with journey managers to identify students who could benefit from the coppice experience in terms of physical engagement, experiencing 'awe' and doing practical/purposeful work as identified in the research.

3. Ruskin Mill College has established a ‘team work’ B-Tech unit for students working in the coppice as the social importance of coppice work was also significant in the research.

Background

Ruskin Mill Trust (RMT) is an organisation consisting of five colleges. Ruskin Mill College serves students with learning disadvantage, approximately 16-19 years old. The college offers a land based experiential education.

The purpose of RMT is to advance the education of young people with learning difficulties and/or behavioural problems through training in the areas of arts, crafts, agriculture and environmental sciences, with particular reference to the insights of Rudolph Steiner. The college is also influenced by the ideas of William Morris and John Ruskin. The organisation is committed to advancing educational and cultural opportunities to its staff and local community.

Research focus

To find out why outdoor/practical/woodland work is important to students and how specifically it can promote student development. Examples from the research can be used as evidence to substantiate what college staff believe anecdotally about the benefits of coppice work. These staff expectations might also be challenged or confirmed by students’ own experiences.
**Context**

The research took place between January 2011 and April 2011 for approx. 10 weeks. Coppice work took place daily.

Ruskin Mill College Land Trust owns 22 acres of ancient beech woodland. Within this are 10 areas of coppice consisting mainly of hazel. The coppice is a clearly defined area within the woodland and had been previously coppiced in 2011. The space differs from other parts of the college in that it is made by students and is intimately known to only those who work there.

Woodland management by students and staff is fully integrated into the college curriculum. Coppicing provides firewood as well as wood for green woodwork and blacksmith workshops.

**Expectations**

Stakeholders expectations were often connected to the benefits of feeling purposeful and developing oneself. This was backed up by evidence from students.

Stakeholders frequently cited 'being outside of yourself – having a sense of larger perspective', as important. However this was not significantly reflected in student experiences captured as part of this research. We may have been able to capture this with a longer time scale for the research or by using other methods.

Stakeholders focussed on 'where' students were, so the wood and trees were viewed as central. However 'what' students did dominated the evidence gathered about students' actual experiences.

It's worth noting that stakeholder expectations were often rooted in a theoretical understanding and their own beliefs. As the students all have learning difficulties they can sometimes struggle to express themselves verbally or articulate in detail how they’re feeling. Stakeholders often talked in terms of their own, personal experience. Perhaps they don’t feel that they can speak on behalf of students?

**Methods used**

Students took an active part in the research by conducting video interviews of their peers and filming their favourite areas of the coppice, drawing pictures, taking part in group discussions and being interviewed by staff while working and spending time in the coppice.

It was challenging to achieve responses from students as the nature of their learning difficulties presented communication, relationship and cognitive processing difficulties. Whilst taking imaginative approaches assisted facilitating them to articulate their feelings and emotions these could be out of context. It was important that lessons didn’t simply become filming or drawing sessions or distract too much from coppicing.

The practitioner-research wrote a diary based on his observations and personal reflections. He also interviewed other staff on a one-to-one basis and as a group during a 'goldfish bowl' group discussion.

A second researcher (external to the organisation) analysed the data and compiled the report, whilst liaising with the practitioner-researcher.
Results: 10 most significant findings

Feelings of being competent (and seen by others to be competent)

This was closely connected to tool use, practical/physical work, the fact that students saw coppicing as a 'proper job' and building the tea shelter. Students could see when these easily identified tasks have been completed or achieved in an appropriate way.

'I like to learn, learn new skills like chopping, lopping, splitting and I like being, I helped to put this teepee up [standing by tea shelter]...’ RMP05

'I don't like when somebody uses the tools in an unsafe ways like when the axe, like swinging the axe too hard’. RMP11

'It's all right to go fast with the axe if you know what you are doing, and you got experience’. RMP10:

Being purposeful

Students seemed to feel a sense of purpose that was connected to the structured and productive nature of the work and associated with the recurring jobs that could be undertaken and the tools that could be used, within this context. It is the structure and productivity of the work that is associated with the feeling of being purposeful. This indicator of wellbeing seemed to be very closely tied to 'feelings of being competent'. Ensuring understanding of the purpose of the work seemed to be at the forefront of staff interaction with students in terms of questions they asked students.

e.g. ‘This, this is RMS20 and RMP05 trying to cut a piece, a piece of wood, with an axe and a hammer’. RMP03 [student narrating and making video]

‘When we fell the tree and cross cut the tree, we then split the lots into two halves and then we stacked the logs into a stack and then we have the white pickup which then comes over...

‘(RMaudio_RMS01_RMP10_RMP11_discussion)

‘You get going jobs you wanted to do it, jobs cutting trees down’. (RMaudio_studentsgroupdiscussion_part02)

Experiencing positive emotions and moods

Aspects of the coppice’s outdoor environment (being outside, fresh air, quiet) seemed to have most association with people experiencing positive emotions and moods. Much of the evidence for this expression of wellbeing was drawn from the researchers and other staff’s observations of students, and was corroborated by some of the direct quotes from students or feedback from other tutors.

RMP06: ‘I like everything, it's really nice and peaceful, it's nice to be outside for a change’.

RMP01: ‘I enjoy processing wood using the billhook. I didn’t think I would like coppicing but I really enjoy it.’

Developing oneself

Most instances of students expressing a sense of developing themselves were connected to their learning new things. This is perhaps not surprising given the context of the learning environment of the college*. 

53
There was little evidence of people talking about how they had developed in other ways e.g. socially/emotionally, but this is perhaps more difficult to record and separate from other aspects of college life.

Student: ‘You learn about trees and stuff like that, all different type of trees, you learn how to use the safe tools and stuff, how to grow straight and all different kind of other growing - light - and knowing when they have like diseases, you learn about the well being of the woods themselves, what they do when they fall down and rot into the ground’

RMS01: ‘OK, so you are learning about woodland ecology’

Student: ‘Yeah and knowing how to collect the woodfuel safely’.

(Rmaudio_studentsgroupdiscussion_part01)

RMP11: ‘Yep, I know much, like all the first years when they come, including me, and I just like I know what to do here and there and I didn’t’.

RMS01: ‘You didn't, but you discovered that?’

RMP11: ‘Yep’.

(Rmaudio_RMS01_RMP10_RMP11_discussion)

* The Practitioner-Researcher was also the lead coppice tutor, which perhaps increased the amount of research conversations focusing upon learning outcomes, both because this was a familiar route of inquiry and interpretation for the p-r and because students may have understood open questions within the context of the p-r’s tutor role, increasing a tendency to give examples of knowledge gain. These factors perhaps make this indicator more prominent than it would have been otherwise.

Safe and supported within and through social relationships

Ruskin Mill College Tutors believed that the nature of the woodland space made it easier for students to function positively, socially, with its well-defined social areas such as the tea tent, and evidently less social spaces where students could work alone. The evidence associated with feeling safe and supported socially seemed to reflect the quality of students' relationships with staff and one another and the sense that, within the coppice environment, this social network constitutes a cohesive ‘team’. There was strong evidence of friendships within peer-led videos. However, video makers were perhaps amongst the more socially confident students, increasing the likelihood of the capture of this sort of data.

Student: ‘We get on really well when we do team work like splitting the logs’.

RMS01: ‘When you’re splitting them especially with the splitting axe and the...’

Student: ‘Sledgehammer’.

RMS01: ‘Do you think about what - what do you think about particularly?’

Student: ‘The, the, the like when we stack - when we like fell that ash this morning, that's a, that's a big team work effort’.
RMP03: ‘Hello RMP05. We're coming to the end of the coppice season. What have you most enjoyed about the coppice season this year? [delivered in fast formal ‘interviewer tone’]’.

RMP05: ‘Eh, um, splitting and working really hard. Enjoy the company really [moves arms in the air for emphasis and looks off camera, presumably at other coppice workers]. And [looks upward in thought], and being outside and things like that really. And, being with [names others, including tutor]. It's been quite good fun. It's good’.

Relaxed

There are a range of possible routes to students feeling relaxed, associated with work, familiar tasks or places and being outside. Feeling relaxed wasn’t linked in the data with people, but rather with the impact of the environment and the activity.

RMP06: ‘I've forty winks sometimes’.

RMP03: ‘...you go to sleep?’

RMP06: ‘Yes. And I don't know, it's like just peaceful’... [pause while thinking and looking around at coppice] And the... and the fire's nice and warm’.

Connecting with others through shared beliefs and outlook

Many examples of respondents feeling connected to others, through a shared sense of values, were associated with their experiences of participating within a collective understanding of the significance of practical work or new knowledge: what could be described as the culture of the coppice. Some examples seem to be students repeating things that they've learned from tutors, about the work of coppicing.

Awe

This new indicator was defined as: Experiences of awe bring people into the present moment, which underlies awe's capacity to adjust time perception, influence decisions and make life feel satisfying. Awe was often experienced when standards were felled in the coppice, because of the size of these trees. It could also be experienced on a small scale e.g. looking at the fire.
RMP11: Timber, it’ll go slowly, it doesn’t want to go.
RMS01: It is....its opening. Look at that top. [Unclear]
RMP11: It’s going.
Student: Fantastic [sound of tree cracking and falling].

Feelings of closeness to the natural world

The six examples of this indicator are closely associated with trees and being in the woods. There weren’t any examples of this indicator being directly connected to the work of coppicing, except that they were necessarily in this environment to work.

Student - no ID: Nice, it’s nice and calm, touching the trees, getting into the trees, you feel like a tree. You know you feel like you’re there...

Secure with personal limitations

The evidence for this was often from students experiencing things that don’t go to plan and learning from their mistakes. There were no negative examples of this indicator. Is there something about the uncontrolled environment of the wood that makes it easier to accept things that are sometimes difficult?

Student: Then I realised a cut in there it aiming at that larch. That will be much better, it's like that gap bit.
RMS01: Yeah. We got to be so accurate haven’t we? So in retrospect would you have cut it a little bit more here? On this side?
Student: Yes.

Reflections

The importance of doing practical, purposeful work seems to be the most significant outcome of students’ experiences of the coppicing work. This was closely related to students’ feelings of developing themselves through doing a 'real' and 'important' job. The activity was of primary importance in accessing this psychological wellbeing.

Experiencing positive emotions and moods was also very important and related primarily to where students were. The wood, and coppice space providing a flexible space in which to get closer to people but also where people could be alone.

Being safe and supported through social relationships was tied to working as and feeling part of a team as well as having a common/shared interest with other students but also staff.

Coppicing allows wellbeing to occur because it necessarily takes place in a woodland environment and involves people working together on specific and focused tasks which have real meaning for participants.

Action points

- Interviews and discussion continue to be used and the practitioner-researcher benefited from techniques learnt whilst undergoing research. Coppice students are involved in producing an article for the college magazine and a cover article for the Royal Forestry Society.

- The research opened the researcher-practitioner’s mind to the possible use of video as a tool for differentiating learning whilst coppicing. However video has not been used since, emphasis is on body coordination and use of tools and there is little context for video in terms of viewing or using.
• Students' feelings of competence and sense of purpose were identified as an important benefit of coppice work. For students, doing a 'proper job' with lasting effects appears key to their sense of achievement. The college is looking at ways to become more conscious of the significance of tool use for students and identify ways in which progression can be integrated into students' learning.

• Coppice staff identified the importance of working with journey managers to identify students who could benefit from the coppice experience in terms of physical engagement, experiencing 'awe' and doing practical/purposeful work as identified in the research.

• Ruskin Mill College has established a 'team work' B-Tech unit for students working in the coppice as the social importance of coppice work was also significant in the research.

**Summary of findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank (most reported)</th>
<th>Wellbeing outcome</th>
<th>Associated factors</th>
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| 1                    | Feelings of being competent (and seen by others to be competent) | What: tools, proper job, shelter building, practical/physical work, familiar job, producing things for other people to use, feeling part of something  
Who: staff, Ruskin Mill College community  
Where: tea tent |
| 2                    | Being purposeful | What: proper job, tools, producing things for other people to use, practical/physical work, learning new things, being busy  
Where: the woods  
Who: coppice team |
| 3                    | Experiencing positive emotions and moods | Where: being outside, tea tent, the coppice  
Who: coppice team  
What: being noticed, physical/practical work, practical/physical work, play, tools, being busy, coppicing |
| 4                    | Developing oneself | What: learning new things, physical/practical work, tools, large scale nature, proper job |
| 5                    | Safe and supported within and through social relationships | Who: coppice team, friendship grown from working together, other students, Ruskin Mill College community  
What: shelter building, physical/practical work |
**National Trust – Family Places Project**

**The project:** Wellbeing and social cohesion outcomes of woodland activities at National Trust sites

**The organisation:** The National Trust

**The project researcher:** Jade Bartlett

**Participant group:** Family Learning groups in Devon

**Number taking part:** 32 Adult Learners

**Activity:** Outdoor Adventure

**Top 3 messages:**

1. Supporting opportunities for family access to woodland sites and activities can allow parents to feel confident that they are enabling their children’s growth and development.

2. Seeing their children engaging in a relationship with nature and having the opportunity to ‘get out’ with their families can help parents to feel good.

3. Being in the company of other families can enable parents to feel confident, accepted and safe. They can also feel supported with expert staff on hand. Parents observe social wellbeing benefits for their children through interactions with other children and adults. And by sharing experiences with their children, parents can feel more confident and accepted within their own families.

**Background**

This project was undertaken for the National Trust (NT), a national organisation.

The focus of this research was the *Family Places Project*, a three year Big Lottery Funded partnership between the NT and Family Learning (FL) in Devon, Cornwall and Torbay. As part of this project FL tutors and NT staff worked together to identify good NT places for family learners to visit – places that would inspire learning, increase confidence and give the families a chance to learn new skills together.

**Research focus**

Research remit - to explore what types of wellbeing Family Learners involved in the project might achieve through visiting NT woodland sites and engaging in staff-led activities with a partner organisation. This better understanding of the use of outdoors sites contributes to the current NT’s national strategic agenda ‘Getting outdoors and closer to nature’

**Context**

Between September 2008 and September 2011 157 new learning opportunities were provided and 2264 participants visited a NT place to learn about their local heritage, gardens and countryside.

Around 33% of the project’s outdoor time was spent focused specifically in a woodland environment.

Different groups of Family Learners visited Halwell Woods: South Pool, Overbeck’s Woodland: Salcombe and Gallant’s Bowers: Dartmouth.
They undertook activities such as bug hunting, mirror walking, smelly cocktails games and stick men making. Each session included a woodland walk, a fire and refreshments.

Some families were from areas of social disadvantage and some parents were targeted for attendance due to their particular learning, social or emotional differences.

The sessions allowed the learners to return to the sites in their own time, and go on to use the skills they had acquired to benefit their local community.

**Expectations**

Stakeholders in the project included National Trust staff and Children Centre staff. Most stakeholders expected participants' would have a positive emotional experience from taking part in woodland activities, through feeling happy themselves, happy observing their children enjoying themselves and happy as part of a family having a good time. A range of stakeholders also suggested adults would experience psychological wellbeing via woodland activities. These stakeholders predicted that supporting parents to successfully manage their family, in the unknown and challenging context of the woodland environment and with its learning opportunities, could increase their feelings of competency and control. In turn it was hoped by some that this raised psychological wellbeing might contribute toward future participation in adult learning.

**Methods used**

The research was largely conducted via 5 minute individual interviews, recorded by dictaphone on site during woodland activities. Interviews were undertaken during activities or walking along side respondents during woodland walks. Session times were relatively short and respondents had to divide their attention between looking after their children and answering questions, but short interviews as a method could flexibly accommodate and incorporate respondents’ attention on and engagement with their children as part of the data collection. It was sometimes challenging to establish an effective researcher-respondent relationship using these vox-pop style interviews, in such a short activity time frame. Some respondents appeared to lack self-confidence when responding, perhaps feeling shy and put on the spot and it was sometimes difficult to achieve depth in such a short exchange. However, conducting short interviews at different events and locations and with a range of participants, allowed common themes and ideas to emerge. The data was then analysed by looking at participant’s responses to identify when they were indicating that a type of wellbeing was being achieved or not. This was collated and it was analysed as to who, what or where the trigger for the wellbeing indication was.

**Results**

The results collected showed a number of different levels at which participants were considering their experiences. During evaluation of the data it became apparent that parents had answered the interview questions with their own wellbeing in mind but also with perceived or observed benefits they considered for their children. This was taken into account when analysing the data. Therefore, within the wellbeing indicator descriptions are the direct wellbeing benefits the participants have described for themselves, but also the benefits that they have perceived for their child. The perception of benefit to their child leads to an in-direct wellbeing benefit for the parent as described below in terms of competency, confidence and control.
**Psychological Wellbeing** - Feeling competent, confident and in control, Developing oneself.

Indicators of psychological wellbeing were associated with parents talking about the woodland visits enabling them to make good choices for their children and their way of parenting. Quotes and observations suggested parents were achieving positive psychological wellbeing by enabling and choosing experiences for their child that they felt to be necessary and significant for them. Consequently parents appeared to be achieving feelings of being competent, confident and in control in relation to their child’s positive wellbeing and development.

“I mean when I was a child I roamed the woods for hours, I feel the children don’t get that opportunity as much now really, and that really bothers me...to get out as much as possible in non-shopping environments as well, we do so much shopping with our children. We don’t do enough nature with them, outdoor stuff – you know. I’d like to do more of this sort of thing.”

This was the most commonly referred to route to wellbeing for parents from the woodland sessions and parents accessed it in multiple but associated ways:

- **By making a good choice for their child** – making what is perceived to be a necessary and good choice of activity (time spent in outdoor/natural world) on behalf of their child and observing their child benefiting from it.

