

Well-being in the Woods

Some thoughts from the FSA 2017 Conference

By Jon Cree

"My wellbeing was sky high as I drove home..." a conference delegate.

This year's FSA conference had a new 'feel' to it this year packed full of workshops and plenty of chatter in between. The Plas Derw team were the 'bedrock' and made great efforts to meet folk's needs. The site and weather certainly helped and I had the feeling that it gave both inspiration and a sense of well-being for folks – combining many elements that can contribute to our well-being and sense of self in the world – community, music, natural world contact, learning and 'knowing why and what we are learning', 'making', skill development (the list is a long one!).

We kicked off with a few facts and challenges.

Despite GDP quadrupling in developed countries in the last two generations, the planet is producing 35% more food per person and infant mortality is down from 150 per 1000 live births to 5 per 1000 we have an increasing mental health issue and the way we live is killing many through dementia, cardio vascular disease, food disorders and loneliness. In the UK the mental health and well-being stats are fairly stark;

- In March 2017, the NHS reported in the last year 240,020 under 19's had contact with mental health services, a rise of 7.3% on the previous year. Eating disorders had risen threefold
- The office for national statistics reported that 10% of 5-16 year olds had a mental health problem and almost half of these were linked to anxiety
- In the under 12's 30,000 were self harming and this has increased 4 times in the last 5 years
- Teen suicides were reducing however, in 2016, it became the highest in 14 years – 78% of these were young men
- 50% of the UK's mental health problems are established by 14 years and 74% by 24, which is when the brain matures. 70% of these cases occurred due to no intervention

For a summary and more detail on these it is worth visiting the <https://youngminds.org.uk/>

What does Forest School have to contribute to health, well-being, and shifting these statistics?

There is no time like the present. This is an issue well and truly on the political agenda and the movement has a role to play, as we all know.

A good place to start is Jules Pretty and his colleagues at Essex University, who, over the last 20 years, have been looking at how nature produces mental and physical health benefits. They have shown that regular small doses of nature bring immediate 'wellbeing' and that it is our individual 'choices' often shaped by society and the environments we inhabit that are key to contributing to our well-being. What we need is time and space to slow down and get into the 'green mind' ie the upper cortex in order to self-regulate our system and stimulate those parasympathetic hormones and nervous system that bring health and wellbeing. Oxytocin, for example, which increases bonding and understanding between people and place. As Pretty says when the green mind is quiet, the self is stilled and it is a way to encourage greater care for the planet. (See the Margot Sunderland keynote at the 2014 FSA conference <http://www.forestschoollassociation.org/neuroscience-forest-school-margot-sunderland/> for more detail on the neurology).

Jules has had a great influence on health services and 'green space' being prescribed more for maintaining wellbeing. He advocates three types of engagement to increase regular attentiveness and immersion –

Nature engagement; Social engagement; and Craft engagement that can include anything from drawing, writing, singing and carpentry through to brewing! In order to develop these types of engagement we need to make them 'habits' which takes time and repetition.....hey presto we have Forest School, which has as one of its principles as long term regular sessions. Indeed Pretty states that shifting diets and maintaining regular exercise, for example, takes at least 50 days at one hour a day, which is why most diets fail and gym memberships are cancelled!

The conference forged ahead, in the sunshine mostly, which helps our vitamin D! Therefore, here are a few snippets:

Mel Harrison and Chris Walton looked at Chris's PhD on sit spots and that 'stilling'. It showed that 60% of children who had been involved in an environmental/nature connection programme remembered sit spots most from the programmes and 50% continued them outside the programme.

The importance of 'stilling' the mind as a transition into nature was emphasized and the way we lead this in a gentle engaging way emphasising focus on all the senses helped us tune into a Forest school session and the place and increases more attentiveness. *"My own sit spot is still glowing green and gold in my mind's eye and one I will never forget"* is one of the statements from one conference delegate, and the way to nurture and facilitate sit spots is too make this a regular routine for us as leaders...it is indeed a habitual practise.



