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Forest Schools: Observations and Experiences of Parents Michelle McMichael, RECE and Jennifer Moore, RECE

Abstract

This study examined the observations and experiences of parents whose children receive additional outdoor play time in a Forest School setting. The researchers used a qualitative methodology with online narrative interviews of 15 questions; participants took approximately 15 minutes to complete. 22 parents whose children attended two Forest Schools (one in the Region of Waterloo and one in Wellington County) completed the interviews. The researchers completed this study to better understand why parents chose to enroll their child in a Forest School and how they believed Forest Schools benefited their child. 77% believed that time spent in nature is beneficial for children who have diagnosed exceptionalities or challenging behaviours, 32% said the traditional school system was not working for their child in some way. An interesting finding was on risky play. 100% of parents felt risky play was important, however some expressed the need for it to be supervised. Findings from this study suggested many of the parents chose to enroll their child in a Forest School program for a variety of reasons. The most common were (i) concerns with the traditional school system, (ii) increased opportunities in risky play, and (iii) the overall positive effect on their child.

Introduction

This study examined the experiences of parents whose children receive additional outdoor play time in a Forest or outdoor school setting. Many children today do not appear to be spending enough time engaging in unstructured outdoor free play. "There is growing public awareness that each generation seems to be spending less time outdoors and more time indoors engaged with our prolific technological devices" (MacEachren, 2013 p. 221). There are two main concerns that are making Forest School more popular than ever. "...research shows that youth participation in outdoor activities has declined. The second concern is that childhood obesity rates have increased and prescriptions for childhood mental health problems (like ADHD) have skyrocketed" (Andrachuk et al., 2014, p. 15). The overarching research question for this study was: What are the observations and experiences of parents whose children receive additional unstructured outdoor free play in a Forest or outdoor school setting?

Literature Review

The literature suggests that the main barriers to children spending time outdoors are technology, parental fears and concerns.

Technology

Technology has changed the way children see and experience the world. Advancement in technology can be attributed to children spending less time engaging in outdoor nature play. When a large amount of a child's life is spent using technology such as watching television, playing video games or using hand-held devices, they miss out on learning opportunities that are key "essentials of a healthy childhood such as play, reading books and hands- on experiences of nature and the physical world around them" (Hamilton, 2016, p. 285).

Parental Fears and Concerns

Many children are not receiving enough unstructured time outdoors to play and explore as they please. This is something that has changed drastically over the years and one of the reasons for this is parental fears. "Fear is the emotion that separates a developing child from the full, essential benefits of nature. Fear of traffic, of crime, of stranger danger-and of nature itself" (Louv, 2008, p. 123). Parents today admit that their children do not play outside as much as they did themselves as children. Society plays a part in this as parents listen to news programs which talk about children being abducted or hurt and this in turn causes anxiety and fear.

Risk presents the potential for there to be injury or harm, however risk can also provide opportunities for gain in terms of child development. Forest Schools provide children a place to take supervised risk and learn what they are capable of. Many parents recognize the need for children to engage in risky play but feel they cannot allow their children to participate in these risky activities due to fear of injury. "...risky play provides children with opportunities to challenge themselves, test limits, explore boundaries and learn to make decisions about injury and risk" (McFarland & Laird, 2017, p. 1).

The purpose of this qualitative study was to examine the experiences of parents whose children receive additional outdoor play time in a Forest or outdoor school setting.

The overarching research question for this study was: What are the observations and experiences of parents whose children receive additional unstructured outdoor free play in a Forest or outdoor school setting?

To gain further insight on this topic, the study also examined:

- The reasons why parents choose to enroll their child in Forest school.
- Parents' perspectives on how Forest school benefits their child in relation to their child's behaviour and/or development
- How parents define the term risky play and what their attitudes towards risky play are

Methodology

Research Design

The research design that was appropriate for this qualitative study was an online narrative interview.

Instrument

An online narrative interview consisting of 15 questions and which took approximately 15 minutes to complete was provided to participants using SurveyMonkey to gather qualitative data. Qualitative data collection provided in-depth information of each participant's underlying reasoning and motivations by collecting detailed open-ended responses. Openended responses from the online narrative interview were used to help identify themes in the data. "...qualitative researchers look for overlapping themes in the open-ended data, and some researchers count the number of themes or the number of times the participants mention the themes" (Creswell, 2012, p. 220,221). This research design was appropriate for this audience as it allowed "...rapid access to large numbers of people and a detailed, rich text database for qualitative analysis" (Creswell, 2012, p.220).

