

ACCESSING THE OUTDOORS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

by Anne Faulkner



SEN students go on a treasure hunt to find their award certificates in the Calderstones Park



Willow weaving with students at Everton Park



As a child I played, discovered and created a ‘fantastical’ world in the outdoors. I didn’t have the luxury of living with a backdrop of a national nature reserve or in an AONB, instead the waste remains of a mining community was my outside haven and I made it my own. It was where I would go when I needed some space, where I would play with my friends and where I connected with nature. It taught me that children and young people do not place adult-centric measures of the value of natural spaces based on measure such as biodiversity but other factors are important too. We often hear about society disconnecting with nature with case studies about today’s children and young people – however the factors in place to cause this disconnect may be harder for children and young people with special educational needs.

‘Less than 1 in 10 children regularly play in wild spaces now, compared to half a generation ago’ (National Trust, Natural Childhood report, 2012).

The ‘We’re in the Wild’ project began in May 2013 and is funded by the Big Lottery. This three year project works with disadvantaged children, young people and families to provide opportunities to increase play, learning, self esteem, confidence, life chances, physical and emotional health through engagement in local green spaces. This article is about my experiences of working with children and young people with Special Needs – both disabilities and behavioural difficulties.

From my experience it appears that several SEN establishments organise outdoor residential trips allowing them to try outdoor pursuits and discover new activities but neglect to discover nature on their doorstep and fail to utilise their local parks and open spaces for educational purposes. This gives the students a false perception of the activities they could experience in the outdoors and the assumption that only beautiful places can be found much further afield. This in turn impedes their sense of belonging to their local community – something that these often vulnerable young people need. Under the Equality Act 2010 every school must make ‘reasonable adjustment’ so as not to discriminate against disabled pupils providing ‘auxiliary aid’ if necessary to achieve this.

Barriers to accessing local outdoor spaces

The availability of staff: to accommodate adult: child ratios and administration burden.

Ideas about activities: Often staff do not feel confident teaching in the outdoors but that improves with guidance. After one session with visually impaired students the teacher came running up to me to say that the ‘smelly cocktail’ activity has inspired her to do the same activity for a ‘separation’ lesson she’ll be doing in science next year.

Trust in students: After making bird boxes as part of a learning programme a 15 year old boy commented; ‘It was great we used real tools’ suggesting that they are often denied access to such activities possibly because of their disability.

Preconceptions of student’s ability: Students at a school for the visually impaired were unable to go outside without staff aid which in turn develops a fear of the outdoors until introduced to it.

Accessibility of green spaces and access to those green spaces: Not all open spaces are completely accessible throughout and walking to green spaces can pose many accessibility barriers.

Dr. Frances Kuo and Dr. Andrea Faber Taylor conducted a study with young people diagnosed with ADHD. Their evidence concluded ‘*Green outdoor settings appear to reduce ADHD symptoms in children across a wide range of individual, residential, and case characteristics.*’ (American Journal of Public Health. 2004 September; 94(9): 1580–1586.)

The attention to detail that students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) had was astonishing, with students having noticeable positive engagement with tasks such as willow weaving. One particular student with ADHD initially showed little interest in the activity, snapping the willow rather than weaving it. After I guided him with the techniques he became engrossed into weaving the willow and managed to fix a large gap in the structure. Teachers were astounded by his dedication to the task at hand in contrast to what they had witnessed in the classroom. Throughout the rest of the programme he regularly asked if we could go back to work on the willow feature.

The emotional response of pupils to their local spaces was motivational to me with one boy in a pupil referral unit commenting after a six week programme *'I walk through the park every day but I never noticed until now'* When beginning a programme with a group of students with behavioural disorders I asked the students if they have ever visited their local parks, one female student responded saying *'I don't need to; I can see parks on the tele.'* Once out and doing the activities that same student stated *'this is so much better than watching tele.'*

Ownership can also be enhanced through specific activities. For instance one group I was working with placed time capsules under trees they were planting – allowing students to not only enhance their connection with a place but giving them space to reflect on their past and articulate aspirations for their future.

Providing students with SEN has brought benefits, giving students the opportunity to experience calming and relaxing environments, allowing them to escape from the stresses of life, improving their wellbeing. Planning programmes to meet needs and offer multiple benefits is important as the following comment from a teacher following a programme of learning for children with autism spectrum disorder shows. *'The children not only gained experience and knowledge of the outdoors but the activities also helped with their social and emotional our group leader understood their needs and motivated us all to learn about the outdoors. This included the staff too!'* Another teacher with similar students stated, *'Our children have increased confidence in their personal abilities through completing tasks and activities. They have been able to transfer skills learnt to other areas and activities.'* A programme of learning designed for students with visual impairments elicited comments such as *'I could work independently'; 'it allowed us to use our other senses'*. After they were asked if they would like to go into the outdoors more often they all agreed they would but a teacher pointed out to me that the students would have difficulty doing it independently due to their visual impairments and so it would require members of staff to aid them. Once again the availability of staff limits opportunity.

The 'We're in the Wild' project has helped open young people's eyes to nature around them. The establishments involved have enjoyed the project and through community partnerships made will hopefully continue to get involved. With the right commitment and dedication enhancing SEN children and young people's wellbeing through the utilisation of their local open spaces is achievable.

My top tips for working with children and special needs in local spaces

- Consult and observe your target audience so you develop a programme to suit them.
- Plan to introduce them to areas of the park slowly, utilising the closer areas first.
- Work to form relationships (slowly/slowly). I have found that long term programmes have the best positive impact giving them an enjoyable pattern to look forward to.
- Have short structured tasks initially to build confidence and keep the group engaged.
- Plan to avoid 'perceived failure' by students. For example students with behavioural difficulties often have low self-esteem so ensuring activities whether they be bird box building or planting trees give a reward without too much challenge initially is important.
- Be creative; think outside the box, I've always found kinaesthetic teaching to work the best. Make it interactive and fun.
- 'Best laid plans of mice and men oft go astray', be prepared to change plans and adapt your activity to keep them focused.

Of course extra provisions may be required but with enough supervision the exclusion barrier can be transformed to inclusivity and through effective staff management and provisions SEN groups can have the door opened to a richer opportunity of discovery and involvement. ■

References

1. Steven Moss National Trust, Natural Childhood report, 2012
2. Equality Act 2010
3. Kuo, F.E., & Faber Taylor, A. (2004). "A potential natural treatment for Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder: Evidence from a national study." American Journal of Public Health, 94(9), 1580-1586.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Anne Faulkner. I have been teaching outdoor learning since 1999 as Ranger for 13 years, teaching 'Bikeability' with British Cycling and running the 'We're in the Wild' project for Plantlife. I am passionate about developing outdoor education to encourage everyone to discover nature on their doorstep

and get outside more. I am currently working with children and young people to create leaflets to inspire other people their age to utilise their local parks as well as running long term programmes to engage children and young people with their outdoor spaces I provide teacher training to empower teachers to utilise their parks for educational purposes and am developing school tool boxes so they have the means to continue their outdoor education long into the future. To read more about the 'We're in the Wild' project go to:- www.wildaboutplants.org.uk/england/projects/were-in-the-wild/

Photos: All from the author.



Visually impaired scout group discover Crosby beach