  “For the exercise, so they can do something tangible... I think a lot of life these days is not something you can touch, is it... so the more they can affect change in their environment then the happier they’ll be, I fancy. Good preparation for life really.”

- **Through learning experiences** - learning more about their children’s abilities, or learning new activities to do with their children or seeing their children in the act of learning, within the natural world. Evidence for this route to wellbeing and feelings of developing oneself seemed to emerge through parents talking about the learning experiences they had had in relation to their children’s wellbeing. Parents appeared to feel they had developed themselves via learning new activities to do with their children, learning about new places to go with their children, observing their children learning new things and developing their family by learning about each other and each other’s abilities.

  “I mean to be honest with you, I’d have never thought of coming here with a picnic so that’s something, that’s nice so I’ll do again. Yeah and the mud slinging – I’d never do that – too messy! Lazy mummy...”

- **By acting on the impetus of recollected childhood memories** - remembering positive experiences from their childhoods of outdoor and natural spaces and finding opportunities to offer their children similar opportunities.

  “When I grew up in the summer holidays we used to spend all our time outside, now kids seem to spend all their time indoors playing, playing computers or TV’s or stuff, so I just want them to spend as much time as they can outdoors, being happy really, they are.”

- **Via reinforcement of existing beliefs and ideas** – the opportunity to reinforce their understanding of the value of nature to their children.
“You know I think they learn different stuff from sitting in front of the TV all day, you know they are very happy doing their own games, building their own little things, shelters and stuff in the garden which is nice, I just think they’ll grow up knowing a bit more about the world.”

These last three might also be linked to making good choices for their children in that they are concerned with reinforcement of parent’s beliefs through aspects of their own biography, observations and beliefs.

“I think it’s very important as well - you’re talking about bringing children into woodlands. I think that’s being outdoors in general. But they just learn so much – and they’re not scared of a twig or its good for them.”

**Emotional wellbeing** - Experiencing positive emotions

People seemed to feel good spending time taking part in activities in and around woodland. This indicator of wellbeing emerged frequently possibly because describing what they had enjoyed and felt happy about was relatively straightforward for participants. Feeling good was regularly associated with shared parent - child activity.

“It’s just the chance to get out, spend some time with [child’s name], just the two of us, for bonding, that kind of stuff really”

**Emotional wellbeing** - Feeling optimistic about the future

This sense of feeling good was evident when asking participants why they had chosen to come on the activity and if they would use the woods again. Some participants had been to a similar sessions before and wanted to have a similarly good experience again. Participants who had not been before signed up because it sounded like a promise of fun. Over half of the participants who expressed optimistic feelings about the future did this through talking about did so expressing their interest in returning to woodland environments, coming on similar sessions or bringing other members of their family to the same place. A number of participants were looking forward to trying some of the activities they had experienced during the session at a later date in the woods. One participant commented that their child had been looking forward to the session and 'thinking about it for days'. Another participant had hopes that their child’s good experience in the woods would grow on them as they got older.

"I think it’s great for the children, it’s wonderful for them to be in nature in the outdoors, I think it feeds their soul, its feeds their imagination, it’s great for them to learn about things so they can get an appreciation of it and they will come to love the environment and look after it as they get older, and I think that comes right from day one... when literally I strapped her on my back and we went and I think hopefully that grows as they get older, and that will always be there."

Observations and the data suggested that the majority of participants left the sessions with optimism for the future, looking forward to continuing and growing their and their children's relationships with woodlands, the National Trust and the Children's Centre / Family Learning project.

**Biophilic Wellbeing** - Feelings of being engaged in a relationship with nature and feeling close to nature

A sense of feeling good in relation to being close to nature or engaged in a relationship with nature were commonly expressed outcomes of participation in the family learning sessions. When talking about natural connections and wellbeing derived from them, adult participants talked about their observations of their children being engaged with nature, their families being able to engage with nature together and their own
personal engagement in a relationship with nature. The majority of participants who expressed feelings of engaging in a relationship with nature acknowledge this as an opportunity to ‘get out’, where ‘out’ was described in multiple ways including enjoyment of fresh air, beautiful places, non-commercial (no cost) spaces and somewhere that can be returned to for a continuation of these experiences. Respondents described satisfaction in having the opportunity to experience pleasure, aesthetic enjoyment and playful interaction with the outdoors, the fresh air and the woods. A smaller proportion of those experiencing closeness to nature felt this had been specifically achieved through the organised activities they had participated in.

‘Because nature is a natural playground’

‘She likes picking things up and looking at things’

‘I love the green and the serenity of being in the woods’.

**Social Wellbeing** - Feelings of being confident, accepted, safe and supported within and through social relationships, supporting others through social relationships

Participants mainly seemed to achieve social wellbeing from taking part in the woodland activities with other families. Participants said that the involvement of other parents, other children and members of staff from both organisations in planned activities, all impacted the social wellbeing they seemed to achieve. Participants described a feeling of wellbeing from being part of a group with other parents and perceived wellbeing benefits for their children from their interaction with other children and adults. Part of this social benefit seemed to be related to the support participants felt was provided by having ‘expert’ staff available to both help them care appropriately for their children and share their ‘expert’ outdoor knowledge.

‘when I’m on my own with him or something…I’m always thinking right, got to do more things with him all the time, but when you’re with a group, it’s somehow a bit more relaxing, as long you can just go with the pace and they’re telling you where to go next and what to do next which I think is better”

“Just the chance to get out, spend some time with [child’s name], just the two of us, for bonding, that kind of stuff really”

An interesting aspect of the achieving of social wellbeing by respondents was how a shared experience between parent and child was mentioned as a particular source of feeling good for parents and families. This experience was regularly one related to learning about or engaging with the natural world.

**Reflections**

Conducting this research appears to have shown that The National Trust’s partnership working with the Children’s Centres offering ‘Woodland Adventures’ seems to lead to positive wellbeing development for the families involved. This wellbeing has been identified as Psychological, Emotional, Physical, Biophilic and Social. It is believed that we have proved that by offering parents and carers opportunities to take their young children out into woodland environments and take part in activities, the NT working with local CCs can positively impact the parents and families involved, increasing feelings of competency and confidence in parenting skills. The parents observed benefits for their children through interaction with others, interaction with nature and learning opportunities. Through having made the choice to take their child on these sessions they (the parent/carer) feel that they are positively effecting their child’s development and thus feel like
positive and effective parents. This leads to greater confidence and feelings of optimism about their abilities to parent and about their children’s lives in the future.

This study shows the importance of and the possible outcomes from the NT working in partnership with other providers for families and the difference to these families that can be made when working together.

This is an interesting study that is not without its limitations and it would be interesting to consider further research into parenting choices leading to competent parenting.

**Summary of findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank (most reported)</th>
<th>Wellbeing outcome</th>
<th>Associated factors (who, what and where)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>Supporting opportunities for family access to woodland sites and activities can allow parents to feel more confident that they are enabling their children’s growth and development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Biophilic</td>
<td>Parents can feel good in relation to observing their children engaging with nature and from having the opportunity to ‘get out’ with their families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Social</td>
<td>Parents can feel confident, accepted and safe in the company of other families, they can also feel supported with expert staff on hand. Parents perceive social wellbeing benefits for their children through interactions with other children and adults. By sharing the woodland activity experience with their children parents can feel more confident and accepted within their own families.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>The sessions enable parents to take part in structured activities with their children, this can lead to experiencing positive emotions from sharing experiences with their child. The locating of the activities within a woodland environment assists in parents feeling positive emotions associated with being in a ‘beautiful, peaceful’ place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
<td>Parents can feel optimism that past positive experiences can be replicated at the sessions they choose to attend. They can feel optimistic that positive experiences are able to be replicated in the future either at another similar supported session, by returning to the woods or by bringing additional members of their families to the woods.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Forest of Avon Trust – Shirelink day centre

The project: Into The Woods

The organisation: Forest of Avon Trust

The project researcher: Nicola Ramsden and Rachel Tomlinson

Participant group: Adults with learning disabilities from ShireLink day centre

Number taking part: 10

Activity: Sensory activities e.g. listening, collecting colours, blindfold ‘meet a tree’
Art/creative activities e.g. mud painting, making music, making clay creatures
Practical tasks e.g. coppicing, making a wind break
Fire lighting (using fire steels) and cooking (popcorn and chestnuts)
Feedback games

Top 3 messages:

1. Social relationships in the group were key to the wellbeing of the participants, especially in unfamiliar situations. Leaders and staff helped participants but also stood back, encouraging participants to try things independently. Staff were encouraged to take part in activities on an equal footing as participants, which allowed them to see participants in a new light. Participants were able to demonstrate their achievements to staff and peers, receive positive feedback and give support to others in the group.

2. Sensory and creative activities were important as they both appeared to allow participants to access a fundamental source of wellbeing, which may be connected with flow and/or mindfulness.

3. Having a sense of purpose and feelings of being competent were key outcomes of the sessions. These are most often associated with creative activities and practical tasks, which encouraged participants to learn new skills and to work towards and achieve a goal.

Background

The Forest of Avon Trust (FoAT) believes that trees make a huge contribution to our quality of life now and in the future. FoAT plant trees, provide training and advice, and bring the benefits of trees to children, businesses and communities through tree planting, activity days and Forest School.

Into the Woods works with the FoAT to encourage people to go to local woodland, connect with nature and build the confidence to explore other woods in their own time. We use Forest School-type activities to introduce people to the woods in a safe and supportive atmosphere.

Into the Woods specialises in working with groups and individuals who may not normally visit woods, including adults with learning or physical disabilities, mental health service users and people from minority ethnic backgrounds.
Research focus
To investigate the potential impacts on health and wellbeing from a range of woodland activities provided in Forest School style sessions and to understand what leads to these impacts.

FoAT believes that woods and trees have a beneficial impact on the quality of life and its Natural Connections project was set up to promote these benefits to everyone, in particular people who might find it hard to access woodland. Forest School is promoted nationally as playing a beneficial role in child development, but less attention has been given to its potential benefits for adults.

It’s important for us, as an organisation and as individuals, to have access to evidence-based research that demonstrates there are wellbeing benefits from woodland activity. The research also helps us improve our practice by prioritising the activities and features that lead to wellbeing.

Context
We worked with a group of adults with learning disabilities who attend a daycare centre in Bristol. The participants, comprising 2 women and 8 men aged between 21 and 64, were accompanied by 3-4 ShireLink support staff.

The programme ran 1 day per week for six weeks, during autumn 2011. The sessions took place in woodland within the Ashton Court Estate (where FoAT is based), which is open to the public. Participants arrived as usual at their daycare centre and travelled by minibus to Ashton Court. They parked nearby and walked into the woodland site. This had to be level and accessible, because a number of the participants used wheelchairs or walking aids.

Participants brought a packed lunch to eat in the woods, hot drinks were provided and a fire was made on several occasions. There were no toilet facilities in the wood, so some participants asked to be transported back to the Ashton Court centre when needed.

Expectations
All the stakeholders interviewed believed that being in woods was a good thing for health and wellbeing. When questioned more closely about why or how this might be accessed, the most common expectation was through close contact with the natural world.

Another aspect which frequently occurred was gaining wellbeing through either physical or personal development. In most examples this was attributed to being in a new situation which would challenge or stretch participants, eg. the unfamiliar environment, trying new activities or being with people they didn’t know. In other responses, it was the natural setting that was felt to be the important factor. Connected to this was an expectation of wellbeing from achieving, feeling competent or learning a skill.

Stakeholders expected participants to benefit from being with other people in the wood, partly because they would be working together and learning as a group and sharing the experience. It also seemed to be important that when in new and unfamiliar situations, they would be supported by the rest of the group. Stakeholders expected participants to feel relaxed and peaceful, this was almost always attributed to the woodland itself.

Of the 10 most significant wellbeing indicators recorded amongst stakeholders, over half were coded with “where”: it was the woodland or natural environment that was seen to be of most importance.
During the data analysis, it was difficult to accurately compare stakeholder expectations with our findings, because the findings were based on very small fragments of each session. For example, a two minute film of someone toasting popcorn or making a leaf picture would be broken down into perhaps ten or more wellbeing indicators. The discussion with stakeholders did not focus on anything as specific as a single activity but considered the broad experience of “being in the woods”.

Methods used

- Pre-session interviews with staff
- Pre-session card sorting – potential participants were shown photos of different woodland features or activities and chose those they liked or did not
- Pre-session slideshow & discussion
- Sticker sheets – one sticker labelled with each participant’s name, any comments or significant events noted
- Blackboard – for anyone to draw or write on
- Scrapbooks – each participant was given a small notebook in which they could draw, write, stick in things they had collected or made
- Feedback games – such as woodland charades where one person would mime something we’d done that day and the others had to guess what it was
- Videos taken by researcher and watched by researcher later
- Videos taken by participant and watched by researcher later
- Researcher reflective diaries
- Feedback sheets filled in by ShireLink staff – questions about what participants had enjoyed or not and what they would like to do next time
- Post session discussion between researchers

The most useful or productive methods with this group were:

- Videos (taken by researcher and participants) as they gave us time to watch people more closely
- Reflective diaries and discussions as, again, we had the time to reflect more in what had happened, find out from each other what we had missed or discuss sessions in more depth
- Feedback sheets gave us good, immediate feedback on what had gone well/not so well in sessions so we could adapt plans accordingly
- Pre-session slideshow and discussion were useful for getting to know the group and gauging how they might react to different situations, but didn’t generate a lot of research data
- Sticker sheets were useful as quick methods for recording during a busy woodland session but didn’t provide substantial research data; however, they could be useful for researching change over time

Results

Safe and supported within and through social relationships

This indicator is frequently recorded when staff and carers are working alongside and giving positive feedback to participants during an activity or during everyday routines, such as making their way to the camp. It also occurs sometimes when the group are sharing an activity, such as sitting around the fire eating lunch. Many participants need practical help with tasks but support in the form of re-assurance and feedback is also valued. Some participants also check on or encourage each other from time to time. It is almost always associated with ‘who’.
SS3 leads SP1, blindfolded, to a tree, gets him to feel the trunk, asks him if it's big, leads him away again, turns him around and takes off blindfold. SP1 heads straight to his tree and touches it. S1 "How d'you know that, SP1?" SP1 smooths trunk and says "soft". F1 "Brilliant" SS3 "Well done mate" (video)

**Experiencing positive emotions & moods**

Creative and sensory activities seemed to be most common factors in contributing to people experiencing positive emotions and moods, followed by the leaders and whole group. Cooking and fire were also significant. Many of the occurrences of this indicator were hard to code, perhaps mainly because we couldn't tell what was contributing to the experience.

[shire05_feedbackquestionnaire] What did people enjoy? SP10: 'the fire, popcorn, lovely'

[shire06_leafcrowns_06] (SP7 is wearing his crown and smiling) SV1: 'how do you feel when you wear that?' SP7: 'happy', SV1: 'what do you think when you see everyone else wearing theirs?' SP7: 'happy' (video)

**Sensory Pleasure**

This is quite a difficult indicator to record but we felt that it was an important aspect of wellbeing. It was hard to tell whether someone's pleasure was necessarily from a sensory experience, but there seemed to be times where eating, listening or touching something was a pleasurable experience in itself.

Not surprisingly, most instances of this indicator arose from organised sensory activities and eating and drinking. Creative activities such as music-making also led to the indicator being recorded.

(shire02_feedbackquestionnaire) [what did people enjoy?] SP8 – (put hands to eyes like a blindfold) [meet a tree activity]

(shire05_F2diary) SP10, who is so quiet and undemonstrative, absolutely loved the popcorn and ended up diving into the bowl with both hands.

**Enjoyment of creative activity**

We added this indicator as a way of recording when people seemed to get pleasure or satisfaction from inventing, creating and imagining things as opposed to the physical experience. It was most often associated with doing and becoming absorbed in the creative activities themselves. In a few instances, it was associated with sensory activities or watching wildlife.

(shire02_F2diary) The group got very absorbed in making the Blobsters (clay creatures), even though they didn’t spend long making them – the activity seemed to really engage them.

(shire04_music_02) SP3 looks absorbed in hitting 2 sticks together

**Purposeful**

We used this indicator when participants knew what they wanted to do and were doing it. They were actively pursuing a thought or activity, rather than simply responding to an instruction or watching passively. It was associated with motivation to do a job or to reach a goal, rather than the creative process itself.
The most significant way in which people accessed and experienced feeling purposeful seemed to be while they were engaged in creative activities. This may be because there is a clear end ‘result’ (in making something) or that the task is clear to them.

Practical tasks also seemed to be important as accessing this indicator. Sometimes it is difficult to separate practical tasks from creative ones, eg leaf bashing: to one person the task may be about imagination and another about the physicality of it.

[shire02_F2diary] The group got very absorbed in making the Blobsters (clay creatures), even though they didn’t spend long making them – the activity seemed to really engage them.

[Shirelink_SP1_stickers] Wanted to clear away his own rubbish into the right waste bag.

**Feeling competent/being seen to be competent**

This wellbeing indicator was frequently accessed when people were participating in practical and creative activities and/or were able to demonstrate their skills and abilities to others in the group. It also was experienced when participants were undertaking an activity that was familiar to them (although it did occur once when they were encountering a new or unusual type of activity). It was sometimes brought about when participants could see that they had carried out a task according to instructions and were meeting the expectations of the leader.

The instances when people wanted to show each other how to do something, or that they had done something (e.g. ‘look what I’ve done’) were easier to record. Some participants are more demonstrative than others and therefore more likely to do this/be recorded under this indicator.

(Shirelink_SP2_stickers) I’m going to tell people what I did today – cutting trees down

(Shirelink_SP8_stickers) Made a boat-shaped Blobster “Look – I’ve done it!”

