

## Summary Report from Good from Woods Partners

**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 well-being 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 – Hereford Steiner School**

The research took place in March 2011.

This was a ten-day, one-off programme. 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-focussed 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, for more detail see Results, below.

(Ranked in order of perceived significance)

<b>Wellbeing outcome</b>	<b>Associated factors</b> – who, what activity and where appear to lead to these outcomes.
Safe and supported within and through social relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ Mostly through relationships with Embercombe staff and peers</li> <li>⤴ Some mention activities like log moving – often co-operative and team-focussed tasks</li> </ul>
Closeness to and engaged in relationship with the Natural World	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ Spending time alone</li> <li>⤴ In the setting of the woods and outdoors</li> <li>⤴ Variety of situations from active log moving to more passive sitting in the woods.</li> </ul>
Positive emotions and moods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ The setting of the woodlands</li> <li>⤴ Some mentioned that it was working and the log carrying that was fun</li> <li>⤴ For others, hard work and work-based activities appeared to prevent them from achieving positive emotions and moods.</li> </ul>

Feeling Relaxed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ Being in the woods and outdoors</li> <li>⤴ Creative activities like sign-making and drawing</li> <li>⤴ Sitting in the woodland, or going there to have time-out from the group</li> </ul>
Developing oneself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ Activities such as wood chopping and work-based tasks</li> <li>⤴ Through learning new skills and knowledge</li> <li>⤴ Being outdoors and in the environment of Embercombe</li> </ul>
Feeling Competent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ Active tasks including log moving and chopping</li> </ul>
Feeling purposeful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>⤴ Activities such as log moving and chopping</li> <li>⤴ In the setting of Embercombe</li> </ul>

## 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 well-being: "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)

and

"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 well-being 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 well-being 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 where 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.

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