

Research Papers

CABE: Tackling inequality through local green space

Natural England: Links between natural environments and learning: evidence briefing

# The Woodland Environment

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I found the research conducted by CABE to be particularly intriguing and relevant, especially since the Introduction to Forest School Programme I implemented was based in Old Trafford. This area is part of the borough of Trafford, where 11.4% of children come from low-income families. The situation is more acute in Old Trafford, with 30.4% of children living in low-income households. The community is known for its rich diversity, vibrant neighborhoods, and active local groups. Old Trafford could easily meet the qualifying criteria for the study. This is where my siblings and I grew up, exploring two local parks, playing games, and independently discovering the wonders of nature. Although I now reside in a different part of Trafford, I bought my first home in Old Trafford, where my son spent his first two years. However, due to increasing traffic, deprivation, and crime, it became clear that he would not experience the same freedom in nature that I did as a child. Notably, only one participant in my introductory program spent considerable time outdoors, and the places he visited with his parents were outside the area. Their nursery had very limited outdoor space, and trips to the park were often unfeasible due to staffing issues.

The study highlights that many local public spaces are underutilized because of their poor quality, and this holds true for Hullard Park, where I chose to conduct my sessions. The park lacks seating, play equipment, and installations that promote interaction with the environment—facilities that I currently enjoy in my local area. While the park is lovely and generally well-maintained, there was an unacceptable amount of litter around the benches in the children's area, with some discarded items posing potential dangers to children. Before one of my sessions, I went to the park equipped with a litter picker and a bin bag to ensure the area was safe for use. I completely understand why this unsightly mess might discourage local families from utilizing the green space. Although it would be a fantastic spot for picnics, there are few picnic tables, and dog owners often disregard signs to keep their pets on leashes, which can be risky for young children.

Whilst I wholeheartedly agree with the advantages that green spaces offer, I have two concerns regarding this research. First, it oversimplifies wellbeing by suggesting that access to green spaces alone can enhance overall health and longevity. Many other significant factors contribute to wellbeing, such as better healthcare, education, public services, higher income, and access to leisure facilities—particularly in demographics where individuals often face increased caregiving responsibilities and lengthy work hours due to multiple jobs. Additionally, social housing tenants should be included in the decision-making process before social housing plans are made, rather than after. The report notes that some residents temporarily accessed sites planned for development, raising the question: "What happens after development?" With limited spaces available for creating green areas, it is concerning why deprived neighbourhoods are overdeveloped and overcrowded, forcing residents to travel for access to nature. The report acknowledges that local people are in the best position to make decisions about facilities in their area, but had those residents been involved at the early stages of development, social housing estates might have looked very different and provided far more benefits.

My second concern with the article is that it does not delve deeply enough into the reasons people feel unsafe or underutilize local green spaces. It mentions that African Caribbean individuals use parks more for social gatherings than for exercise. I would like to present a counterargument: these social gatherings likely refer to festivals and carnivals, and many individuals may be discouraged from accessing green spaces due to a sense of not belonging. Hiker and writer Anita Sethi has shared her experiences of racial abuse while traveling across the UK, revealing moments when she felt unwelcome in the countryside. Rhiane Fatinikum, founder of Black Girls Hike, states, "The lack of representation in hiking is clear for all to see: It's never something I associated with Black people – it's not even marketed at Black people. Historically dominated by white middle-class males, I wasn't keen on the prospect of venturing out alone or joining a typical hiker's group where there'd be nobody I could identify with." Thus, it is not merely about creating green spaces in areas populated by the global majority in the UK; it is essential to make those spaces safe and welcoming for everyone.

This theme is further explored in Natural England's research paper, which concludes that there is still a lack of equal opportunity to enjoy the outdoors. The study examines the positive outcomes of engaging with the natural environment across various learning experiences. While it was not definitively shown that everyone benefits from this engagement, there were no negative outcomes. The group I worked with during my forest school sessions was largely unaccustomed to spending significant time outdoors, whether with family or educational providers. I believe the evidence in such research would be more robust if participants were observed over an extended period. The children in my sessions became visibly more relaxed and less anxious as time went on. Initially, they were excited to leave the nursery for an outing, but they were also apprehensive about what to expect from the session and being outdoors. With sufficient time, I believe there would be more evidence of improvements in their wellbeing and learning after they acclimatized to this new environment.

Forest School is a unique experience, and it is clear that not all groups have equal access to nature. In my opinion, it is vital to help families familiarize themselves and their young children with green spaces. These areas must be accessible, affordable, and inviting, and there should be a continuous effort to promote this. It is simply not enough to claim that everyone is welcome; there needs to be ongoing marketing, and the government must ensure widespread awareness of the benefits that exposure to outdoor spaces can bring to physical health, wellbeing, and learning.