



Forest school – How creative processes impact on emotional wellbeing

You know what? This probably isn't going to look like Andy Goldsworthy. I think that should probably be stated at the beginning of most creative projects in an Early Years outdoor space, at least those that are child initiated. This was also the case at Bishops Wood Centre, near Stourport-on Severn, Worcestershire, where from January till December 2011 I took up a long term residency exploring creative processes at Forest School, in particular the use and exploration of materials and impacts on emotional wellbeing.

The creative processes used were open ended, with no specific outcome, with an emphasis on exploring the potential of materials and discovering how to master them. This fits with the ethos of Forest School, which is one of play-based, child initiated learning

taking place over time, and invites the children to explore and experiment at their own pace. They do this with the support of practitioners based on observation and reflective practice.

The exploration of materials was one of the things that, as an artist, I was very keen to investigate. Exploring the potential of materials and engaging with them to begin discovering how to master them through open ended processes. Bernadette Duffy (Duffy, 2006) outlines this with her description of a creative process that has four elements; curiosity (becoming interested in what it is) - exploration (investigating what it can do) - play (immersion to find out what I can do with this) - creativity (what can I create or invent with this). This is not a linear process, with children moving back and forth.

So far so good, but as a practitioner this led to a debate around the appropriateness of materials that we use in Forest School. This is an important debate to have, as the choice of materials helps define your Forest School practice, and in turn what makes Forest School, well, Forest School, as opposed to Outdoor Classroom, (which can be described as the enhancement of curriculum in the outdoor space, usually with specific learning outcomes in mind that are teacher led). The obvious starting point is to use what natural materials you find on your Forest School site. This is fine, but the questions start to creep in when you think about what materials to bring onto your site, after all, we can't all be lucky to work in a mature woodland. Whether Forest School or Outdoor Classroom, children need to be provided with a stimulating environment that supports creative



play and learning; an environment that provides risk, open ended resources, and a space for play that is internally driven by the children.

Sara Knight suggests a Forest School site should be sufficiently different to other outdoor spaces, whether this is in a local woodland or an underused part of the school grounds (Knight, 2009). With the emphasis on using natural materials, plastics are not used (no laminated sheets pinned to the trees, or plastic bags for weaving for instance), and some traditional ways of joining things together are also removed, including sellotape and glue. For me this began to challenge how I normally work in an Early Years setting, and the more I looked at my choices the more I had to think them through. When I began to use paints at Forest School I began by using natural paints that I had used before.

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This included using paints based on spices. However, this did not fit with the idea of using, as much as possible, the materials found naturally occurring on the Forest School site, and so consequently what you would expect to find in a woodland.

I found this began to exclude other natural materials I regularly used, such as sea shells. I needed to set my own parameters for the materials I would use for creative activity down in Forest School. I needed to define what my Forest School practice was going to be all about. I decided on these guiding principles for my use of materials:

- Firstly, the materials would be natural and in keeping with a woodland
- Secondly, if left out on site they should be able to degrade over time.
- Lastly, that the materials and how we use them will not have a negative impact on the site or its biodiversity and habitats.

These are only a guide for me and have many grey areas. Most practitioners have props, or comfort blankets, which they occasionally need. Some use cuddly toys to support storytelling, mine is clay - it's such a versatile material with different qualities to soil, and in my mind I thought it okay to stretch my first principle to include it. This led to a period of reflection for me, and challenged me to become more creative in my approach. It also reconnected me to the creative process that the children were engaged in, of experimenting and playing with materials and asking the questions 'what can this potentially do?', 'what qualities does it have?'. For the paints this included grinding up charcoal, soil and dried leaves for pigments, as well as boiling nettles, bracken, birch leaves amongst others to extract the dyes from them.

This also had a seasonal aspect to it. The seasons are an integral part of Forest School. It has its own rhythms, from the cycles within each session through to the ebb and flow

of the seasons, and the Forest School programme enables its participants to connect and experience them to a deep level. From a creative point of view the seasons bring changes in the light, weather and colours. The pace of activity changes too, peaking with the busy Spring and slowing to almost a stop during Winter. The materials that were available reflect this, as does the change in colour palette. We used baskets to keep collections of materials to see if it would reflect the changes in the seasons, and also to look more closely for colours and textures even in the winter months.

We investigated how the creative process could look at this. The growth of bracken on the site, for example, was quite dramatic, reaching in some cases 6 feet tall in a short space of time. I began to explore it as a material, firstly risk assessing, then noting its qualities and possibilities as I went along; forming archways, wrapping, weaving, grinding, pulping and combining it with other materials. I think that showing the children that you are engaged in this kind of experimental process is a positive approach to working with children. It puts you on equal terms with them, that you don't have all the answers, and sends a message that it is okay to explore with no set product in mind. I was grinding up some bracken in a bucket when one of the children asked me what I was doing. "I'm squashing this bracken up to see what happens", I said. Next the children were doing the same, chanting "mash, mash, mash it up!" as they did so. They added water - "Its gone green!"

The open ended way of working was also key to our enquiry around how creative processes in Forest School support the development of emotional intelligence and self-esteem. An open ended creative approach combines with other elements of Forest School to form an environment that is able to support individual children's needs. The children can explore their own ideas at their own pace over a long period of time. Sensitive intervention





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from the adults helps move their thinking on, introducing new skills when needed, which enables smaller achievable steps to be taken.

One group's interest in natural paints did not emerge from mixing mud and water as I imagined it would, but from one child's investigation into removing charcoal from a partially burned log. First he was able to use his fingers to remove pieces, but then, as it got more difficult, he had to change his strategy. Next he tried smashing the log onto a tree stump, but with little success. He then transferred skills he had gained elsewhere in Forest School, by using a stake and mallet to chisel the charcoal free. We extended this

experience by exploring how a lump of charcoal can be changed into a powder, and then changed further by adding water- and so a paint making process was introduced through a child's own investigation.