**Reflections**

One of the most important research findings was the importance of social relationships in the group. These were especially significant when encountering new and unfamiliar situations. Group leaders and centre staff were always on hand to help participants but would also stand back and encourage participants to try things independently. Centre staff were encouraged to take part in activities on an equal footing as participants. In the follow-up (six months and one year later), it emerged that this had been important for staff, who had had an opportunity to learn new things about the participants and see them in a different light.

Sensory and creative activities were important as they both appeared to allow participants to access a fundamental source of wellbeing, which may be connected with flow and/or mindfulness.

Having a sense of purpose and feelings of being competent were also identified as key outcomes of the sessions. These are most often associated with creative activities, which encouraged participants to learn new skills and to work towards and achieve a goal. They were also accessed through participating in practical tasks. There is overlap between practical tasks and creative ones, eg leaf bashing: to one person the task may be about imagination and another about the physicality of it.

The importance of social relationships underlies all these types of activity. Participants would be given support and encouragement and were able to show they had followed instructions competently and met
expectations. They had a chance to demonstrate their achievements to their peers, receive positive feedback and give support to others in the group.

In considering the most commonly occurring indicators of wellbeing, we felt that there were some strong parallels with the new economics foundation’s “5 Steps to Mental Wellbeing” and that it might be useful to underline these, as they are being promoted widely in the NHS and other health and wellbeing agencies. The 5 steps have been added in brackets in the Action Points below.

**Action points**

**Feel safe & supported (connect):** ensure there are enough staff to offer a sufficient level of support. Support staff and carers should be briefed and participate fully in all activities, as an equal member of the group. Also to support service users in trying things independently, giving help when necessary

**Sense/ mindfulness (notice):** incorporate lots of sensory activities, especially for groups who are unlikely to experience them independently.

**Engagement & absorption (be active):** ensure that a range of creative activities is built into the programme and that time and space is given to allowing participants to explore their own creative urges.

**Have a purpose (be active/give):** give people tasks with clear outcomes or goals to work towards and give them responsibility for their completion. Repeating a routine activity, such as setting up the fire circle and involving people in helping can give participants the confidence to initiate the activity themselves.

**Feel competent (be active/learn):** adapt activities so that all participants can achieve (for example provide suitable tools, make workspaces suitable for wheelchair users). Encourage peer learning and for participants to take control of sessions. Give opportunities for positive feedback, recognition and acknowledgement. Make sure quieter participants, who are less likely to come forward, also have these opportunities.

**Embed opportunities for future research:** Recent Forest School sessions led by Into the Woods have used post session feedback discussions, video, photos, feedback sheets and scrapbooks. It is anticipated that future sessions will use some of these as well as sticker sheets, reflective diaries and snapshot videos.
### Summary of findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank (most reported)</th>
<th>Wellbeing outcome</th>
<th>Associated factors (who, what and where)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1                    | Safe and supported within and through social relationships (98)                  | Who - carers (30), leaders and carers (19), whole group (12), leaders (11), participants (11), small group (3), home life (2)  
What - creative activity (4)  
Where - camp circle (1)                                                                 |
| 2                    | Experiencing positive emotions and moods (79)                                    | Who - whole group (8), leaders (6), carers (2), participants (1), small group (1), games / 'play' (2), eating and drinking (2), practical tasks (2), being given something/to take home (2), unusual/different activities (2), watching/observing (2), routine (1)  
What - creative activities (10), sensory activities (10), cooking (5), fire (5)  
Where - being amongst trees (2), being in the woods (1), being somewhere familiar (1), uneven ground/obstacles(1) |
| 3                    | Sensory pleasure* (64)                                                           | What - sensory activities (29), eating/drinking (15), creative activities (13), fire (1), practical tasks (1), weather (1), wildlife (1)  
Where - being in the woods (2), unusual/unfamiliar place (1)                                                                 |
| 4                    | Confidence in and enjoyment of creative activity* (62)                          | What - creative activities (49), games (3), sensory activities (3), familiar activities (2), wildlife (1)  
Who - carers (2), leaders and staff (1)                                                                                             |
| 5                    | Purposeful (52)                                                                 | What - creative activities (21), practical tasks (9), exploring/getting to know site (4), following instructions (3), tools (3), eating and drinking (1), being independent (1), routine (1), sensory activities (1)  
Where - camp circle (1), being in the woods (1)  
Who - carers (1), leaders (1)                                                                                                       |
| 6                    | Feelings of being competent (and seen by others to be competent) (51)            | What - practical tasks (11), creative tasks (10), tools (7), following instructions (5), familiar activities (3), sensory activities (2), cooking (2) getting around (1), understanding/communication (1), unusual/different activities (1), weather (1)  
Who - group (5)  
Where - unusual/unfamiliar place (1)                                                                                                   |
### The project: Into the Woods

### The organisation: Forest of Avon Trust

### The project researchers: Nicola Ramsden and Rachel Tomlinson

### Participant group: young adults with learning difficulties on City of Bristol College Horizons course

### Number taking part: eight (aged 17-24, 5 male & 3 female)

### Activity: woodland activity sessions using the Forest School model, including: games, arts & crafts, fire-lighting and cooking, practical conservation work.

### Top 3 messages:

1. Experiencing positive emotions and moods through being in a group was found to be important to this group. Despite being young adults this group enjoyed the opportunity to 'play' and devise games. Creating opportunities for this would be beneficial.

2. Developing themselves, succeeding in new tasks, becoming competent and showing others were found to be important. Tasks that encourage this outcome are already part of good practice in Forest School.

3. Connecting with and being with others as a group came out as significant, particularly when interviewing college staff post-woodland sessions. This highlights the importance of spending time talking with staff to find this information as we can then build on this during sessions.

### Background

The Forest of Avon Trust (FoAT) believes that trees make a huge contribution to our quality of life. The charity plants trees, provides training and advice, and brings the benefits of trees to children, businesses and communities through tree planting, activity days and Forest School across the former county of Avon.

Into the Woods works with the FoAT to encourage people to go to local woodland, connect with nature and build the confidence to explore other woods in their own time. Into the Woods specialises in working with groups and individuals who may not normally visit woods, including adults with learning or physical disabilities, mental health service users and people from minority ethnic backgrounds.

### Research focus

To investigate the potential impacts on health and wellbeing of a range of woodland activities provided in Forest School-style sessions and to understand what leads to these impacts.

We feel there is a lack of evidence to back up assumptions that being in a natural setting is beneficial. We wanted to gather evidence in order to review our work and help us adapt sessions to have the most beneficial outcomes. We also wanted to demonstrate the impact of our activities to partner organisations e.g. colleges and daycare centres.

### Context

A six week programme of Forest School style sessions, one day a week for six weeks during autumn 2011.
Sessions centred on New Barn Wood, an enclosed area of woodland surrounded by the open parkland of Ashton Court Estate, a public park owned by Bristol City Council. The woodland here comprises mature trees including sycamore and oak, with smaller trees/shrubs such as holly and hazel.

The participants were students with learning difficulties attending the City of Bristol College's Horizons course. This three year course is for school leavers who've been in a special school or supported in mainstream education. It aims to provide students with challenges to help them develop independence and the skills needed for adult life. The Forest School-style sessions aimed to build students' resilience, develop physical confidence and stamina, learn about personal safety around fires, tools etc., work together and learn about and appreciate the natural world.

Sessions included: sensory activities e.g. listening, blindfold ‘meet a tree’; art/creative activities e.g. making music, clay creatures; practical tasks e.g. coppicing, making a toilet screen; fire lighting and cooking; games e.g. hide and seek, stalking. Participants travelled to the site in a minibus and had a packed lunch in the woods each week.

Participants weren't able to easily express complex ideas, thoughts and feelings and the research methods reflect this.

**Expectations**

The following indicators were expected to be significant outcomes by stakeholders both from the college and within the Forest of Avon Trust. They were also amongst the ten most frequently recorded during sessions:

- Developing oneself
- Feeling safe and supported within and through social relationships
- Feelings of being competent (and seen by others to be competent)

These are also shared outcomes of Forest School best practice. Many of the woodland activities were therefore planned with these in mind.

College staff expectations primarily focussed on personal and social development. This was most often represented by the wellbeing indicators: 'developing oneself' and 'feeling safe and supported'. This reflected the aims of the college course where staff monitored students' move towards greater independence.

Connecting with others through shared experience came out significantly in the inter-session stakeholder interviews (during a half term break) but there seemed to be few expectations of this before the sessions had started except for team work.

**Methods used**

- Pre-session interviews with staff
- Inter-session (during half-term break) interview with course tutor
- Pre-session card sorting – potential participants were shown photos of different woodland features or activities and chose those they liked or did not
- Pre-session slideshow & discussion
- Sticker sheets – one sticker labelled with each participant’s name, any comments or significant events noted
- Blackboard – for anyone to draw or write on
• Scrapbooks – each participant was given a small notebook in which they could draw, write, stick in things they had collected or made;  
• Feedback games – such as woodland charades where one person would mime something we’d done that day and the others had to guess what it was; 
• Videos taken by researcher and watched by researcher later 
• Videos taken by participant and watched by researcher later 
• Researcher reflective diaries 
• Feedback sheets filled in by City of Bristol College staff – questions about what participants had enjoyed or not and what they would like to do next time 
• Post session weekly discussions between researchers

**The most useful methods for this group were:**

Slideshow with sound (pre-woodland – gathering expectations): students seemed to respond quite naturally to what they were looking at/hearing without many prompts.

Post-woodland discussions between researchers: a good way of ‘blurting out’ what we thought had happened, immediately afterwards.

Mid-session interview: the tutor could answer questions about our observations as she knew the participants. She could tell us whether students behaved differently in the woods compared to college.

Sticker sheets: students were self-conscious or found it difficult to answer direct questions about how they felt. This gave them a voice without putting them on the spot.

Reflective diary: useful as a practitioner tool for reviewing sessions and how we felt people had responded to them.

Observational video: very useful in the analysis stage as its raw data and we had time to observe videos again and discuss what was happening (although this relied on our interpretation).

Participant video: gave a different perspective and focus to what was going on and allowed participants to express themselves e.g. one participant talked alone to the camera but rarely in the group.

**Results**

**Experiencing positive emotions and moods**

This was by far the most common indicator of wellbeing, perhaps because it’s relatively easy to observe. It’s also straightforward for participants to express positive feelings and a common/’normal’ thing to verbalise. Games and ‘play’ came out very highly as sources of this. The fire was also significant when students directly interacted with it e.g. lighting it and cooking on it. Personal creative moments were also connected e.g. creating the clay creatures or playing music.

Experiencing positive emotions and moods was mentioned by stakeholders before the sessions started but wasn’t seen as particularly significant, perhaps because it was an assumed outcome. In addition it may not be judged to be an important educational developmental outcome. It was however the most significant indicator recorded during the sessions.
Everyone is playing music on sticks, with leaves etc. People are singing along in a circle and seem to be enjoying themselves, there is laughter (especially from CP3).

CP8 is really pleased with his quick lighting of the fire and wants others to see. He is very pleased with his success, ‘Look at that one, it’s still burning!’

Connecting with others through shared experience

Over half of recordings of this indicator were associated with a ‘what’ people were doing. It was strongly connected to games (especially ring-on-a-string), but also often occurred during sensory activities (in particular, blindfold meet-a-tree). Students had to work with each other during these activities which brought them together as a group. It was also often associated with a familiar place or routine and sometimes students recollected what they had done on previous sessions. There is quite a lot of overlap when looking for the root of this wellbeing e.g. the fire circle quickly becomes a familiar place and it is strongly associated with the daily routine (the group sits here during mealtimes and spends relaxed, sociable timethere); it may also be important as a place of ritual. So the wellbeing might come from the place (fire circle), routine (lunchtime) or people (group sitting together).

CP2 was reminiscing about last week when she and CP6 had played a game where they drew a line in the ground. They also chatted about which way was best into the woods.

Feelings of being competent (and seen by others to be competent)

This indicator was almost always associated with a ‘what’ code. The majority of these were practical tasks of some kind, such as using tools, whittling sticks, cooking food and tending the fire. It was coded only twice with a ‘who’ code, which was surprising, given that part of the indicator is “being seen to be competent” so requires other people to recognise the competence.

The indicator often occurred as participants became familiar with an activity and/or routine and took ownership of it. Sometimes, it was difficult to decide whether the root of the wellbeing was the place or the activity. Activities are often associated with a particular place such as the fire circle.

There were only seven negative occurrences of this indicator, occurring most often when participants found it difficult to use the firesteel. However activities were chosen/set-up so that an initial challenge was followed by a sense of achievement.

FCP5 was really pleased with lighting the fire actually. When she came up to wash her hands she went "I was brilliant!"

For two weeks in a row now, somebody's gone and got the wok (fire wok) out, stuck the legs on and... asked who wants teas and things and gone round and sorted out what people want to drink.

Purposeful

Practical tasks seem to be the most significant source of participants feeling purposeful, perhaps because the nature of the tasks mean that there are clear and well defined goals which the participants wanted to reach. The fire was a significant route to this wellbeing. The participants seemed to enjoy their time around the fire.
and cooking so were motivated to light it. They seemed to enjoy using the fire steels in themselves, again perhaps because they expect to reach a pleasurable goal (lighting the fire) at the end.

This is quite a difficult indicator to record as it is not a commonly expressed feeling. We nearly always relied on our own interpretation of behaviour. Perhaps this is also why practical tasks seemed most significant as we were able to observe people setting out to achieve goals.

(CBC03_F2_diary) They all get really involved in picking up the chestnuts, even CP8 who’d been saying he couldn’t see any. I think they did feel proud to be able to find them and collecting the nuts in a bag gave them a good sense of achievement.

(CBCmid_interview_CS1_F1_F2_01) CP6 is quite reluctant to engage normally [at college] so the fact that he is engaged when he’s in there [the woods] is good.

Developing oneself

Many instances of this indicator came from practical tasks such as cooking as well as ‘play’. There were many new things for participants to try for the first time. Food seemed to be significant (chestnuts and damper bread). Activities such as fire-lighting were repeated from session to session so that participants were able to learn/develop skills over time.

From our observations we saw that over time the participants were increasingly willing to try new things, and when the students felt that they had ‘achieved’ they did sometimes vocalise this. However it is possible to both over and under-observe this indicator as this is based on observations over six weeks only. Participants may have done some things before without us realising it e.g. they may frequently try new food, but we assumed they didn't. On the other hand they may not have done some things before e.g. we assumed that they could all choose appropriate clothing for the woods but they may have had to learn this during the sessions.

(CBC03_F2_diary) Everyone tried a chestnut – even CP8, once he’d found out that CP7 was eating one. And almost everyone liked them – CP8 didn’t like his. CP5 absolutely loved hers and waxed lyrical, telling everyone she loved them, and asking for more.

(CBC04_F1_F2_discussion01) F1 "CP4 is quite dirt aware - he was worried about getting mud on his trainers" F2 "yes, at first......but later on he wasn't complaining, he seemed to have got over it"

Feelings of being confident

The most significant recorded instances were when people felt confident in front of the whole group and in the place which became familiar during the project. We felt that this indicator was likely to increase over a greater length of time.

Again feelings of ‘confidence’ can be hidden from observers, someone may be feeling quietly confident but not express this and it may not be obvious to those watching. Those participants who either vocalise their confidence by saying ‘I’m good at this’ or demonstrate it in their behaviour are likely to be recorded more often.

(CBC02_F1_diary) I feel that CP7 in particular is beginning to really engage with being in the wood. He talks about it more rather than other things and I feel that he's more relaxed in the group.
Reflections
Experiencing positive emotions and moods, the most regularly recorded indicator, was closely connected to fire and ‘play’, already important elements of Forest School practice. It was important to remember that some young adults may enjoy play (there was an obvious appetite for it in this group). As practitioners we need to be open to this without patronising participants. Play allowed participants to bring their own ideas to sessions, organise games and share with peers.

Connecting with others was also significant in stakeholder interviews. In our yearly follow-up, staff mentioned that people interacted with each other in the woods in a way that they didn't in college. Students don’t sit together over lunch in college but were happy to do so in the woods. This stressed the importance of long-term, rather than one-off, woodland sessions as people can build a shared experience. It also highlights the importance of talking to staff about the differences they notice in different environments.

It was sometimes hard to decide what was the root of the wellbeing. A range of factors may have led to wellbeing e.g. some participants didn’t like getting muddy shoes but it was unclear whether they didn’t like mud or if they had learnt from parents/staff to keep their shoes clean. The source could be social or personal.

It was hard to interpret what we saw/heard at times. Some responses/actions seemed to be learned behaviour but we couldn’t be sure.

We found it hard to compare stakeholder expectations (from pre-session interviews) with the findings from the actual woodland sessions. Stakeholders tended to talk in the abstract and focus on the environmental aspects of the ‘place’ (the woods) rather than specific activities. Our research analysis focused on activities, such as collecting wood, and individual components of 'being in the woods' such as uneven ground, weather, mud, individual relationships in the group etc.

Action points
Always go to the participant setting before being in the woods. Take a ‘warm-up’ activity to prompt discussion, encourage participants to tell us their thoughts about the forthcoming sessions and introduce ourselves in a familiar place.

It’s useful to hold individual interviews with stakeholders before sessions begin (in a more basic/short format). This means that as practitioners we can find out what stakeholder expectations are and at the end of the sessions evaluate whether these have been met or changed. We could create a template of questions to ensure that we do this in a more formal way during each project.

Scrapbooks: these started out as somewhere for participants to stick things in or to draw in whenever they wanted. They quickly became associated with 'special place' (a time of reflection) and always used at that time for drawing or noting down words or signs. The tutor continued to use these and 'special place' at college. The group could use the scrapbooks as a prompt to think about their time in the woods.

