



TASK 4B

READ TWO PIECES OF RESEARCH AND WRITE AN EVALUATION OF ONE

RESEARCH PAPER

Rethinking learning? Challenging and accommodating neoliberal educational agenda in the integration of Forest School into mainstream educational settings

This paper examines whether mainstream and alternative education can be aligned to satisfy the demands of a capitalist society. It also seeks to demonstrate that the two different styles of education are not so deeply separated after all. That, in fact an alternative education can provide all the components of mainstream education. What this paper aims to illustrate is what the education system would look like if there was to be an integration of formal and informal learning.

Research was conducted of two schools in the Midlands that had similar demographics - largely white British and low number of pupils on free school meals. Consisting of interviews with pupils, the class teachers and the Headteachers the qualitative data was transcribed and subject to phenomenological thematic analysis utilising the Braun-Clarke approach. Some of the resulting language that the pupils associated with formal learning or 'work' was 'boring' 'sit still' 'writing and writing' 'stay quiet.' All of these remarks are directly correlated to the skills required as an adult to succeed in the working world.

"The association between work and adulthood in opposition to play and childhood (Aitken, 2001) features in children's accounts and is central to notions of future preparedness for work, yet the playful side of childhood also becomes increasingly confined to defined segments of the school day: Learning [at school] is very, very good because, because if you don't learn, you might not be able to do anything when you're a grown up ... because, you're not going to play when you're a grown up. (Lewis, Reception)"

The following quotes from Florence and Jess, both in year 4, also demonstrates the responsibility placed on children in formal education whereby from a very young age they understand the responsibilities they bear to learn facts, remember them, recall them (for assessment purposes) and how one day they'll be truly useful citizens when they pass this knowledge on to children of their own:

In a lesson we'd normally sit still ... In ICT, science, geography, you get quite a bit more facts out of that for you to remember ... if you get a test at the end of that term, then you've got to have learnt something and you've got to have kept something in your head. (Jess)

If you don't learn anything, like you're not going to do well in life because you won't know what to do ... So like if you have kids, you know how to look after them and teach them things. (Florence)

Jess' sentiments are articulated by Alice, who points to the negative emotions experienced by children when they are put under pressure to recall facts that they have learnt in order to prove understanding.

When I read this, I immediately recalled my first teaching term - teaching year 5 at a Catholic Primary School. In a departmental meeting about recent assessments, I presented the results of recent tests. When I'd finished, I then presented my teacher notes and summation of that half term. I did this to illustrate that it was not necessary to put children through rigorous testing every six weeks. It creates a perpetual stressful environment for children whose focus then becomes on remembering facts and formula to attain grades. It also sucks the creativity out of teaching as teachers are pressured to show progress. In my opinion, it is not mainstream teaching in itself that is lacking in creativity – the process does not have to be 'boring', children should not be required to sit still or be quiet. In truth, I find this difficult myself and would often take my children outside to do maths by writing with chunky chalk on the paving or we would study literacy in the amphitheatre, that we were fortunate to have. It is not the curriculum itself that is uninspiring; I feel that it is the constant requirement to prove that learning has taken place by the attainment of grades that stifles the learning journey. This latter point is also made by a Reception Teacher and in her interview she states: 'Ofsted focus has changed, so they're coming in now and looking at pupil outcomes rather than teaching.'

Along with affirmations from parents who made positive observations about Forest School and its ability to advance development of social skills the paper also quotes Harris (2017) and his belief that ' Drawing approaches found in alternative education into mainstream school settings thus has the potential to disrupt the monotony of classroom learning and foster positive relationships with school.'

However, I feel that the paper has limitations in its ability to extol the 'learning' benefits of Forest School. It points to the way it complements mainstream education and helps to embed learning by relieving children from a 'pressure pot' environment but doesn't discuss the topics that children can actually learn at Forest School that are included in the national curriculum. For instance, they can study leaves to learn about photosynthesis; worms that the children find in the soil can be great study subjects when learning about invertebrates for biology. These are things that they come across in the forest.

I facilitate creative writing sessions for children through my CIC, Rock Paper Write. The sessions are often nature-based and in woodlands they learn how to write descriptions using their senses (something they could not do in the classroom). The children are able to develop their own natural curiosity - asking questions and going on to do their own research. Being outdoors and often in new environments helps to stimulate their imaginations and writing is then not regarded as a cumbersome task but something they choose to do. They take pride in the work that they produce and want to share it with others. This then improves their oracy skills. There isn't a test at the end; there is no measure of their performance but their contributions are valued and this in turn encourages them to do more.

Forest School teachers in schools are often compromised by requirements to show evidence of learning because typically, no writing takes place during forest school sessions. It is these moments that should be documented - child-led learning that not only complements the curriculum but is part of the curriculum. Whilst I realise that there is a clear distinction between outdoor learning and Forest School I think that every interaction with nature brings real benefits over time to participants. There is, in fact, learning at Forest School that can be documented besides the acquisition of soft skills that are mentioned. I do not consider this paper has gone quite far enough to do that.