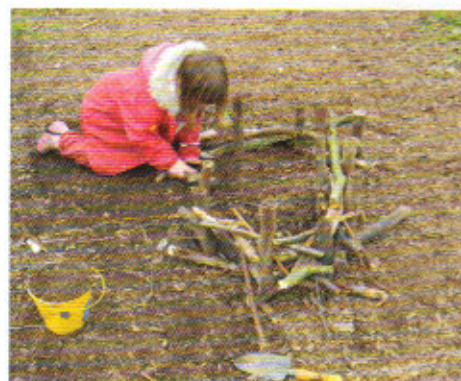
In another example, Child H had created a charcoal paint mixture that she was satisfied with. She found a feather and wanted to use it to make marks on a plank of wood. H initially tried dipping the sharp hollow point into the paint, like using a quill, (this had been raised as an idea around the fire circle by another child at the beginning of the session). This was not successful, and her response was to add more water to the mixture and try again. When this did not work H turned the feather over, dipped the vane of the feather into the paint and used this on the surface of the wood. We asked H if this worked, and she nodded, with a big smile, clearly delighted. She tried the hollow end again. She said, "This bit's not working!", but without showing any disappointment. "But the other end does?", we asked. "Yeah!", she replied, and called one of the other practitioners - "My bit's working!!". She continued mark making, and then called another practitioner to tell her what she had done. The practitioner did not hear her, so H picked up her bucket and went to tell her.

What can be seen in both of these examples are children exploring a new material, and using tools to manipulate it. Both of them are confident and not easily put off, working with a sense of purpose, trying new things and unafraid to make mistakes. H in particular worked with a keenness and vitality that showed in her sense of pride of her achievement. The open ended creative processes present in the examples also demonstrate one of the strengths of the Forest School approach. The long term nature of the programme provides the time and opportunity for experimentation in achievable steps, free from product outcomes. It supports the development of the brain's 'seeking' system (Sunderland, 2006), which allows us to produce ideas, encourage curiosity, exploration and self belief.



Curiosity is an important element in being creative, as well as a key building block in learning. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997) in his book on creativity identifies curiosity as one of the few things that creative people have in common, and Bernadette Duffy's description of the creative process begins with curiosity. Here, when encountering a new material the child will begin to explore it by wondering what it is, what it is for and what can it do? This occurs through a playful open ended process, where the material's properties and possibilities are explored, and only then can the question 'what can I do with it?' be posed.

Curiosity and finding things out for ourselves needs to be a positive and rewarding process. Forest School is a perfect place for this. Children need a rich and stimulating environment that offers many choices for creative engagement (there is a very good discussion of this in Richard Louv's 'Last Child in the Woods' (Louv, 2010)). A Forest School site provides this with space, different depths of field, varied micro-habitats, a varied woodland structure, ample time and materials with numerous possibilities to stimulate the imagination, discover new patterns and connections. It's environment immerses the children in sensory experiences. It connects them to the seasons, the weather, the textures, colours and smells of the leaves, logs and soil. These conditions encourage the children's curiosity and leads to



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them becoming totally absorbed in their exploration, focusing on their task, not thinking about how well they are doing, and losing track of time. Csikszentmihalyi calls this state 'flow', when emotions are positive, energised and are focused on the task in hand.

Finally, an example of how creativity in Forest School can help children work through their feelings and how they connect with others. During my early sessions with Child A, I observed that she found it hard to negotiate solutions to the problems with working with other children, particularly sharing. She was fine working alongside another child, but found it hard to collaborate. Week 6 saw a different approach emerge, a more individual way of working. She became focused on mixing paints and making figures from mud and sticks. This period lasted a couple of weeks, and our careful observations we could see she was growing in some way. She was working mostly by herself, engrossed in a task, avoiding the previous

conflicts over sharing resources. She also no longer seemed to need someone else to play with, possibly finding that engaging in creative activity by herself was calming, and increasing her sense of empowerment, (such as organising her own environment, acting on her own behalf, having a sense of purpose and a sense of ownership). She began to use hazel poles to make a large arrangement on the floor, laying them to block the paths of the trolls being role played by the other children. She added some tree stumps and painted one black, using charcoal paint. This one she placed in the middle. The arrangement, she explained, represented the fire circle, so the boundary was not a physical one, but a social one - everyone knows you cannot cross the fire circle, it is one of the rules of Forest School. It was as if she was interacting with the other children at arm's length through a shared idea - a social rule.

In week 8 the troll games mentioned above had been supported by using large pieces of tree bark as masks. Child A wanted to make her own mask, which she did, painting it all with mud paint. At this point she wanted to re-engage with the other children by joining in with the other children playing trolls with

their masks. "I want to play with them", she said, but needed me to be with her. I suggested that she used her mask to join in, and be a troll, which she agreed to do. In this way the mask became an enabling prop, a vehicle for initiating an interaction with the others initially through imitation. She had observed what the group were up to and accepted it by copying. In subsequent weeks her relationships with other children seem more positive and looking back over the documentation of those sessions we could see her development and how the creative activities had helped her (Goleman's work on emotional intelligence provided an excellent background for these observations (Goleman, 1996)).

In the examples above we can see that creative processes do provide a range of possibilities to explore connections and associations, and a vehicle to express these. It supports children understanding themselves and then being able to develop empathy to understand others. It also enables children to make sense of their world, and encourages the curiosity and self confidence to lead their own enquiries.

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