Two-way feedback - We feel that it is important that we also feedback to participants so that reflection is mutual and not a one-way stream. As part of our practice we already gave participants personalised ‘certificates’ to recognise their contribution to the sessions and identify individual strengths.
Helping people to get to know each other (including leaders and support staff) and feel familiar with their surroundings is key to people feeling more confident. Allowing time for this to happen in various ways is important to embed into practice, informally e.g. eating lunch together or exploring the area in different ways. A minimum of six sessions is good Forest School practice.

**Summary of findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank (most reported)</th>
<th>Wellbeing outcome</th>
<th>Associated factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Experiencing positive emotions and moods</td>
<td>Most common were 'what'/activities: games and 'play' (18), fire (12), creative activities (9), cooking/eating (8); as well as the place: being in the woods (5), being in a familiar place (3).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Connecting with others through shared experience</td>
<td>Most common were 'what'/activities: games (15), sensory activities (7) but also where we were: fire circle (5) and who participants were with: other students (5), the whole group (5).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Feelings of being competent (and seen by others to be competent)</td>
<td>Most common where 'what'/activities: practical tasks (22), cooking/eating (6), fire (7)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Purposeful</td>
<td>Most common were 'what'/activities: practical tasks (17), fire (7), creative activities (6), games/'play' (5), sensory activities (5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Developing oneself</td>
<td>Most common were 'what'/activities: cooking/eating (9), new/unusual activities (8), games/'play' (6), practical tasks (6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Feelings of being confident</td>
<td>Most common were 'who'/people and 'where'/place: whole group (10), familiar place (9), leaders (4), other participants (4)</td>
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Play Torbay – Fort Apache

The project: Wellbeing benefits of play at Fort Apache

The organisation: Exploring Nature Play Project, Play England and Play Torbay

The project researcher: Naomi Wright artist researcher and volunteer for the Exploring Nature Play project

Participant Group: Children and adults working and playing at Fort Apache, and other stakeholders from the local community

Number taking part: 52 in total plus others in general observations.

Activity: Saturday morning play sessions and play events held at Fort Apache over a period of 12 months, August 2012 – August 2013-10-01

Top messages:

- Let the children continue to lead the play activity in the woodland, and be free to choose what they do. The benefits are clearly shown in terms of their wellbeing. As one of the stakeholders said ‘you can feel that the place belongs to children.’

- The psychological benefits (see page 2) of this type of activity within the woodland appear to be huge. Promote play near trees and their spaces which provide the interesting and varied places necessary for this free nature play. Recognise the freedom and permissions that the play workers and volunteers give the children and young people to be in control, purposeful and develop themselves.

- Create a one size fits all consent and research process with Play Torbay, so that parents only have to sign once and the research can make the most of opportunities that present themselves within the open woodland environment. This will make it easier to research and reach the needs of more disadvantaged children and young people who lead particularly complicated lives. Develop a plan for ongoing research, perhaps in collaboration with academic institutes or other organisations, working with children (FUNK), volunteers, researchers, and artists who can observe from the edge of activity and step in when required.

Background
Exploring Nature Play is a 3 year lottery funded project hosted by Play England, set up to investigate different ways of increasing understanding of nature through play with children. Fort Apache in Torquay is one of three sites in England that is hosting one part time member of staff to deliver this project. This Good from Woods research provided an opportunity to study the existing activity in the woodland and the significance of nature in the play.

Play England is an organisation within the National Children’s Bureau that works for all children and young people to have freedom and space to play throughout childhood.
Fort Apache is managed by Play Torbay which provides free play and adventures in partnership with other organisations for all children and young people in Torbay. The organisation is lead by the children’s expressed needs.

Play Torbay employs a community development worker and play workers who work at the woodland twice a week, and more in the summer holidays. On a typical play session there are 4 play workers and 2 or 3 volunteers, and up to 50 children and young people taking part.

**Research focus**

Three main aims of the research were as follows:

1. To find out more about any wellbeing benefits gained by the children and young people from their play in Fort Apache woodland adventure playground.
2. To help clarify whether or how the natural environment, the activities, the place or the social elements contributed to the wellbeing of children and young people playing at Fort Apache.
3. To research how best to carry out ongoing action-research in an open and accessible play woodland site such as Fort Apache.

**Context**

Fort Apache is Play Torbay’s only wooded, ‘wild’ and publically accessible adventure playground. It is surrounded by housing estates and grows on the site of an old tip.

Fort Apache’s ethos embraces free play, in which the children and young people come and go as they please, there is no payment and they guide the play activity supported by the play workers and volunteers employed on site.

Fort Apache is within an area in the top 10% of multiple deprivation in England. Many of the local children come from homes with generational unemployment, drug dependency, and mental illness. Many of the local children are carers or have additional needs – not as noticeable whilst playing as they may be at school or in a “controlled” situation. Often, the children come from single parent families, families where more than one generation lives together, fostered children and extended families co-habit.

Commonly there are between 40 and 50 children attending the sessions, the numbers for each session varies according to the time of year and family needs.

The play on offer includes any form of nature play throughout the woods (tree climbing, den building, mud sliding), provision of nets or ropes, lighting a fire and cooking. Organised activities might include woodwork, modelling clay and tree planting. The children’s interests lead all activities and requests with additional advice from FUNK, the young advisory group for play in the whole of Torbay.

**Expectations**

The stakeholders expected and hoped to find out that the children and young people have fun and are happy at Fort Apache. They also expected elements of learning, expanding horizons and sharing of adventures.

With reference to their own childhood experience of play there was a hope that children and young people would develop a greater understanding of nature and benefit from being outdoors, such as being physically and mentally stronger.
These stakeholder’s memories of play, indicated to the researcher an expectation that the children need to create their own memories of, or nurture, the culture of this ‘wild’ and ‘natural’ woodland.

Some of the stakeholders had become friends through volunteering at Fort Apache. There was an expectation that children, young people and themselves with a wide range of ages, would all benefit together.

The hope was that the children and young people spend most time freely playing, in the wilder areas. They also expected that the children and young people appreciated time with volunteers and staff, who were never judgemental and allowed them freedoms they don’t get elsewhere.

**Methods used**

A range of different research methodologies were used:

- Conversational Drift – Letting the child lead the conversation or activity
- Interview – one to one across a table
- Discussion Group – around the fire pit or under the trees
- Joining in other happenings – display table and conversations at other organisation’s activities
- Working alongside other groups – such as FUNK, encouraging them to want to help
- Leading and setting up events – such as soup and tea at lunch time chats
- Envisioning – Creating prints and maps of Fort Apache
- Fun Games – developing games for Fort Apache
- Observational Drawing – sketches and on photographs of movement and place
- Photographs – a range taken throughout the year
- Videos – some taken by the children
- Interventions and installations – activities in tree houses
- Questionnaire – an electronic Survey Monkey questionnaire

As an artist, the researcher explored the ideas of play as art as life and is part of the living process.

The most successful of these methodologies were those carried out in the same spirit of the place, free, open-ended and child lead.

Children come and go as they please and the methodology for the action research had to be flexible and stretch according to their needs and interests. In addition some the methods tried worked better than others – generally paper based and electronic questionnaires and games worked less well. **Children and adults at Fort Apache like to do things outdoors**, not read things.

**Results**

There were clear benefits from playing in Fort Apache woodland. Positive emotions and moods (25), Being in control (21), and being safe and supported within a group (20) were the most commonly referred to indicators. The psychological outcomes were the most significant of all of them.

During the 12 months there were no observed problems caused to the participants through the playing in Fort Apache. Incidents were never reflected in the evidence given. They always related to personal issues of the child or children, not the activity in the woodland.
Both children and stakeholders referred to the open and free nature of the space, as well as the variety of trees and slopes and vegetated surfaces within it. This environment and the fact that children are given a broad permission to play provided the following range of benefits:

**Psychological**

This was the most regularly attributed theme, and within this ‘being in control’, ‘purposeful’ and ‘developing oneself’ were the most common indicators.

Children often described being in control of their space in a den, or tree house, or while hiding in vegetation. They used these moments to escape their family, or their home, a time to be themselves, alone, find some peace.

Q: ‘So that’s (pointing at the hidden treasures) why you needed a code from me so I could come into your space here that you have made’
C6: It gives me a homey feeling

They also used these self discovered spaces to play games with their friends that lead to an expression of a similar belief, being purposeful. The mixed age range was important too, young people playing with smaller children, the children being with the adults different from their family and school.

C4: There’s like no particular place really, it’s just like every part of it is special cos like when kids come here.........
Q: Yeah.
C4: They literally feel welcomed, they literally feel like they can, they wake up in the morning and have a smile on their face and say yeah I’m going to Fort Apache I can do anything I want, no one can stop me.

**Emotional**

Nearly everyone expressed a positive emotion or mood, the most common indicator referred to. It was easy to take this for granted. All sorts of places were referred to when talking about these feelings such as dens, nest area where activities happen, fire pit and cooking area.

Q: ... and how do you feel when you are in your dens?
C: Happy.

C3: Everything’s perfect here, it’s always good fun; you can always find something to do.

C13: if Fort Apache wasn’t a little bit dangerous it wouldn’t be that fun.
Q: And why would that be?
C13: Because there’s some mountains and they’re dangerous but they’re really fun to climb up.

Contributing factors were lots of things to do, games to play and places to explore, sticks to play with, some risk, spaces to relax, not being tired (like they are getting up for school).

Being even tempered, optimistic and relaxed was also significant, often when the children were on their own.
Social

The third most commonly used indicator was being **accepted, safe and supported within and through social relationships**. Children and stakeholders often referred to the social side of the experience of playing at Fort Apache. The mix of children and adults was important, as was having a range of places for them to meet, to socialise and to make decisions about what to do next. Woodland environments always have a range of different spaces.

Q: Oh, so you sort of came and found it here?
C3: Yeah.

Q: And why did you decide that you wanted to play here?
C3: Because everyone was nice here, you had good things to do and yeah

In describing ‘War Games’ and ‘Indians’ at Fort Apache:

Q: and how many children were involved in that?
C2: Loads.
C14: about...........
C2: Nearly the whole of Fort apache.

There are times when children play in large groups, and others when they are on their own and in small groups. Fort Apache allows for this to happen naturally.

Physical

The evidence gathered through map making and photographs show an immense amount of physical activity and movement all over the site, as well as learning to work with their hands woodworking. **Confidence and enjoyment of physical activity** was the most important indicator. People referred to feeling refreshed and enjoying the fresh air, tiring themselves out too.

C10: The best thing... it’s full of good sites and, some of the sites, I practice my moves
Q: You practice your what?
C10: My moves
Q: Your moves. What are your moves?
C10: My fighting

On talking about the ‘man-hunt’ game:

Q: Do you think, do you think here’s a good place for games like that?
C14: Yeah.
Q: Why’s that then?
C2: Cos there’s loads of places to hide and........

This was attributed to the whole of Fort Apache and also the surrounding streets and playing field.

Biophilic

The connection with nature came through strongly, **being engaged in a relationship with nature coming 4th out of 22 indicators**. The children noticed the smallest details in the shape and structure of the trees,
whether it was for creatures or for their use as bed, house, den, climbing frame, shelter. They would express their closeness to nature in relation to dens, the wilder areas, on the edge of the woods. They also referred to a familiarity of the different seasons. They enjoyed opportunities to learn about the natural world too.

D: Is that a narrow leaf?
C10: Narrow leaf? No cos it goes out then in.
Q: Mmm. Well what about this one there, would you say that was a narrow leaf?
C10: No.
Q: Yeah, there’s a little ledge that’s like a round..................
C18: Chair.
Q: Chair. Exactly, it’s just like a chair and it’s somehow, it just fits in just right doesn’t it? When did you find this?
C3: Yeah cos in the fields you haven’t got that choice – you can’t make a fire in the field, one it’ll spread, two its grass and three it’s been raining for quite a while......

Creative/cultural

Children referred to things they imagined, stories, daydreams, adventures, memories, the atmosphere of the place, a general connection with the place with a sense of belonging that wasn’t easily placed within the other categories.

Children expressed a creative/cultural/imaginative that may indicate a more holistic and innate connection with the place. A linking with their kith or homeland, The enjoyment of the cooking activity over the fire may also be linked to this.

This more holistic was connected to feeling safe, relaxed, purposeful, close to the place, and was often in particular spaces that the children felt like they had control over.

The indicator most referred to was the imaginative, creative expression of place, giving this sense of belonging.

Q: So what’s he doing now?
C6: He’s doing a bit of sleep talking and it’s a log and there was sleep talking and you don’t want to disturb his natural behaviour.
Q: So how does it make you feel when you come and find these things again?
C10: I have a vision or a flashback and I can see them in their life,
Q: Who’s your friend? He’s just talking to – down the tunnel – what does he do this friend?
C10: He kind of looks after my base at night and he does a very good job and he............
Q: Does he? Has he got a name?
C10: I haven’t given him one yet.

Reflections

To an adult passing through Fort Apache it may not appear that special – a scrubby area of ordinary woodland, some rubbish not far below the surface, new rubbish in places, steep muddy bald slopes, they might judge it as a bit of a scruffy forgotten patch of wood. To those children that live nearby, it is the
playground of their lives for every day, it is the nature close to where they live. When the play workers and volunteers are on site, they enable even more adventurous play, the whole place buzzes with a mixture of contentment and excitement.

The children and young people get permissions and freedom to express their place in it through play, connect with its wild and jungliness, to get mucky, to be themselves that they might not get at home.

The self prescription, described by the children, of a little piece of fort apache play to calm down, to feel peaceful, to feel better is interesting.

Q: Do you come here quite often?
C10: Yeah. I come here to calm down
Q: Oh! Why do you need to calm down?
C10: Because I can get really angry. I can get really angry really easily. And it’s not very nice

To the adults involved there is an overwhelming feeling of wellbeing for themselves working in Fort Apache. The place has a unique and magic quality to all those I spoke to, because it is free, unfenced, open and natural, relaxed. The significance of this feeling passed on to the children and the way they play should not be underestimated.

A: There’s a feeling up there that isn’t there – it does stay there but it’s not strong
Q: What when they’re not there?
A: It’s a feeling of ease, I can’t describe the feeling really, it’s ease, yeah, because now – as I say the children have put their stamp on it]
Q: Mmm
A: And they’ve – its – I don’t know, it shouts out that this place belongs to children.

Action points
Research:

- Create a one size fits all consent and research process with Play Torbay, so that parents only have to sign once. The research can then make the most of opportunities that present themselves within the open woodland environment. This will make it easier to research and reach the needs of more disadvantaged children and young people who lead particularly complicated lives.

- Develop a plan for ongoing research, perhaps in collaboration with academic institutes or other organisations, working with children (FUNK), volunteers, researchers, artists who can observe from the edge of activity and step in when required, and encourage different thinking.

- Try out different methodologies (make them playful) and be prepared to go with the flow (and fail) in such open and free environments. It does not work like inside a classroom, this sort of research takes time and has involved volunteering and paid work.

- Other areas to research include the self- prescription, the benefits to volunteers and staff, creative wellbeing indicators.
Children’s and adult’s Play:

- Let the children continue to lead, as one of the stakeholders said; ‘you can feel that the place belongs to children.’

- The psychological benefits of this type of activity within the woodland appear to be huge. Promote play near trees and their spaces which provide the interesting and varied places necessary for this free nature play. Recognise the freedom and permissions that the play workers and volunteers give the children and young people to be in control, purposeful and develop themselves.

- Recognise the benefits to the adults working or volunteering on activities with children in woodland, the happier they are the more they support the place and the children.

- The fact that it has open free access means that the children continue to play after the ‘play work’ sessions. The confidence and competence and connection with the woods gained during this time could be explored further.

- Put on more events that create memories and encourage families to engage with Fort Apache, while recognising that these families are complicated.

- Provide more free and improvised creative activities such as playing music, dressing up, installations and cooking.

Summary of findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank (most reported)</th>
<th>Wellbeing outcome and indicators</th>
<th>Associated factors</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| 1                    | Emotional, positive feelings and emotions | • Lots to do, lots of adventures, activities  
• The fire pit, the nest are comforting places  
• The dens provide space to calm down. |
| 2                    | Psychological, Being in control | • Given the freedom and permission to play how they like. Lots of natural places to hide and be themselves.  
• Supported through self-development – whether activity based or just providing a place to gather and talk.  
• Self-prescription of play at fort apach to make themselves feel better. |
| 3                    | Social, Accepted, safe and supported within and through social relationships | • The mixture of ages present – adults to little children.  
• Places to gather and make friends  
• The cooking and the eating lunch together.  
• The workshops and woodworking activities |
| 3 | Psychological, being purposeful | • Children lead the play  
• Loose materials to enable that play – ropes, nets, woodland materials, sticks etc  
• Workshops, in the nest |
| 4 | Biophilic, being engaged in a relationship with nature | • Allowed to go out of sight, explore and climb trees.  
• The woodland provides the variety of vegetation and surfaces to get a great understanding of the form and function of the trees, a stronger awareness of nature.  
• Opportunities to learn more about nature |
| 5. | Biophilic, being close to nature | • As above  
• Allowed to get mucky and explore.  
• Activities that allow physical and mental immersion in nature. |
| 6. | Physical, confidence in, and enjoyment of physical activity | • The nature of the environment  
• Making things – woodwork, design and build  
• The permission to roam from parents and play workers |
| 7. | Creative/cultural | • The wooded, free and open place engenders creative and imaginative play  
• The freedom to get close to it and belong in a holistic sense  
• Provision of loose parts  
• Opportunities to express imaginative play through the arts  
• The cooking |
Woodland Trust – tree planting

The project: Exploring the wellbeing outcomes of tree planting activities for young people

The organisation: Woodland Trust

The project researcher: Nicky Puttick and Vickie Norris (The Silvanus Trust)

Participant group: Students from four secondary schools in the St Austell area of Cornwall; aged between 11 and 16, with the majority of participants (64%) aged 12 or 13.

