

# Exploring in a Cambridge Forest

*Developing creative learning opportunities with young children, parents, educators and a creative practitioner*



Learning, playing and exploring together

*The North Cambridge Children's Centre Creative Forest Schools project was a collaboration between Cambridge City Council, Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination (CCI) Milton Country Park and Colleges Nursery and family centre. The project took place over an eight week period during 2008.*

**EACH WEEK** in the summer of 2008, educators from Colleges Nursery and Family Centre took a group of 14 children out to the forest at Milton Country Park. They were accompanied by parents and by creative practitioner Filipa Pereira-Stubbs from Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination. The nursery had already been visiting base camp at Milton Country Park for two terms and there was a well-oiled operation involving minibuses, snack baskets, volunteers and bags of waterproofs. The vision was to develop creative learning opportunities for children in an outdoor environment very different from the nursery garden and far removed from their homes in a relatively deprived area of north Cambridge.

The role of the artist was to offer fresh perspectives and expertise informed and developed within the community of creative practitioners that CCI has fostered.

## *Time for slowness*

Slowness is a core theme of CCI's work. All our work is committed to clearing time and space for children to become fully engaged in the experiences that they are offered. Our focus in the forest was to create both physical and metaphorical spaces for the children's curiosity and playfulness so that they could question, explore and experiment as many times as they needed.

As Filipa relates, 'We sat in the minibus, on our very first trip to Forest School. Next to me was Jacob who after only one meeting had made me his friend. He was someone whose thoughtful comments I was to treasure again and again over the weeks.'

"Will we be able to see the reindeers' cages?" he asked. I explained there wouldn't be cages.

"But where will the reindeers be?" I explained there wouldn't be reindeers; deer maybe, but not reindeers.

"But, aren't we going to the zoo?"

I explained that we were going to a park, not a zoo. We exchanged our questions slowly, with much time in between to look out at the passing landscape. He stared out the window for a long time, comfortable, as was I, with the silence between us. Then, "Well then, how will we see the reindeers?"

Children have an ability to return to a thought or subject that fascinates them again and again until they have fully explored all they need to, until they are full. We felt the forest environment and the work done there could honour this ability, this need, quite seamlessly. Once again, Filipa recalls an example involving Jacob. 'It's a rabbit hole, you see. Come and look.'

We squat down and look closely.

'I wonder where it goes,' he says thoughtfully.

I wonder out loud whether we could find out.

'Oh yes,' Jacob agrees, 'we must find out.' He trots off confidently.

We end up at the top of the small hill, by a drainage lid. I don't call it that, of course. 'This is where the rabbit tunnel ends.'

The next ten or so minutes are spent happily looking into the dark, dark rabbit tunnel. Jacob figures that by dangling sticks in the tiny holes at the top we will be able to ascertain its depth. Profound science is being engaged with through imaginative play. It is such a wonderful space that other children are drawn to join us. Soon there is a busy group all pushing sticks into the holes. The children very quickly discover the limitations of thickness, amongst many other things. Eventually a teacher comes over, in turn drawn by the utter concentration of this small group. She is greeted by a barrage of excited explanations. The children have become the teachers.

The environment encouraged a different experience of time – we felt that there was more of it, probably because the children were being allowed to find their own way and become immersed in their experiences. It was contagious to work alongside these very young explorers; they quickly infused one with a sense of delight over things one would normally walk past. There seemed to be more scope for repetition and open ended exploration. Adults often found themselves engaged with children in games that involved repeating an action over and over. These younger ones really delighted in the simplicity of the engagement. It seemed to captivate and soothe them.

Filipa remembers watching a young girl. 'A crucial experience comes when she finds a log. More specifically, she finds a friend busily moving along the log. With great hesitation but equal determination she grabs my hand and pulls me to the log. As usual I am not saying much but she doesn't need me to say anything. She needs to create a reliable, strong, warm balancing partner.'

Her first attempts are very tentative but she is determined and incredibly quickly it becomes easier for her. We patiently continue to practise over and over and over again. And then, when the repetition feels like it's becoming a meditation, she slides into mastery and begins to do it on her own, a wonderful moment that lifts her straight into pure delight and more daring. Now she is scuttling across the big, safe log with speed and leaping off at the end again and again. I realise that in the distance the teaching assistant has been watching it all and is now beaming and brimming with pride and joy. It's a deeply satisfying event for us all.'



### Relating to landscapes

Within this small amount of park allocated to the work of Forest Explorers, there were whole worlds of possibility for physical and imaginative engagement. The children were absorbed in making their way up and down the small mounds, weaving in and out of small bushes, rolling, touching, tasting and climbing. Their physical activity anchored their cognitive and imaginative exploration of the space.

