

Summary Report from Good from Woods Partners

The project: Young Leaders Project (YLP)

The organisation: Embercombe

The project researcher: Jessie Watson Brown

Participant group: 'disadvantaged' young people aged 17–21

Number taking part: 7

Activity features: physical; work; tree management; residential

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, for more detail see Results, below.

(Ranked in order of perceived significance)

Wellbeing outcome	Associated factors - who, what activity and where appear to lead to these outcomes.
Feeling Relaxed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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	<p>Two aspects:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> – 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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – being in the woods – the contrast of closeness to nature at Embercombe with cities and technology

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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 they they enjoyed making a positive impact on their environment:

"its all nice and tidy now and its 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 skilfully: "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.
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- Participants felt they were building a positive relationship with nature through working in and care-taking the woodland.
- Stakeholder expectations generally were similar to participant experiences, which suggests that the programme is effectively achieving it's 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.
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- 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 where 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.

More practice recommendations from Embercombe staff.

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