Number taking part: Survey – 113, Discussion groups - 18

Activity: Tree planting

Top 3 messages:
1. Adapt the way that tree planting activities are facilitated to take into account the main motivating (and wellbeing inducing) factors for young people; namely to create habitats for animals, plants and trees, to feel that they are acting within a nurturing/ care-giving role towards nature, and taking action towards a purpose greater than themselves.

2. Enable young people to access psychological, emotional, social and physical benefits through follow-up activities/discussion.

3. Ensure tree planting activity participants are not de-motivated to engage in further pro-environmental behaviour through feeling that they have ‘done their bit’.

Background
This project was undertaken on behalf of the Woodland Trust. The Woodland Trust’s aims are to:

- work with others to plant more native trees
- protect native woods, trees and their wildlife for the future
- inspire everyone to enjoy and value woods and trees.

They are based in Grantham, Lincolnshire but operate nationally with staff and volunteers being based around England.

Research focus
This project retrospectively explored the wellbeing outcomes of tree planting activities for young people. The research examined young people’s memories, experiences of, and feelings towards tree planting. The research methods used consisted of an online survey, followed up by discussion groups held in schools.

Context
Tree planting activities took place in a variety of locations including school grounds, farmland, a disused china clay quarry site, private gardens and youth organisation grounds (e.g. cubs, brownies). The majority of
young people we encountered had planted trees in their school grounds at various primary schools. We are uncertain as to the exact extent of this, and whether the school grounds were woodland or non-woodland sites. Some young people had planted trees in their gardens and other non-woodland sites.

As the research was retrospective, memories of previous tree planting experiences were explored. These activities could have taken place at any point prior to the research being carried out (in May/June 2012), but the majority of young people had planted trees whilst at Primary school.

**Expectations**
A representative for the Woodland Trust was the only stakeholder interviewed for this project. He expected tree planting to benefit young people by providing enjoyment through the physical aspects of being outdoors and planting trees, and through experiencing a deeper/spiritual connection with nature through planting a tree.

The stakeholder was also interested in the longer term impacts of tree planting, and cited studies which link childhood experiences in nature with pro-environmental behaviours in later years.

**Methods used**
An online survey was used to gather initial information and identify students who would be willing to participate in a discussion group about tree-planting. We designed a series of survey questions using 'SurveyMonkey' and built a simple website which allowed students to easily access the survey. The survey was designed to take between 5 and 10 minutes to complete, and was completed in school class time under the supervision of a teacher.

The survey was followed up with a discussion group at three of the participating schools. The discussion groups took place either in class time or during the school lunch break, and lasted a maximum of 30 minutes. Group size varied between 2 and 11 participants, depending upon which students had volunteered at each school. Basic content was planned prior to the groups taking place, with areas to explore in more depth identified from the initial survey findings.

**Results**
Our research identified the following wellbeing indicators in relation to memories of tree planting:

**Self-transcendent Purposefulness**
This was the most commonly identified wellbeing indicator in discussion groups, with 20 separate references recorded. This indicator was developed in response to comments from the discussion groups that referred to a sense of taking action for a purpose greater than oneself. Participants often linked this purpose to the global environmental crisis (usually phrased as "helping the environment"). This feeling of having positively influenced the future of "the environment" can produce a physical sensation of satisfaction; 'a warm glow', and a sense of increased emotional wellbeing. For example, one participant said: "It makes you feel kind of successful cos you're making a difference to climate change".

It is important to contextualise this indicator amidst the other feelings young people expressed about global environmental issues. Feelings of disillusionment, anger, sadness, helplessness, even fear of impending doom, appeared evident:
Researcher: “this whole notion of global warming... how do you sort of feel about that in general?”
E: “All humanity’s achievements are for nothing.”
Researcher: “Right. So you feel a bit helpless maybe?”
E: “Angry”
Researcher: “Angry – OK. So do you think that planting trees is maybe one way of you know feeling different about that?”
E: “Yeah, they’ll slow it down.”

This could indicate that the participants’ knowledge that they had planted a tree in the past acts as a wellbeing resource that can be accessed in later years - perhaps enabling them to feel less helpless about global environmental issues, or create a psychological link between personal action and global environmental issues that is empowering.

Feelings of nurturing the natural world.
This was the second most frequently identified wellbeing indicator relating to tree planting activities.

This indicator is characterised as feeling that one is in a care-giving role towards trees, animals, ecosystems etc. This sense of being a caregiver/ nurturer to the natural world came up frequently in the three discussion groups. This indicator often combined with the ‘self-transcendent purposefulness’ indicator, but seemed to differ in that it relates more closely to personal action and depends upon a direct relationship with nature.

When completing the online survey, 79.8% of respondents to the question “Why do you think it is important to plant trees?” chose ‘To provide habitats for animals, birds and plants’ as one of up to 3 options they could select. This selection rate was significantly higher than other available options.

Young people derived a sense of wellbeing from directly benefitting plants, animals and trees. This was evidenced when participants were asked about what feeling connected to nature means to them and one young person replied, ‘Sort of like – like you’re benefitting to the animals like helping them out to get along with life a lot more.’.

Experiencing positive emotions and moods

Most reported instances of positive emotions and moods referred to feeling good because of practising pro-environmental behaviours. Participants did not generally seem to understand how tree planting could have a positive impact on their mood per se. This could be due to the amount of time that had passed since they planted trees, or perhaps because they identified the action so strongly as a pro-environmental behaviour.

For example:

Researcher: “Right, and how did it sort of make you feel to think that you were helping the environment?”
M: “Yeah it made me feel a little bit happier.”

Feelings of closeness to the natural world

Feeling close to the natural world seemed to be an important aspect of the tree planting experience for many of the participants. This indicator was often referred to in conjunction with other wellbeing indicators that were perhaps more suited to participants’ vocabulary or understanding, such as ‘feelings of nurturing the natural world’.
When asked, ‘Have you had any other experiences that have given you the same feeling, or a similar feeling [as tree planting]?’ one young person answered, “Sometimes in the woods, basically where the plants have grown most, just in there, just, just makes me feel connected... Just sitting there and watching it.”

Being engaged in a relationship with nature

When asked ‘Can you think about anything in particular about tree planting that made you feel connected to nature...?’ One participant said ‘Well, I was sort of just, I just sort of like thought it could just be like a huge tree later on and just kind of have lots of animals inhabiting it.’

This quote is interesting in how it refers to the temporal aspects of being engaged in a relationship with nature. The tree planting experience in its nature is linked to the future of the tree(s) being planted. Being able to influence the future of an environment through planting a tree seems to be of significance to young people.

Developing Oneself

This was referred to in a discussion about feeling connected to nature. A connection to nature was sometimes understood as increased by purposeful pro-environmental behaviours, which could be entwined with this sense of self development.

One participant said ‘Your mind’s more open to what’s out there and your emotions are much happier when you’re with them.’ when talking about being in an environment with plants and animals.

This was an area identified by the project stakeholder as being a likely benefit of tree planting. Given that many of the young people who participated in discussion groups seemed to struggle with self-reflection, the concept of self development may have been outside of their understanding. The act of discussing tree planting seemed to deepen participants’ understanding of how previous tree planting experiences sat within their notions of environment, wellbeing and responsibility towards the natural world.

Reflections

The research has shown that young people do not consider that they personally benefitted from tree planting activities, but are largely focused on the impact that their actions have had upon the natural environment.

This may be due to the context in which tree planting activities were conducted and/or the environmental education that young people have received since tree planting.

Tree planting may help young people to generate a sense of self-transcendent purposefulness and to foster feelings of nurture and care for the natural world. These both appear to have a positive impact on wellbeing.

Many participants reported that by planting trees they felt that they were ‘doing their bit’ to help reverse environmental destruction and restore the natural environment. It is important to ensure that this feeling isn’t de-motivating for partaking in future pro-environmental activities. The Woodland Trust may wish to consider scheduling in follow-up visits to schools that had previously planted trees as a way of ‘cementing’ the experience for young people and making best use of the opportunity to have a positive impact on future environmental behaviours, and allow tree planters to access the less obvious benefits of tree planting through discussion and encouraged reflection.
The main challenge in conducting this research was engaging schools and keeping them engaged throughout the data collection stages. This was achieved to a satisfactory level, possibly helped by incentives offered by the Woodland Trust. However, we had to remind all schools to disseminate the survey to students and we lost contact with one school after the survey stage due to staff absence/ lack of handover.

**Action points**

- Ensure tree planting activity participants are not de-motivated to engage in further pro-environmental behaviour through feeling that they have ‘done their bit’.
- Enable young people to access psychological, emotional, social and physical benefits through follow-up activities/discussion. Perhaps developing a curriculum to accompany tree planting activities which teachers can implement in class time.
- Increased awareness within the Woodland Trust and within schools of the opportunity that tree planting activities offer to empower young people with regards to global environmental issues, and demonstrate the sorts of pro-environmental behaviours that will positively impact on the future of the planet.
- Adapt the way tree planting sessions are facilitated to take into account the main motivating (and wellbeing inducing) factors for young people; namely to create habitats for animals, plants and trees, to feel that they are acting within a nurturing/ care-giving role towards nature, and taking action towards a purpose greater than themselves.

**Summary of findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank (most reported)</th>
<th>Wellbeing outcome</th>
<th>Associated factors (who, what and where)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Self-transcendent purposefulness</td>
<td>Tree planting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Feelings of nurturing the natural world</td>
<td>Tree planting, and discussions relating to feeling connected to nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Experiencing positive emotions and moods</td>
<td>Tree planting, or discussing hypothetical situations relating to tree planting.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Feelings of closeness to the natural world</td>
<td>Discussion about feeling connected to nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Being engaged in a relationship with nature</td>
<td>Tree planting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Developing Oneself</td>
<td>Discussion around feeling connected to nature</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Otterhead Forest School – young teenagers

**The project:** The impact of regular Forest School sessions on young teenagers wellbeing

**The organisations:** Otterhead Forest School and The Castle School, Taunton

**The project researcher:** Jenny Archard

**Participant group:** Six-week Forest School group, including some students who had been to more sessions, from Castle School, Taunton

**Number taking part:** 13 students overall

**Activity:** Series of six day-long Forest School sessions at Otterhead Lakes

**Top 3 messages:**

1. Play of all kinds is a very important component in Forest School sessions, even for older young people. It helps them feel in control, build relationships and creates the ground for many other positive outcomes.

2. For Leaders and Teachers to know that being in a place that is ‘different to the everyday’ and that provides the opportunity for ‘developing relationships with adults’, is a crucial part of Forest School for this age group.

3. We need to ensure that Leaders understand what a ‘natural connection’ is for a young person, and then create opportunities so that they can build their own ways and language. We need to create time for all in the woods if we want to maintain and grow our species’ connection with the nature we spring from.

**Background**

As a Forest School Leader, I worked with The Otterhead Forest School team from 2008-2011, which is where this research took place in 2011. The key members of staff at that time had been some of the pioneers of the use of the Forest School approach with older children and young people with behavioural issues. They worked mostly with young teenagers with behavioural or nurture needs, either in groups or on a one to one basis. Their base was the old coach house at Otterhead Lakes, a mixed woodland local nature reserve in the Blackdown Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty. On any day there was a variety of groups of students in the woods, being supported by the team. As the project researcher I was part of the Otterhead team at the beginning of this project, then left to create a new woodland social enterprise.

All students came from The Castle School in Taunton, which had been sending pupils to Forest School provision for some years.

As a practitioner-researcher, my own interest was in the longer term wellbeing of the young people I had experience of working with, and finding ways to record and document changes for them.
Research focus
The focus was:

- To observe and document impacts of the Forest School process on young people, especially those who only came for 6 sessions
- To see what, if any, improvements could be made in practice to enable greater benefits for young people
- To share findings widely with those in the Forest School movement as there has been little research work done with teenagers

Context
The data gathering part of the research took place in the late autumn term of 2011, with follow-up in the late summer of 2012 and final reporting in 2014.

Thirteen students participated in the research. Five were year seven and eight students new to Forest School and coming for a day a week in a six week block. Eight were longer term students from years seven to eleven who had in general been attending a day a week from between six weeks to four years. All students had some kind of behavioural or nurture needs.

Students were brought to the Forest School by school minibus, and school staff did not stay for the sessions. Each of the six week sessions were led by two Otterhead Forest School staff, joined by the project researcher. The project researcher had worked with some of the longer term students earlier in the year. The longitudinal research was carried out six months later by the project researcher with help from GfW staff, in different woodlands without the participation of Otterhead staff for practical and logistical reasons. The longitudinal research made clear connections between types of wellbeing experienced and what students recalled the wellbeing being derived from.

The research used a set of wellbeing domains and indicators of wellbeing experience developed prior to data collection to guide analysis and reporting, but expanded these further in response to emerging findings.

Expectations
From initial interviews, Forest School and Castle school staff most commonly expected to see students achieving social, psychological, emotional and physical wellbeing.

The most frequently anticipated wellbeing outcomes for students were those around social wellbeing; feeling ‘safe and supported within and through social relationships’, socially ‘confident’, and ‘accepted’.

“Social, emotional aspects – all the sort of making friends, learning to play and fall out and make up and all the stuff that they should be doing at school but find it hard to” (FS?).

These were closely followed by expectations of opportunities for achieving psychological wellbeing especially ‘feelings of being competent’.

“I think that they just don’t cope with five days a week in school. I think it’s something very different as part of their working week, it gives them an opportunity to – it brings them confidence and raise self esteem.” (CS)

“... a sense of achievement really, that they can achieve in a different way, even if they’ve been told that they’re failures in certain ways.” (FS)
The achievement of emotional wellbeing was the next most common expectation, especially ‘experiencing positive emotions and moods’.

“xx’s mum said to me that it’s the only day of the week she doesn’t have to drag xx out of bed.” (CS) “just that little glow inside, that they’ve had a positive experience and some fun and some achievement and it’s just like that nice little feeling inside”(FS1).

Those that were least common were the natural connections and physical wellbeing themes.

Three less easy classifiable experiences of wellbeing: ‘Different from everyday life’ (being out of school, being outside, having space to think); ‘Developing relationships with adults’ – (staff acting as role models, trusting staff, asking staff questions, seeing staff learning); and ‘Understanding own behaviours/emotions’ (helping students look at what has gone wrong) were picked up during stakeholder interviews.

From initial conversations with new students, their expectations were to be doing things that were physical and fun and led to learning about leadership, their own behaviour, tool-use and nature.

Methods used

- Semi-structured group interviews, audio-recorded and transcribed. These were used with the Otterhead staff team and the Castle School staff before the research sessions began with the students.

- Semi-structured individual interviews, audio-recorded and transcribed. Used with Otterhead staff team, and individual students at Forest School.

- Observation recorded in a diary, accompanied by photos and videos, some taken by students for research purposes. Some of the audio from the videos was used for data and transcribed.

- ‘Flash card’ prompts for follow-up interviews. These were a series of 20 statements that the students could put into an order to describe what they had got the most from whilst being at Forest School as a prompt to further discussion. The statements were linked to the wellbeing domains and indicators guiding the data analysis, but were put into language students were more likely to use.

- Reflective Diary. This was completed as a journal of the process of being involved in the research, and captured my own feelings about progress as well as developing observations.

- I also tried using peer interviews, but in general this did not work or generate any decent data (except in one case); instead it caused rather a lot of hilarity and fun!

Results

The experiences of wellbeing amongst students that I observed most frequently during the six-week period of the Forest School programme, with some examples, were:

Feelings of being in control - Students showed different ways of being in control of their own experience in the woods. One student chose to make his own fire each week, away from the group fire. Another was asked if she wanted to make a willow star, and instead she chose to watch what her friend was doing.
Energetic - Most students walked, climbed, ran and played on the site explore walk in the first session. Sometimes being energetic was a ‘free’ activity that students created themselves, and sometimes it was supported by staff after the learners had initiated it.

Experiencing positive emotions and moods - I observed laughter and smiles often, which doesn’t mean that everyone was happy all the time, and for some it was much more subtle; one smile on making something or achieving a task.

Feelings of being confident - From week one, staff encouraged students to be confident in front of the group and in one-to-one interactions. In interview one student commented, ‘My confidence has improved - I wouldn’t speak to people when I first came’.

Supporting others through social relationships - There was a positive atmosphere modeled by the staff who were generally friendly in their relationships with each other and to the students. Two students supported each other a good deal during the six weeks and made a short video together of why they like forest school.

Confidence in and enjoyment of physical activity - As soon as the young people get off the minibus, some of them are running down the hill, chasing each other and laughing.

Different from everyday life - Most students commented that they liked to come to Forest School as it was a day out of school. Students said that being at Forest School gave them the chance to have a break, make friends with different people and allow them to learn different skills. I could see it being a respite from their everyday worlds.

Developing relationships with adults - I saw staff making a point of being available, open to questions and friendly whilst ensuring boundaries are kept. Students engaged in rough and tumble with staff and were physically close, sometimes even clingy. One student said “Normal teachers just talk down to you quite a bit and then, like, they don’t take much notice of you. They [forest school staff] take notice of you and the things what you want to do.” This quote also suggests that developing relationships with adults who allow you some control may be significant for some.

Playing (with sticks, with others or alone) - The activity that stood out the most was playing and the amount and type of evidence I amassed suggested to me that it was an experience of wellbeing in itself. The students play the most whilst in the woods, and will play on the way to the woods and on the way back. Playing happens alone, in small groups, large groups, with sticks, with mud, with staff; it was sometimes an organised game (by students or staff), initiated by students or it appeared to be completely unplanned.