Procedure

The researchers aimed to recruit a minimum sample of 10 participants for this study.

Phase 1: Recruitment

Step 1: The researchers emailed the owners of the Forest Schools who acted as Gatekeepers to obtain permission to conduct a research study.

Step 2: When the permission from the owners was obtained, the researchers followed up with each owner within a week with an email containing the Letter of Invitation for participants and the link to the online narrative interview.

Step 3: Current and previous parents of the Forest Schools who were interested in participating were asked to go to the link attached in the email. Participants read and agreed to the consent in question one of the online narrative interview.

Phase 2: Data Collection

Data was collected using an online open-ended narrative interview. The SurveyMonkey link to the online narrative interview was open for two weeks.

Phase 3: Data Analysis

The data was analyzed using a step by step process as outlined by Creswell (2012).

Participants

Homogeneous sampling was used to conduct this qualitative study. Sample: 22 parents

Location: 2 Forest Schools. One located in Waterloo Region and one located in Wellington County.

Population: Parents with children age 2-12 years who are enrolled in a Forest School.

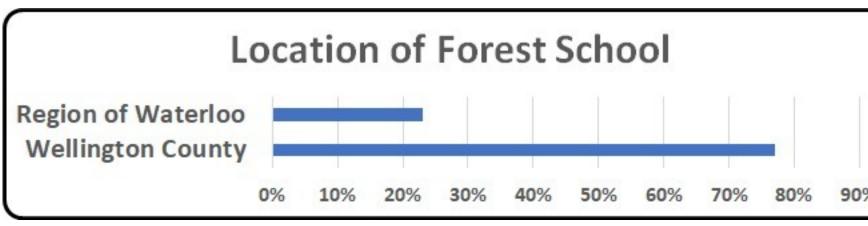


Chart 1: 77% of the participants were from a Forest School located in Wellington County. 23% of participants were from a Forest School located in the Region of Waterloo.









Results and Discussion

Chart 2: Why do parents choose to enroll their child in a Forest School Program? Some of the key words from the responses of participants included nature, explore, outside, anxiety, diagnosis, fresh air and exercise.



Chart 3: What do parents like about the Forest School curriculum?

Participants indicated some of the things they liked most about the Forest School curriculum. These included the freedom of the curriculum and the child-led, hands-on approach.



Main Themes/Findings

Traditional School

Many of the participants made comments in their responses about the traditional school system. 7 of the 22 respondents, (32%), commented on how the traditional school system was not working for their children in some way.

"The traditional school system was not meeting the needs of my children. I felt that they needed more freedom to explore the world around and learn in a more hands-on way" (Respondent # 3).

Risky Play

Participants were presented with a definition of risky play. They were asked if they agreed with the definition, if risky play was part of the Forest School curriculum and if they felt it should be. They were also asked their thoughts and feelings on their children participating in risky play. 100% of respondents agreed with the definition they were presented with. The same was also true for their agreement that risky play is part of the Forest School experience and that it should be.

"Yes. I am a nervous mom but also believe in risky play. This is why I sent them to forest school." Someone else can watch them climb and fall :)" (Respondent # 22).

Children with Exceptionalities and Children's Mental Health

32% of respondents disclosed that they have children who have exceptionalities and/or mental health disorders which include diagnosed exceptionalities such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, Pathological Demand Avoidance and learning disabilities such as Dyslexia as well as mental health issues such as anxiety, stress or emotional outbursts.

"My son has anxiety and doesn't connect easily with people. He comes ALIVE at outdoor school and when he talks about it. So much so his therapist reports back about how positive the effect is. My daughter has ADHD and, in the woods, it's not obvious, she gets to be daring and push her limits that she just can't at school" (Respondent # 12).

Limitations and Future Research

In evaluating the limitations of this study there could have been a better balance of respondents from each of the Forest Schools involved in the online narrative interviews. Selecting Forest Schools from different demographic areas could also impact the results.

The responses from the online narrative interview conducted for this study suggest that Forest Schools have many benefits for children with exceptionalities. This is an area which could benefit from further research.