The bake off certainly ticked all three of Pretty's practises. It involved intense collaboration in teams to produce three dishes in 45 minutes working with foraged food (nature connection) to make some amazing dishes that were truly 'crafted'. The key to this was the preparation from Mel with all the little details and beautifully laid out resources – natural baskets, menu boards, well presented supplemental ingredients and the enticing magic of her facilitation, making everyone feel 'special'. Knowing Mel, much of her magic has been realised through some of the earth education philosophy and practise. Looking at the faces of folks when they returned from the workshop you could see and feel well-being in action....so many smiles...they had a great time! Such a fun way to introduce food at Forest School, which is such an important aspect of well-being.

Music, song and story was writ large in the conference this year from drumming workshops through to making euke's and singing. Singing and rhythm has always been a constant companion of community and enables a feeling of being part of something bigger and 'creative' and singing in the woods certainly combines all three of Pretty's engagements. The simple combination of song and story shared by Iza Moon was enchanting, meanwhile Danny English showed the healing power of

his new stories soon to be published, and Elizabeth Swift taught folks some of the 'natural voice' techniques. All these workshops gave some valuable tools to enable us as leaders and the learners to find their voices and contribute to that sense of community.

Another 'theme' explored was that of working with people who see the world different from many i.e. those with autism or so-called 'attention seeking' behaviour and how do we 'neuro-typical' work with learners.

Michael James workshop could have gone on much longer – he shared his experiences of working with autism and gave much food-for-thought through role-play scenarios. Sarah Hennessy reframed attention seeking to 'attachment seeking' and her invaluable experience of working in art psychotherapy and Forest School saw people making peg characters after exploring the Five to Thrive tool which involves Responding, Engaging, Relaxing, Playing and Talking – all key Forest School tenets in supporting people's well-being and sense of self-worth.



Measuring what we are doing regarding well-being and social value was another aspect that many explored at two workshops run by Eleri Lloyd and myself. We all have agency in this and need to define what it is we mean by well-being. We looked at what well-being 'really' means and common words that cropped up were connection and community, sense of worth, feeling OK about ourselves, contentment, comfort and one I loved "being a fish in water". We looked at some of the 'paper' tools and how can we integrate these more into the flow of the FS without it feeling like an 'assessment' that helps both our practise and persuades the powers that be that this work has some worth! Social value is increasingly being used and all our outputs and outcomes should be seen as 'ripples' which was the key result of the O'Brien and Murray study done on FS back in 2005. We should not underestimate the impact we are having. For more information on social value, see <http://www.socialvalueuk.org/resources/tools-by-principle/>

Other ways of measuring can include creative use of photos and reading the language of photos, indeed many Forest Schools use photos to communicate messages but when interpreted by both the practitioners and learners this can be such a powerful tool. Other measures looked at were the ELSA measures used in schools. I recommend you look at the article written by Emily Williams used at Oxford Road Primary Forest School in Reading. One useful website that includes many ways of measuring this in an outdoor learning situation is www.acewild.eu

There were many other workshops and hopefully this gives a flavour of what was a relaxing, challenging and empowering weekend.

My final word comes from a conversation with Pam Warhurst who has been chair of the Forestry Commission, an advisor to Natural England and now a key figure in the edible landscapes movement and heads up 'Incredible Edible' and the Local Nature Partnership in West Yorkshire. Local Nature partnerships are all about health and well-being and linking people to nature, working with a host of organisations including health authorities and nature organisations in England – there is one in your area! Pam laid down a couple of challenges to the Forest School movement which I believe will go some way to realising Pretty's 3 types of engagement in our communities. So I leave you with:

- **How do we clearly communicate the benefits of Forest School, indeed how do we clearly communicate what Forest School is?**
- **How can we work more effectively with other organisation and individuals – either in our organisations, between organisations, both regionally, nationally and even internationally if we are to effectively improve the health and well-being of the planet and us?**

For more detail on Jules Pretty's work, see his book "The Edge of Extinction"

Jon Cree

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