Understanding own behaviours/emotions - Staff challenged poor behaviour on many occasions, and give options for better, more positive, behaviour. In interview, one of the longer-term students described how being at forest school had changed his behaviour, “It’s sort of learnt me to deal with a lot of people, cos before I end up sorting out a clash and then going home, it sort of, you learn tolerance with people, so then he winds you up and winds you up and you can ignore them for a certain while before you end up sort of hitting the top.”

Longitudinal research with a smaller group (six months later) suggested that many experiences of wellbeing had endured over time. Experiences of wellbeing that appeared to remain significant for students included:
Confidence in and enjoyment of physical activity (Physical) There is an interesting overlap with other experiences of wellbeing - Energetic, and Closeness to the natural world.

Feelings of being confident (in social relationships) (Social) Experienced frequently through ‘being with friends and hanging out’ and links to ‘Developing relationships with adults’ (below).

Developing relationships with adults (Unclassified) - linked to experiences of getting comments from others about how you are doing and spending time on your own. Spending time on your own is included here students described activity in terms of their developing relationship with an adult enabling it to occur.

Energetic (Psychological) - very frequently observed in early data, again as playing games, running around, going for explore walks; and links with two high placed flashcards (Messing about with sticks; Playing running around games).

Different from everyday life (Unclassified) - Frequently observed in the first data, as being associated with being out of school and having space to be and to think, and links strongly to recalled social and natural experiences; of being with friends and hanging out, making new friends and being in the woods)

Feelings of being competent (and seen by others to be competent) (Psychological) - Links to recollections of carving sticks using a knife or other tools, being allowed to decide what to do and cooking food on the fire

Experiencing positive emotions and moods (Emotional) - Frequently observed in the first data, and linked to students with going for walks in bogs and streams and carving sticks using a knife or other tools.

Playing - with sticks, with others or alone (new indicator) - very frequently observed in the first round of data and linked with messing about with sticks, going for walks in bogs and streams and playing running around games).

The surprises are the two that became more important:

Feelings of closeness to the natural world AND Being engaged in a relationship with nature. Neither of these had been observed in the first round of data, but were linked with two of the experiences most recalled by students as leading to wellbeing (Clearing up and looking after the forest; Being in the woods), indicating that they had become more important over time. Looking again at the earlier data, I would also suggest that my view about what constitutes ‘closeness with nature’ and ‘being in a relationship with nature’ is different to how the students experienced these aspects.

And one that was not articulated frequently in longitudinal responses:

Feelings of being in control (psychological) - This does not appear strongly in the follow-up data, but I suspect that is because it is an indicator that flows through or underlies many of the others, rather than being explicit. Perhaps this suggests that ‘being in control’ is not an indicator, but one of the pre-conditions for woodland wellbeing to take place.

Reflections and Conclusions
The research has given plenty of good evidence that Forest School has made a difference in wellbeing terms to the students who came to these six sessions, including those who only came for six sessions. It was also
shown that the initially recorded wellbeing benefits endured in the longer term, but that some appeared to become more important, and others less so, over time.

The most recorded wellbeing experience were found to be focused round social and physical benefits, but psychological, emotional and other types of wellbeing were also found to result from the FS studies. Interestingly, nature connection wellbeing only became evident in the longitudinal data, but was found to be important at that stage.

Play stands out as an important experience for young people as part of the Forest School session, one that may have been implied but is not stated by the stakeholders.

Physical and nature connection wellbeing were not mentioned in stakeholders’ expectations but were found to be important to students. Perhaps because these are implicit outcomes, they are not being described as a benefit or outcome, and thus could risk being lost or overlooked by both sets of stakeholders.

Perhaps Forest School (and other) leaders like myself are looking for the ‘wrong’ behaviours or indicators to judge if children and young people are really making a connection to nature, or perhaps not being exposed to the woods means not having the language that we expect would be used to express an experience of nature connection wellbeing.

The differences between stakeholders’ expectations was an interesting and unexpected part of this research, and my reflection here is that this could have an impact on the wellbeing outcomes for students. Being clearer about what expectations the Forest School experiences are fulfilling for the students and for the school, and being able to measure these in a simple way looks like a good idea, as well as improving connections and communications between the two stakeholder groups.

**Action points**

- Pay more attention to the physicality (those things that lead to young people being energetic, being able to enjoy physical activity and play) that Forest School sessions with young teenagers can create and make it a more explicit activity and outcome for students

- Pay more attention to activities that encourage students to make direct links with nature, in ways that these young people find engaging, and for Forest School leaders to find out what ‘caring for the woods /place’ might look like and use activities (or even non-activities!) that help their learners feel more connected

- Be clear about what expectations the Forest School experiences are fulfilling for the students and for the school that is sending them, and be able to measure these

- Have more overt ways of monitoring wellbeing outcomes so that the expectations are more closely matched

- For Forest School leaders to encourage all kinds of play amongst teenage students
For Forest School Leaders and Schools accessing provision:

- Play of all kinds is a very important component in Forest School sessions, even for older young people. It helps them feel in control, build relationships and creates the ground for many other positive outcomes.

- For Leaders to know that being in a place that is ‘different to the everyday’ and that provides the opportunity for ‘developing relationships with adults’ is a crucial part of Forest School for this age group.

- Ensure that physicality - play, making, exploring - is an explicit part of Forest School sessions with young teenagers.

- We need to make sure that Leaders understand what a ‘natural connection’ is for a young person, and then create opportunities so that they can build their own ways of connecting and their language to describe it. This may be to use activities that are directly focused on exploring nature, and encourage students to make their own personal connections with nature, so that they can benefit and begin to learn the ‘language’ of nature. It’s a bit like walking in their shoes rather than ours!

- If a school is sending young people to an off-site Forest School provision, be clear about expectations and outcomes on both sides, and make sure there are ways of monitoring wellbeing outcomes.

- To know that six weeks of Forest School sessions do have a wellbeing impact.

For Further Research:

- Find out more about the difference between those who regularly access nature and those who do not; not just what has been called the ‘nature deficit disorder’ but the impact it has on language, cognition and people’s understanding of the world around them.

- Look at the difference in wellbeing outcomes between young people in regular woodland sessions who are engaged in explicit, led nature connection activities, and those whose leaders let those activities develop.

For the Wider Community:

- Make opportunities for ‘more time in the woods’ and ‘time for all in the woods’ if we want to maintain and grow our species’ connection with the nature we spring from
**Nature Workshops – Young Carers project**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>The project:</strong></th>
<th>Walk Tall and Proud in the Trees – Nature Workshops Young Carers project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The organisation:</strong></td>
<td>Nature Workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The project researcher lead:</strong></td>
<td>Jane Acton</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Participant group:</strong></td>
<td>young carers aged 9-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number taking part:</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activity features:</strong></td>
<td>At total of 25 hours in local woodlands over 5 days in school summer holidays. Sensory, educational, physical and social focussing on individual needs and learning styles. Included games, tool use, bushcraft, arts, cooking, talking, thinking, laughing, splashing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Top 3 messages:</strong></td>
<td>1. Top 3 most referenced well being indicators 'safe and supported within and through social relationships', 'developing oneself', 'connecting with others through shared beliefs and outlook'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Measurable improvement in motivation and self awareness by parents and teachers.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3. One unexpected outcome was 2 brothers became ardent recyclers at home. This is an outcome many people working in similar ways would like to see happen ie. that time in the natural world might imbibe a sense of responsibility among the participants. This might be an area which deserves more investigation.</td>
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**Background**

All the young people care for sick relatives who might have physical or mental health issues and drug and alcohol problems. All live in areas high on the Index of Multiple Deprivation 2010. 1 girl has learning difficulties and cares for both her parents who also have learning difficulties 3 boys with identified ADHD or behavioural issues at school.

The research was conducted with the parents and teachers prior to the events in the woods, with the young carers during the sessions and with the parents and carers after the time in the woods was finished.

The site is managed by Cornwall Wildlife Trust for wildlife. It is therefore only lightly managed. It is not heavily visited by local people as it has not marketed in this way. Natural succession takes place making it necessary to be extra vigilant for loose branches or even whole trees after high winds. It is a bluebell wood in spring when we cannot access the space for our activities. There is no obvious coppicing or other management in the areas we generally use. One large chestnut tree dominates the space we use with many sycamore and beech and the growth is of medium density.

**Research focus**

The objective was to improve the self esteem and well being of the young people whose lives are dominated by caring for their sick relatives. The focus therefore was to find out if the sessions do indeed do this.
Context
All participants are young carers which means they often or daily care for the needs of their parents or other significant adults in their lives. Issues they have to deal with are physical disabilities such as a young mum with MS whose deteriorating condition has led to disfigurement which lead to our boy being teased at school. This led to his explosive behaviour in the classroom which eventually led to him being diagnosed with ADHD and being prescribed Ritalin.

Other issues our group have to deal with daily with their parents are depression and mental health problems, drug addiction and managing prescriptions, wheelchair bound parent and parents with Downs (mum) and learning difficulties (dad) where our girl looks after the whole family.

Expectations
One teacher pre intervention comment was:

I imagine they will be given the help and support they need to succeed and that having that experience and being successful will in itself, help boost their confidence and help them kind of come back to school in September feeling like they can succeed in the next academic year.

One parent pre-intervention:

He’ll thoroughly enjoy it I reckon. It’ll teach him too, to sort of like help him control himself a bit with his temper, his temper just losing it and keep hold of it a bit longer than he does

Methods used
• Using a hand held digital recorder: We used this method with a set of questions which were used to aid discussions and explore relevant issues with the parents and teachers before the activities took place. This allowed us to revisit baselines, hopes and expectations in relation to the young people.

• Each member of staff had a note book which was used during the sessions and immediately after each session.
  - On the last day the children were asked to write down words to complete sentences. I think we may have mentioned the word 'poem' but we pointed out they could write just what they saw in each of the 4 directions, plus up and below and how they felt.
  - Emotional Literacy Checklists: These are a set of questionnaires we are licensed to use developed by child psychologists to be used with groups of school children or individual young people over time. The process requires the child, parent and teacher to complete the forms and we use them to set baseline data before the intervention begins and measure distance travelled after the sessions in nature have come to an end. We then worked with the Royal Statistical Society to further analyse the data using Pair and T tests.

Results
Here is a selection of the results, names have been changed. The top most popular well being indicators were as follows:
Safe and supported within and through social relationships

Teacher post intervention 'We haven’t picked up any poor behaviour around the school at all. And if he’d have picked up one detention a week, which he was doing, he’d have been on report to his form teacher by now and he’s not...So he’s certainly under the five detentions, that’s under one a week - not heard from him. He’s doing lovely.'

Sea Scout leader post intervention 'I’ve noticed a marked improvement, for me the significant thing this year was the coast to coast walk which he did, I think we touched on it beforehand, and that’s still etched in my mind, the determination on his face that he was going to finish it, with a bit of help and coaching from the two adult helpers who were walking, but he carried his own bag, he did it all the way you know, and that to me was fantastic.'

Staff: ‘this is all very different now, and like remarkably different from day one.’

Developing oneself

Parent: 'I've seen a change in Tim over this summer holiday which is nice you know'

Parent: he’s more accepting of people’s ideas

Parent She's all of a sudden started to find new friends that do different things whereas before it was all friends on the X box now she's got new friends and going out skating

Connecting with others through shared beliefs and outlook

Parent: they are actually starting to clean up after themselves, and they're not expecting me, I have to say 'excuse me' but they will do it whereas it used to be before 'yeh, i'll do that in a minute' and it never got done.'

Parent: he’s grown a little bit more understanding.

Parent: I do think that they realized how beautiful it is out there, instead of being stuck in, they've actually realized how lovely woodland places is or just to go to a field with trees. Like Michael will go to a field with a tree with his mates and stuff. It’s nice! And they want to go camping now!

One unexpected unplanned outcome:

Being engaged in a relationship with nature

Parent: They know how to recycle. They now, you know like with the cardboard and all they know how to recycle you know instead of just ripping it into pieces it’ll get put in the bucket and stuff... it’s more to the fact that they’re like woods and its very clean

Emotional Literacy Checklists

These are the words from the researcher who helped us from the Royal Statistical Society in relation to each of the 5 parameters:

Empathy - There is no evidence the intervention has made any difference for children, parents or teachers.
Motivation - There is no evidence the intervention has made any difference for children or teachers. But the data suggest there is an effect for parents (an increase).

Self-awareness - There is no evidence the intervention has made any difference for children. But the data suggest there is an effect for parents and teachers (increases).

Self-regulation - There is no evidence the intervention has made any difference for children, parents or teachers. Here a larger sample may show evidence of a difference for parents and teachers.

Social Skills - There is no evidence the intervention has made any difference for children or teachers. But the data suggest there is a slight effect for parents.

**Reflections**

One teacher pre intervention comment was:

“I imagine they will be given the help and support they need to succeed and that having that experience and being successful will in itself, help boost their confidence and help them kind of come back to school in September feeling like they can succeed in the next academic year.”

Post intervention:

“I think he’s a lot happier – he’s come back into year 8 with more of a smile on his face, less negative, less willing to blame other people for things”

“So he has come back more positive, but we’re lacking a little bit in the classroom – little bit of negativity, little bit of walking out still but not as bad as before, when he was in year 7 – they are the main things, main changes – he seems to be a lot more positive.”

- Many of the teachers had not spoken to the children specifically about their experience of being in the woods compared to the parents who often asked them as they arrived home; therefore they felt less able to report specifically on these impacts.

- Teachers were looking for the children to develop self control or for the development of the child. They were not expecting and did not look for, for example ‘closeness to the natural world' or 'optimism for the future'.

- The Emotional Literacy Checklists might be best done at home before the sets of sessions start and when they have all finished, not in the woods.

- One teacher in the post intervention interview did not seem able to refer to the child’s behaviour since the intervention. The teacher was dismissive of improvements in the child referring back again and again to the behaviour of the child pre intervention. This was not a teacher who was seeing the child on a regular day to day basis. Rather this was a 'specialist' teacher who only actually saw the child when they had been misbehaving. In future it is important that we see the teacher the child chooses if at all possible.

- We used a team of research supporters. The volume of data would have been very difficult to manage otherwise.
Action points

We hope to have some of the young carers who are now over 14 to come do Level 1 Forest School training with us and also to secure another small pot of funding to work with young carers again. This time we would encourage peer support with the young people we worked with here to help mentor new young carers and have them working in their communities as Tree Inspectors, using OPAL surveys and underwater litter pickers via SAS and BSAC.
The project: Well Being in Nature - Nature Workshops Mental Health project

The organisation: Nature Workshops

The project researcher lead: Jane Acton

Participant group: Adults with severe and enduring mental health problems

Number taking part: 6: 2 women and 4 men

Activity features: At total of 25 hours in local woodlands over 5 days in autumn 2012. Sensory, educational, physical and social activities focussing on individual needs and learning styles. Included games, tool use, bushcraft, arts, cooking, talking, thinking, silence.

Top 3 messages:

1. Nature based activities can increase the wellbeing of mental health sufferers, as measured on the Warwick and Edinburgh Well Being Scale. Five out of six participants’ scores increased by the end of the research.

2. Participants’ most frequently reported experiencing wellbeing through feelings of ‘developing oneself’, ‘a closeness to the natural world’ and ‘optimism about the future’.

3. Nature based activities can contribute towards a reduced reliance on medication for mental health sufferers, with one participant in this study being able to come off her anti psychotic drugs.

Background

The project was based on the Forest School model, facilitating learning up to level 1 OCN Forest School qualification. It aimed to improve well being by improving people’s capacity and willingness to access nature and to improve self esteem by spending time in nature. It also aimed to increase skills and confidence by walking outdoors in nature, in using hand tools, making fires and risk assessing natural spaces for personal, family and community use.

People with long term serious mental health problems were targeted for this project. We reached people via the agencies which support mental health sufferers, namely West Cornwall MIND, Richmond House Day Centre in Penzance, Community Psychiatric Nurses and Community Health Support staff.

Research focus

This study aimed to provide evidence of the impact of the natural world on mental health issues and how it can help people reduce pharmaceutical medications in favour of less invasive and cheaper options. We also wanted to test the methods which could be used to prove the impact of the natural world on mental health issues. Specifically we wanted to try quantitative methods and empirical qualitative methods. Advised by the European Centre for Environment and Human Health we chose the Warwick and Edinburgh Mental Well Being (WEMWBS) scale to measure pre and post intervention outcomes. We used various other observational qualitative outcomes.
Context
The group was made up of 4 men and 2 women. They had all self-selected, encouraged by their referrers. Their personal backgrounds were varied, with some having suffered traumatic experiences or series of events. The diagnosed illnesses among the group included paranoid schizophrenia, post traumatic stress, anxiety, self harming, depression, talking difficulties and sight problems.

For most, getting to the first session was the biggest hurdle of all. As the site is remote, taxis were provided for all but one of the participants. The activities participants engaged with during the sessions were designed iteratively based on what worked for individual participants from one week to the next. In general, they were sensory, educational, physical and social activities focussing on individual needs and learning styles. They included games, tool use, bushcraft, arts, cooking, talking, thinking and being silent or noisy, with plenty of reflection.

The project took place at a broadleaved woodland owned by Cornwall Wildlife Trust, approximately 10 acres in size. The growth and planting across the woodland is varied, with the project taking place in a more open area of the site. The site is managed for biodiversity, so is only subject to light management activities, and is not heavily used by the public.

Expectations
The most frequently mentioned stakeholder expectations were that participants would experience wellbeing through:

- Developing oneself
- Feelings of closeness to the natural world
- Feelings of physical health
- Relaxed
- Optimistic about the future

The results supported and exceeded stakeholder expectations. Participants generally underestimated the wellbeing outcomes that they anticipated experiencing. They expected that their skills might be tested to the limit, which they found to be true.

Methods used
- WEMWB scale pre and post intervention with the participants
- All the participants underwent the Level 1 Forest School training which provided evidence of learning during the programme.
- The registration process included the preparation of a personalised learning plan which was revisited during the programme and at the end.
- Interviews recorded with a hand held digital recorder: We used this method with a set of questions which were used to aid discussions and explore relevant issues with the participants, referrers and staff before, during and after the activities took place. This allowed us to revisit baselines, hopes and expectations in relation to the participants. Transcripts of all this material were then coded using the GfW well being indicators. Each member of staff had a note book which was used to record observations and thoughts during the sessions and immediately after each session.
Results

Participants’ wellbeing was assessed at the beginning and end of the project using the Warwick and Edinburgh Well Being Scale. All but one of the participants’ scores had increased by the end of the project, but the amount of increase varied quite widely.

All the participants passed their Level 1 Forest School training indicating that the aim of the project to increase the skills and competency of the participants had been realised. This achievement is closely linked to the participants gain a sense of developing themselves.

The top three types of wellbeing experienced by participants were found to be ‘developing oneself’, ‘feelings of closeness to the natural world’ and ‘feeling optimistic about the future’. Examples of participant quotes evidencing these outcomes are included below:

**Developing oneself**

“Yeah, it really has helped, it really has. Usually I would have trouble speaking, you know talking to people and even looking them in the eyes, it has actually really helped with that.”

“I’ve learnt so much as well it’s just and a different way of teaching us things”

“I think I like the wood carving. It’s like communicating with nature when you get in tune to it, you know when you’re carving, making things is like you’re in your own little world. It’s a pleasurable thing to be doing wood carving, it’s just like gets you in tune to the woods surrounding you, you know and helps you to be more of a nature person yourself you know.”
“And sharing and seeing other people express themselves in different ways, I really find it really important that when other people come together like this, and kind of sharing what we’re doing – really means a lot to me.”

“Yeah, I was the same, I was looking forward, I was telling everybody at home, I’m... Yeah I was just telling everybody I met last night and yesterday how I was doing – doing the wood craft, bushcraft tomorrow, yeah I couldn’t wait.”

**Feelings of closeness to the natural world**

“Yeah, definitely, definitely fulfilled. You know cos I’ve always been the one for the outdoors – camping and that, but day to day stresses and you know, what life throws at us day to day I think everybody needs to break away and just to be in a different environment – it can just make you feel different, you know, you go back home with that and you feel fulfilled do you know? Each day you know that – it’s like a food you know, being satisfied with a food but you know.”

“What do I enjoy most? ......just spending the whole day here in the woods and just learning new skills and just working with a group again you know?”

“It’s helped me see things in a different light... The reflections of the sun shining through the tree’s leaves, and how the wind blew in peaceful manner and peaceful way and it felt like being in a different world... And it made you feel like I’d like to kind of live in that situation...”

**Optimistic about the future**

I really couldn’t wait, saw my CPN yesterday and I was like “I can’t wait, I’m going tomorrow”.

But hopefully I will continue doing some sort of thing even if it’s going to walks in woods or something. It’s like inspired me for that as well.

'I kind of energise - I remember once when I – the week before last when I came, I went back and I said to my partner, like you know, the difference between like, cos I have isolated myself so much in the few years, you know, I said to him I’ve realised that you know, when you go out and do stuff and be with other people you do – there is a risk but like, things might go wrong you’re also opening yourself up to really positive experiences as well.'

'A good experience for everybody and people have learnt valuable skills, you know that they might have not know before they came here, but they came here and learnt a lot of skills from the teachers here, and I just hope that everyone will carry that skills within themselves and be able to teach others'  

'I think it will probably last me all my life quite frankly.'

**Reflections**

The research has provided evidence that this type of woodland based training can have a positive effect on the wellbeing of long term mental health sufferers. For example, one of arguably the most mentally unwell participants appeared to gain the most in terms of her well being by being able to come off her anti psychotic drugs on the advice of her doctor. This was an unexpected result but one which all agreed was a direct consequence of this intervention.
A comparison of stakeholder and participant expectations for wellbeing and those reported during and after the series of sessions shows that expectations were met and exceeded.

This was the second GfW project undertaken by Nature Workshops. Having gone through the process with two different participant groups - once with young vulnerable teenagers and once with vulnerable adults – we feel it is the adults that are much more likely to try and second guess what it is we want to hear. It is important to take account of this when interpreting the results.

The volume of the material led to the process being longer than we anticipated. This being our second experience of using the recording and analysis spreadsheets we were given, we were able to prepare, and had in-house systems of dealing with the volume. We also found that presenting the data in tables this time made it easier to manage and handle the data than in the previous research project.

Whilst the use of qualitative methods provided useful and rich evidence of wellbeing, we feel that the production of quantitative data is an important component when proving the impact of the natural world on mental health issues.
**Stroud Woodland Co-op – shared ownership of Folly Wood**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The project:</th>
<th>Folly Wood “Good from Woods” Research Project</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The organisation:</td>
<td>researchers from within the Stroud Woodland Co-op membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The project researcher:</td>
<td>Seb Buckton, Ali Coles, Richard Keating, Jackie Rowanly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant group:</td>
<td>Stroud Woodland Co-op membership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number taking part:</td>
<td>68 participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity:</td>
<td>buying, using and caring for a community owned woodland</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Top 3 messages are that (shared) community ownership of the woodland deliver well being benefits through:**

1. simply knowing that you are contributing to preserving and enhancing woodland and increasing well being benefits for others and 'the greater good' even if you never visit the wood yourself

2. feeling safe and free to visit, enjoy and take action based on having had a stake in agreeing what is permissible and desirable with the rest of the group

3. engendering social, political and environmental connectedness

**Background**

Stroud Woodland Co-op was set up in 2010, as a way of owning woodland co-operatively for the benefit of the environment, shareholders in the Co-op, and other local people. The Co-op currently owns one woodland, Folly Wood, managed by the shareholders for biodiversity, using it for recreation and facilitating its use by local groups.

The research was undertaken during 2013 and 2014 by four shareholders in the co-operative.

**Research focus**

To explore the wellbeing benefits of Folly Wood, focussing on the benefits which are related to the fact that Folly Wood is co-operatively owned; that is, on the wellbeing benefits which could not be provided by a non-community owned wood.

**Context**

The three and a half acre woodland is on the edge of Stroud in the Cotswolds AONB, overlooking the Slad Valley. It was bought at auction in 2010 and the 64 members each hold a £500 share. The group appoints directors annually. Regular core group meetings (open to the whole membership) developed a plan for the group and the wood between 2010 and 2011 by holding seasonal group gatherings and celebrations. Clearance work, replanting and provision of simple play and other facilities began in 2012.

The woodland is probably a remnant ancient, beech-dominated wood, with larch densely planted approximately 90 years ago and in a state of neglect. The closest National Vegetation Classification
(NVC) category is “Beech-Bramble”. The ground layer is dominated by Ivy and Bramble with extensive areas of Sweet Woodruff. There are badger sets in the wood.

**Expectations**
The expectations were that the community ownership model would provide a range of well being benefits which related to both the ownership of the woodland and to being a part of a group. We were interested in how group membership and collective processes would affect these well being benefits, both positively and negatively.

**Methods used**
On-line survey: Co-op members and ex-members were contacted by email, and asked to rate reasons for becoming involved in the Co-op, plus questions on demographics, frequency of visits, transport and activities taken part in.

Discussion group: A group of seven people met for two hours. Discussions were based on findings from the survey with probing questions to further explore wellbeing benefits or the lack of.

Interviews: Interviews were conducted in the research participants' homes. Two interviews with individuals, one interview with a couple. The process was similar to the discussion.

Creative workshop: Role-play and art activities in Folly Wood, aimed at delving deeper into people's experience of Folly Wood and the Co-op, drawing on the findings of the survey, focus group and interviews

Seminar session: Co-facilitation of a session at a town-wide seminar looking at developing collaborative projects amongst environmental organisations and potential well being benefits.

**Results**
The data was analysed for evidence of six different categories of well being, using a set of indicators to assist with identifying instances of each category. The number of references to each indicator is given in brackets. Below these are the headline findings. Together these indicate the value of the specific types of well being benefit.

**Psychological**
- Feeling of being in control (39)
- Competent and seen by others to be competent (2)
- Purposeful (47)
- Developing oneself (21)
- Secure with personal limitations (4)
- Contributing to the greater good (49)

Being in control related strongly to owning the wood - “I’ve loved the idea of feeling like I have more of a say in some outdoor sort of space other than my garden” and also experienced through being able to do things: “we’re part of a project we've got permission to do things...” Children, in particular, experienced a sense of control through their familiarity with the wood: “I like it here cos... you never get lost...”
Purposefulness was expressed as “a shared purpose”, part of this being taking care of the woodland over the long-term. “It’s the sense of purpose that’s really kind of tangible and concrete……. it’s very simple, so the wood is owned by all these people and one of the main purposes is actually to come up and maintain the wood.”

Contributing to the greater good referred to “giving others the opportunity to enjoy woodlands” and to “invest in the community and landscape”. This also related to the longer-term: “It’s exciting to think we can leave it for loads of generations and take that sense of stewardship to create something for future generations”.

Emotional

- Positive emotions and moods (117)
- Absence of negative emotions and moods (5)
- Optimistic about the present (9)
- Optimistic about the future (29)

‘Positive emotions’ was the most cited benefit across all indicators. The Co-operative’s process, its members and community ownership contributed to this as did specific activities such as woodland management, the creation of woodland structures and social activities involving adults and children.

“I’ve always wanted a piece of woodland for myself, but … on my own wouldn’t know what to do with it … so there was that “oh, what a great idea, I can join in”. I haven’t managed to do as much as I’d like to for various reasons, … hopefully if I get to do some work in the woods, that will then carry on even if I’m not around anymore, that’s a good feeling, because we never really get to own anything, we just borrow it for a while don’t we, while we are here.”

Social

- Feeling confident (15)
- Feeling accepted (13)
- Feeling safe and supported within and through social relationships (23)
- Supporting others through social relationships (34)
- Connecting with others through shared beliefs and outlook (48)
- Congruent with political values (18)
- Feeling of belonging (27)

The most cited social benefit was ‘connecting with others through shared beliefs and outlook’ which we took to mean both an interest in communal activity and environmental concern. This was expressed by one participant as: “the fact that there should be a woodland available for people, and for it to be a shared facility and protected, that’s the important thing.” A very simple expression of this was “there is a community here, so we have people as well as trees” and another participant said that the motivation for joining Stroud Woodland Co-operative was “to own some land with some like-minded people and therefore to work with nature in a communal way”.
Physical

- Feelings of physical health (2)
- Confidence in physical activity (8)
- Enjoyment in physical activity (22)
- Energetic (10)
- Relaxed (19)

Enjoyment of physical activity and feeling relaxed were the most cited examples of physical benefits. Fire building and lighting for example provided social and physical, even elemental experiences, much mentioned by adults. For children it was swinging or climbing in the trees that were mentioned most: “I like being on the swing and looking out across the wood...”, or, “two or three things that make the wood really special to me, which are basically all the fun stuff you do on the swing, just doing a massive log bridge thing ...”.

Specific physical attributes of the wood also contributed to feelings of relaxation, such as “homeliness, cos it’s not very big,” and “I wouldn’t walk in a very big wood on my own, but I can go to Folly Wood and feel quite alright about it.” Similarly, “you can relax and the kids can just play anywhere and go anywhere.”

Biophilic

- Feeling of closeness to the natural world (45)
- Being engaged in a relationship with nature (38)

Participants made reference to how being in Folly Wood contributed to feelings of being connected to nature: “when you go into the wood it’s a different kind of being at one with nature I think, which is really a pleasure to enjoy.” Similar feelings were expressed regards badgers - “how precious they are”; light coming through the leaves - “it’s just lovely, it’s just beautiful... the natural patterns and puddles of light and sort of more organic shapes..”; sounds - “I love to hear the tapestry of different sounds...”

The active relationship with the wood was also mentioned: “there’s something very special about being there, and it’s something about helping – it’s helping me to ground myself and literally have my feet on the earth”

Spiritual

- Feelings of awe and wonder (8)
- Feeling of being part of a bigger picture (7)

An aspect of being in the wood was interpreted by some as a spiritual experiences, such as this participant saying, “I actually connect on a more pagan level, on a nature level, all those other things fall away and I’m there, it’s a much deeper connection, I can understand how the Druids might have worshipped trees, you know I feel it, I don’t have to think it”.

112
Reflections
As expected, the community ownership of Folly Wood greatly influenced feelings of well being; it could be seen to influence well being benefits across most indicators. Amongst research participants there was an overwhelming sense of positivity both towards the Co-op and to owning and being in the wood. Few participants cited examples of frustration with the slowness of the process and the majority appreciated a collective approach.

A high degree of altruism was evident from our findings, a real sense that Folly Wood provided a tangible means for people to take local action for the common and long-term good.

However, a few points need to be considered:

- The group, including the research participants, were self selecting and could be seen to be especially motivated regards community ownership of woodland
- Stroud has a history of community activism and environmentalism – an existing network of ‘like-minded’ people and community facilitators
- At the time of this research Stroud Woodland Co-op had been in existence for between 3 and 4 years during which time much effort and facilitation by a handful of members and enthusiasm for a new project has created a strong sense of shared endeavour focused on a specific task.
- Related to this, self development such as learning woodland skills and gaining a deeper understanding of woodland may increase over the years for a variety of reasons.
- The research would benefit from comparison with similarly owned but non-woodland community enterprises – farms, shops, transport etc.
- Many share holders did not take part in the research.
- An important element of the group, the directors, were not interviewed ; four of them being otherwise involved in the research

Action points
These action points fall into two categories. Firstly relating to well being benefits from the ongoing management of Folly Wood, and secondly regards the establishment of community woods elsewhere.

Ongoing Management of Folly Wood:

- Continue to adopt methods that enable the entire Co-op membership to participate in decision making processes and to disseminate information throughout the membership – many shareholders benefit just from knowing what is happening without playing an active part
- Develop activities that continue to enable members, and particularly new members, to participate in group events that benefit the woodland, the members and other users. Wellbeing benefits arise from simply being with others in the wood, having a shared purpose with others and experiencing a closeness to nature – the balance of providing activity infrastructure and nature will be an ongoing issue for discussion and action.

Establishment of new community woods:
- Explore and work through existing networks
- Clearly define aims and objectives
- Facilitate a democratic, transparent process that enables all shareholders to feel in control
- Keep the woodland to the forefront as an equal ‘stakeholder’ itself – avoid endless indoor meetings
- Consider size and location of woodland – small and nearby seem to be important

Summary of findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rank (most reported)</th>
<th>Wellbeing outcome</th>
<th>Associated factors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>117</td>
<td>Positive emotions and moods</td>
<td>Owning woodland, being a part of a positive group, taking part in activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>49</td>
<td>Contributing to the greater good</td>
<td>Enabling others to enjoy woodland, building community and caring for landscape, positive contribution for the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48</td>
<td>Connecting with others through shared beliefs and outlook</td>
<td>Sense of community around caring for woodland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>47</td>
<td>Purposeful</td>
<td>Tangible shared endeavour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45</td>
<td>Feeling of closeness to the natural world</td>
<td>Being in the wood and aware of natural processes and features</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>39</td>
<td>Feeling of being in control</td>
<td>Sense of ownership, such as shared and agreed project aims, belonging.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>38</td>
<td>Being engaged in a relationship with nature</td>
<td>Undertaking activities in conjunction with nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>Supporting others</td>
<td>Helping people care for the wood and for woodland species,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rank</td>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Description</td>
</tr>
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<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>29</td>
<td>Optimistic about the future</td>
<td>Feelings of long-term benefits through woodland management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Feeling of belonging</td>
<td>Part of the group and of the wood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>Feeling safe and supported within and through social relationships</td>
<td>Group ethos of shared responsibility for the project – the wood and all in the group. Both actual, i.e. in the wood and virtual, i.e. via email updates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Enjoyment in physical activity</td>
<td>Playing, firelighting, tree planting, felling trees and gathering firewood, being outside in the wood.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Developing oneself</td>
<td>Learning about trees and woodland, artistic and spiritual experiences</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The project: A qualitative study of the physical health benefits and wellbeing outcomes associated with outdoor learning in natural environments (LINE) for year 2 school children.

Local partners: Mayflower Community Academy, Natural Connections (Plymouth University), Friends of Ham Woods, Stepping Stones to Nature (Plymouth City Council).

The project researchers: Jennie Aronsson and Naomi Wright.

Participant Group: Children in a Year 2 class (6 or 7 years of age) at a local school partaking in Natural Connections Demonstration Project: Learning In Natural Environments (LINE). The participants had already taken part in the Woodland Health for Youth (WHY) project.

Number taking part: 10 within a class of 25 setting the context.

Activity: Tuesday afternoon Learning in the Natural Environment (LINE) sessions in Ham Woods, Plymouth.

Top messages:

- Having lessons outside, in woodland (and other outdoor environments with trees) enhanced wellbeing for the majority of the participants. The top three wellbeing categories that were highlighted were physical, emotional and biophilic wellbeing.

- One challenge of conducting research with young children (6 to 7 years old) is that they are not always able to verbalise their feelings and views; however they may show you what they like or communicate their view through games and other reflective methods. Using a flexible approach and tailoring the research activity to the individual child, using different methodologies and making them playful, can overcome these challenges. Action research is particularly suitable for this kind of research as you alter your plan as you go along.

- The preparation for learning outdoors is lengthy and complex for 6/7 year olds (wet weather kit storage, getting dressed etc.). While this may seem like a waste of up to 40 minutes, it is all a part of the process and necessary life skills for children to learn outdoors: for example, to bring their LINE kit, to dress appropriately according to the weather, and to wait for each other before leaving school safely.

Background

This research project is funded through Good from Woods (GfW), a lottery funded project led by the Silvanus Trust and Plymouth University aiming to assess and advise on action-research that evaluates the wellbeing benefits that may arise from doing activities in woods. Furthermore, this research expands on the Woodland Health for Youth (WHY) project, a cross-sector partnership between health, education and environment that explored the physical health benefits of outdoor
learning in natural environments (LINE). LINE is one of the largest outdoor learning projects in the UK, led by Natural Connections (Plymouth University) and aiming to increase outdoor learning in natural environments in schools located in deprived areas.

The research was conducted in one of the local LINE 'beacon schools': Mayflower Community Academy, a large primary school in the northern part of Plymouth. The school was founded in 2009 and received its academy status in 2013, sponsored by Plymouth University. This area of Plymouth has a high number of families in poverty: using the Index of Multiple Deprivation, the area is the 3rd worst in Plymouth. Statistically the literacy level is low, health problems such as childhood obesity are high. The school grounds of Mayflower Community Academy are designed to provide a wide range of outdoor activities, from sport to wildlife gardening, curriculum based teaching and play time. The school is situated next to Ham Woods, a large wooded nature reserve owned by Plymouth City Council and supported by a Friends group. Mayflower Community Academy utilises Ham Woods for outdoor learning purposes; most LINE lessons take place here although the school grounds are also used at times.

Ten children in a year 2 class (aged 6 or 7) were involved in the initial WHY research project, where their physical activity levels were measured alongside their BMI to explore the physical health benefits derived from LINE. This project continued to prioritise children's wellbeing and aimed to capture the views of children, parents/guardians, staff from Mayflower Community Academy and associated organisations through qualitative research methods.

Research focus

Key aim: To explore children's experience of outdoor learning in natural environments (LINE) and how that impacts on their physical health and wellbeing

- To help clarify whether, or how, the natural environment, the activities, the place or the social elements contributed to the wellbeing of children learning in Ham Woods.

- To explore the suitability of an action research approach when conducting research within schools that use local natural areas for curricular activities and health promotion reasons.

- To disseminate research findings to stakeholders (including Mayflower Community Academy) and the wider public, and make recommendations for future practice.

- To contribute findings to the Good from Woods online data repository, a searchable database available to practitioners for evidencing the potential outcomes of their work to service users, funders and policy makers.

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3 Aronsson, J. (2014) Woodland Health for Youth (WHY); an evaluation of physical health benefits derived from outdoor learning in natural environments (LINE) for school-age children.


Context
Ham Woods is open to the public at all times. It has a stream running through it, paths constructed in and around it, open areas and more wooded parts. Recent history saw the woodland neglected and vandalised. However, due to capital works by Stepping Stones to Nature (SS2N), access is vastly improved and the community is now using the woodland for various reasons. A friends group, Friends of Ham Woods, maintain the site and together with SS2N run a range of activities for the public to celebrate the woods and promote their use and conservation. These activities might include play days, bug hunts and making things from wood. Most of the activities are aimed at local people, encouraging them to be more actively involved in the management and future of Ham Woods.

Outdoor learning has been offered to children at Mayflower Community Academy through LINE since September 2013, and prior to that through Forest School in Ham Woods and on school site since the school opened in 2009. LINE adopts an experiential learning approach and recently the curricular activity has been focused on literacy work. In spring 2014, when this research study was conducted, two classes visited the woods one afternoon a week. Primarily educational, the school visits are also physical (it takes 15 minutes to walk to the centre of the woods, and many of the learning activities involve physical activity) and social by nature.

During the time of this research project, the LINE Facilitator at Mayflower Community Academy was a trained Forest School Leader. She would take the children outside for LINE one afternoon/week regardless of weather (unless extreme), supported by a Teacher Assistant and by any volunteers available. These included volunteers from the Friends of Ham Woods group and occasionally parents/guardians. The practitioner-researchers conducting this research project also volunteered during the LINE sessions as part of the action research process.

Methods
A range of different research methodologies were used:

- Conversational Drift – unplanned and led by the participant
- Interview – one to one, planned with a crib sheet
- Discussion Group – groups of children talking naturally
- Joining in other happenings – in school, these were the lessons
- Working alongside other groups – alongside Friends of Ham Woods
- Leading and setting up events and games – a game based session
- Reflective Journal – notes, pictures, photos and sketches all add to the evidence
- Envisioning – mapping activity of self with place
- Fun Games – making communication and learning fun
- Observational Drawing, photographs and videos – making a record as additional evidence
- Questionnaire – e-questionnaire (Survey Monkey)

Stepping Stones to Nature (SS2N) is a multi-agency partnership project that sits within Plymouth City Council’s Natural Infrastructure Team, designed to improve local green spaces and facilitate green space use in areas of high deprivation (SS2N annual report, 2012)
**Results**

**Expectations**

All stakeholders spoke about the multiple benefits that outdoor learning entails, however the focus differed depending on their role. For example, parents/guardians would focus on the happiness of their children, school staff would highlight the educational benefits, and stakeholders from Friends of Ham Woods and from Plymouth City Council would speak about the importance of children connecting to and appreciating the woodland itself. Most stakeholders expressed an expectation of children being more active in the outdoors, and for the LINE activities to be purposeful and lead to personal development of the children. These expectations materialised in the children, although some aspect were subconscious for the children, such as the learning and the social element of LINE.

The number of times the wellbeing themes were referred to as benefits from learning in the woods were as follows:

**From the Stakeholders:**

Psychological Wellbeing: 57
Emotional Wellbeing: 22
Social Wellbeing: 4
Physical Wellbeing: 33 (1 negative)
Biophilic Wellbeing: 18
Imaginative and Experiential Wellbeing: 7

**From the Participating children:**

Psychological Wellbeing: 36 (5 negative)
Emotional Wellbeing: 61 (6 negative)
Social Wellbeing: 27
Physical Wellbeing: 144 (13 negative)
Biophilic Wellbeing: 54 (3 negative)
Imaginative and Experiential Wellbeing: 16 (1 negative)

The adults thought that the main benefit to the children would be their psychological development – as one might expect from learning activities. The children were overwhelmingly clear that physically doing things was important to them, and the learning (or in their terms, playing) outdoors made them happy. Both children and adults referred to their social wellbeing less often. This may be due to the purposeful, curricular led nature of LINE: a class is a social gathering by nature, thus social wellbeing may be taken for granted. The biophillic and imaginative/experiential wellbeing were expressed often enough for inclusion in the top 8 indicators.

**Contributing factors to the wellbeing were divided into who/what/where**

**Who:** From the stakeholders' point of view, the research questions and discussions were all related to the children. The children themselves frequently referred to someone else: a parent/relative/teacher/other children etc.
**What:** The vast majority of 'what' contributors were either outdoor learning (LINE), or physical activity. In the latter case, the stakeholders would relate wellbeing to generally being active whereas the children were much clearer about the activity and specified splashing/running/climbing etc.

**Where:** Most of the stakeholders related the wellbeing to the woodland (Ham Woods), or generally just being outside. Children more often spoke about a specific place in the woods as a contributor to their wellbeing.

The following section provides a summary for each wellbeing category for participants, including comments made by the children.

**Psychological Wellbeing**

Being **purposeful/developing oneself** was the most common indicator that emerged within Psychological Wellbeing.

Q: *How does it make you feel if you are looking at the trees now, as you are now, how do they make you feel compared to sort of being in school?*

C6: *Like I’m just about to go on a big adventure.*

Q: *Does she mind you getting all muddy?*

C4: *No, not at all, she doesn’t even mind if I go up into and climb a tree.*

C4 is talking about her mother here, the psychological wellbeing referring to being competent in her mother’s eyes.

The children often related this wellbeing to the activity they were engaging in, such as making things, looking for bugs and playing games. The place was also relevant and often specified: being in a tree, in the river, or generally in the woods. Due to the social element of psychological wellbeing, other people would be a key contributor: other children/teacher/other staff/family/relatives etc.

**Emotional Wellbeing**

Experiencing new activities in the woods made the children happy; nearly all the children expressed a **positive emotion or mood.** This was the most common indicator referred to.

Q: *How does that make you feel when you see the birds and clouds?*

C1: *I feel happy because they make happy shapes in the sky. It makes you laugh sometimes.*

Q: *You think of the sort of things that you’ve done.*

C6: *Having fun.*

Q: *Having fun is what you like best – yeah?*

C6: *Just little trees like they give...*

Q: *Like what?*

C6: *Well you get to play in the woods.*

Q: *About the woods – how do they make you feel when you walk in the woods for the first time, how does it make you feel?*

C4: *It makes me feel all right.*
Videos and photographs showed many smiles and a positive outlook, at least an acceptance of the learning, at most an inspiration and concentration.

Key contributors to this wellbeing were taking part in a physical activity (including making things) or ‘risky’ games such as wading the stream. The activity itself often brought about the positive emotional response.

Key places were by individual trees, in the woods generally and by the stream. This wellbeing seemed to be led by and experienced by the child, from within themselves.

Most positive emotions and moods are described in relation to ‘playing’ rather than ‘lessons’ according to the children’s understanding of the activity. The lesson was often thought of as a ‘telling off’ or discipline. In actuality, the teacher would say the whole outdoor experience was the lesson – the ‘playing’ and the ‘discipline’ combined.

**Social Wellbeing**

This wellbeing was attributed to a lower proportion of responses. It is difficult to assess whether this is significant or not. As mentioned earlier, this may be a factor of being part of a class group, the children were behaving all the time in a way that could be construed as social, an intrinsic part of learning outdoors as a group. Many photographs taken show the social nature of the activities; team work, group work, gatherings, events with the class all aimed at learning from peers and strengthening social skills and culturally based knowledge.

The most commonly used indicator was feeling safe and supported within and through social relationships.

**Q:** You like the parachute game best do you? Why?

**C1:** Because you got other people to play with.

**Q:** What’s your favourite activity?

**C3:** Same as [C6] Because we do it together.

**Q:** Why’s that?

**C4:** Cos I do it and my mum gives me a lot of time to play

**Q:** Does she mind you getting all muddy?

**C4:** No, not at all. She doesn’t even mind if I go up into and climb a tree.

Role of a mother in encouraging play through their social/family relationship.

Key contributing factors to this often came from outside school, through friends and family, the sorts of permissions the children thought they had. The activities were significant and not necessarily to do with school learning, just as much about finding places outside for playing.

Some children or their parents had trouble remembering their outdoor learning kit. This sometimes leads to feelings of exclusion (a negative wellbeing):

**C3:** I haven’t brought my LINE kit before and we – they always got to go in the river when they, when they got their LINE kit and I didn’t.
Physical Wellbeing

Physical wellbeing was by far the most commonly emerging wellbeing amongst participants. Since this research study had a focus on the physical health aspect of LINE it is not surprising that this came up most often in conversations and games. Due to their young age, the children were not always able to verbalise what they like but they would frequently talk about certain activities or ask for permission to do an activity, hence indicating a preference for this activity and a wellbeing associated with engaging in it.

**Doing physical activity** was the most common indicator and a key contributor to many of the other wellbeing themes

Q: Why do you find it easy?
C2: Because it's making me healthy.
Q: Why do you think it's making you healthy?
C2: Because it gets me out of breath.
Q: Is that a good thing?
C2: Yeah.

C2 is talking about walking, expressing an awareness of how the exercise affects her physical health.

Q: Which do you like best, running or walking?
C8: Running.
Q: Why is that then?
C8: Gives you more energy.

C8 feels that he gains energy from running. Although running is energy consuming, it releases endorphins which will create a feeling of euphoria and energy.

Q: What sort of movements do you make when you are playing?
C4: A lot, and actually it's FUN!

C4 expresses how much she enjoys being active with great enthusiasm.

The main contributor to this wellbeing was obviously the physical activity itself; however the context was LINE in the woodland throughout the research, hence the place would also be significant.

Biophilic Wellbeing

A connection with nature was evident through both indicators: **feeling close to nature** and **being engaged in a relationship with nature**. The children regularly referred to their closeness to nature and their understanding or learning from it, and the wellbeing this entailed.

C6: I really like the trees, they are part of nature, they help us breathe.
Q: Yeah.
C6: They take all the bad air, put in the good air...
Q: Yeah.
C1: Trees grow like us.

C3: Well, trees has gots loads of leaves on, they are quite big.

Q: What's your favourite activity?

C8: It's climbing trees because I just like climbing trees

Q: Have you got a favourite activity in the woods?

C4: Playing games, playing in the mud, slipping down, playing up in trees, and picking leaves.

The main contributor to this wellbeing was being in the woods, by trees, carrying out an activity that encouraged closer physical connection such as climbing trees, wading in the stream and searching for bugs. Within the school setting, the teacher plays the role of enabling that close contact.

There were occasional negative comments, usually relating to wet or mud and getting mucky. Three out of six boys mentioned their dislike of mud at different times, plus one boy’s mother. Other children positively enjoyed the wet and muddy side to being in the woods.

Q: You want to go home? What because the woods – why’s that then?

C5: Cos I don’t want to get wet.

Imaginative and experiential Wellbeing

This category reflects an imaginative and creative expression of nature as a form of feeling good. Being outdoors brought out some expressions of this possible wellbeing. Most evidence came from children as they described their experience of exploring the place. The place definitely shaped some responses, the jungly, adventurous feel, the colours and shapes. Certain story telling games and other playful learning activities (such as this picture of watering plants most in need) encouraged imaginative responses.

Q: Have you got a favourite shape [clouds in the sky]?

C1: A smiley shark.

Q: Why do you like climbing trees then?

C4: Because sometimes I pretend that I’m a squirrel because I’m really careful in trees, I climb up there and I jump out the top.

Q: Why do you, why do you specially like birch wood trees?

C6: Well just because they have nice patterns.

Q: They have nice patterns?

C6: Sometimes they have little patches of black.

Q: Yeah and what...

C6: Just light and colourful, happy?

Q: Yeah, that’s good.

C4: I like crouching down because I think that there’s bears looking for us.

C4 also said the opposite, that she didn't like crouching down because of fear of bears.
Reflections and Action points

Research:

- Collaborate with a wide range of organisations that could support the research process (academic, business, voluntary sector etc.).

- Obtaining ethics can be a lengthy process. Ensure support available from someone with expertise in this field. Within a school setting, a more synergistic way of engaging children and parents/guardians in the ethics of continuous research would be beneficial.

- Don't underestimate the time and effort needed to conduct rigorous research. Allow enough time out from regular workload and replace staff on the floor; otherwise the research could be resented.

- The differences between research in an adventure play woodland, with children who had chosen to be there and in woodland used for curriculum based activities within school time was interesting. The value of play in learning as well as wellbeing was being expressed by children. Further research into the value of play may be useful to the ‘forest education’ sector.

- The physical health focus in this study complemented the research carried out through the WHY project. Using different research methods (qualitative and quantitative) increases research rigour and reliability. However, both the WHY project and this project were small-scale studies; further research on a larger scale and over a longer period is necessary to fully understand the extent of physical health benefits that derives from outdoor learning in natural environments.

- Reflection upon practice, such as through a reflective log is a powerful tool in practice improvement as it allows critical thinking, values the practitioner's knowledge and skills and leads to more rigorous evidence.

- Dissemination is key to research - this is how practice is changed and improves. Dissemination of findings with stakeholder, other researchers and the public should be encouraged through the research process.

Children’s well being:

- The WHY project research findings demonstrated that the children were significantly more active during outdoor LINE sessions than during indoor lessons, and that they were especially active when LINE was held in the nearby woodland as opposed to the school grounds. Ham Woods offers a bigger space to move around in and is less familiar than the school grounds, hence more interesting to explore. There are also increased opportunities for diverse activities such as climbing on trees and wading in the stream.

- The qualitative research in this study demonstrated that children enjoyed the opportunity to have additional physical activity. The natural environment provided an additional layer to the experience – the adventure, the colours, the breeze.
• Emotional wellbeing was the second most common impact amongst participants. The children expressed joy and happiness from being outdoors, being physically active and engaging in LINE activities through comments and body language.

• The evidence demonstrated that children connected to nature through the outdoor activities. This is an important aspect of LINE, as some children might not experience this outside school and hence never get this opportunity if it wasn’t for school.

• The research findings suggested that the LINE activities provided opportunities for child development social interactions. Moreover, the woodland inspired to creative thinking and imagination through children exploring the place.

**Top Messages**

• Having lessons outside, in woodland (and other outdoor environments with trees) enhanced wellbeing for the majority of the participants. The top three wellbeing categories that were highlighted were physical, emotional and biophilic wellbeing.

• One challenge of conducting research with young children (6 to 7 years old) is that they are not always able to verbalise their feelings and views; however they may show you what they like or communicate their view through games and other reflective methods. Using a flexible approach and tailoring the research activity to the individual child, using different methodologies and making them playful, can overcome these challenges. Action research is particularly suitable for this kind of research as you alter your plan as you go along.

• The preparation for learning outdoors is lengthy and complex for 6/7 year olds (wet weather kit storage, getting dressed etc.). While this may seem like a waste of up to 40 minutes, it is all a part of the process and necessary life skills for children to learn outdoors: for example, to bring their LINE kit, to dress appropriately according to the weather, and to wait for each other before leaving school safely.

• Children in Key Stage 1 want to play when outdoors; the majority of the participants enjoyed this experiential learning. Increased freedom to learn through play outdoors at this stage in the children’s learning may improve their wellbeing, and so their abilities to learn and develop new skills.

• Action based research can provide new insights to how children learn outdoors. A common research process that suits school and curriculum based activities would be useful.
References


126