Each week they would survey the forest and comment on the changes they observed. For instance, Corban, aged 3, was typical 'The shelter's gone. The log's been moved! It was raining then it's sunny; how amazing is that?' It was as if each individual child became more distinct and easier to see. The complexity of their personalities was mirrored in what they chose to do and how they chose to relate to the space and interact with it.

Some educators particularly valued the chance to see their children with fresh eyes. Gill, an educator, commented, 'It gave me the opportunity to see people differently in this new environment. One or two of the children particularly seemed to blossom. They had the space and freedom to show a completely different side to their character. It's useful to remember that people can be different and to give them changes. I had moments of seeing children exploring really freely for themselves and doing things I have never seen them do before. One or two had seemed quite timid in nursery and here they were balancing, sliding, climbing up trees.'

Sometimes, parents were encouraged to stand back from their children and allow them to engage as fully as they wanted with the rich opportunities for play available in the forest. We wanted to help parents see how rich these learning experiences were and build their confidence in offering similar opportunities.

At other times, parents were encouraged to support their children's explorations through being alongside them, listening closely to their observations and welcoming further questioning and exploring. As a result, they could see their children with fresh eyes in new environments, demonstrating qualities and skills they had perhaps not known about. Feedback from the parents showed that they were learning to trust their children's ability to manage their encounters with this wonderful space.

Filipa describes just such a child's encounter and his responses. 'In one of the sessions I had brought in mirrors of all sizes and was showing a small group of children the big mirror, alternating between holding it up against my body and holding it on my lap. Fahim stood nearby, for once alone, and he slowly came closer. I smiled at him, without looking at him, and asked him gently whether he would like to see the mirror. He came closer. I asked what he could see in the mirror. He leaned in to the mirror, which was held up towards the sky. He leaned in closer, bending in to the mirror and then suddenly, without warning, crowed with delight and spun round to look up at the sky. Back round and down to the mirror, back round to the sky. Again and again. I fished a smaller mirror out of my pocket. It didn't seem necessary to say anything at all. I gave him the little mirror. He looked in and once again crowed as he came in close to his own eye. He peered in and past his eye to the sky, twisting himself round to get the angle right. That was it. He'd understood the magic of the mirror. He moved through the space with a sense of purpose, of excitement – he was going to see what he could see!'

Saskia, a parent-volunteer, recognised the value of this. 'For me the special quality of these visits was not so much in the doing but in the being – just observing the children working and creating and discovering together in a natural, peaceful place, at a pace that was right for them, absorbing textures, sounds, looking at the clouds. There was no sense of pressure, no absolute targets to be met.'

Here was an opportunity to build a sense of community between educators and parents and other adults, all committed to enabling rich learning opportunities for their children.

As Steph, an educator, said, 'We got closer to them and they seemed to feel closer to nursery afterwards.'





### *A more dialogic approach*

The limitations the classroom presents in terms of group management, noise levels, appropriate behaviour necessitated by small space and the over familiarity of everyday toys were no longer relevant at forest camp. The children began to move with a new freedom, make the noises they wanted, encounter new spaces and, of course, explore the marvellous, ever changing world of nature. One of the intentions of the creative work was to allow the children to answer their questions in their individual and independent ways.

Helen, an educator, explains: 'We have a garden at the nursery but [in the forest] it is much wilder. There were no toys as such so children were more imaginative. They used all the natural materials and they used their imagination more. They have a much better relationship with the natural world. It was important for us to listen to children and for them to listen to natural sounds. They were quite inspired.'

The educators, liberated by a sense of being somewhere different, of being outdoors in fresh air, seemed strengthened in their intention to encourage the children to engage with exploring the space.

As Mona, an educator, put it, 'We do a lot in our nursery but [in the forest] we saw the children running up hills, climbing the trees, exploring the environment by themselves and finding new things. This all added to my experience and made me think a lot about active learning and how important it is for children to learn by themselves.'

The adults were committed to listening carefully to the children's explanations and fascinations and observed how intensely the children did the same for each other. These conversations extended well beyond the few hours in the forest.

Daphne, an educator, gave an example: 'James listened carefully to Jacob's descriptions and then added his own elaborated thoughts into the discussion. The children talked about texts on the slides and about initial letters, sharing an interest in these. Seeing Jacob using an enormous double pronged branch to catch leaves, James named it "the Leaf Picker" and was inspired to make a similar tool.'

A forest cinema was created back at the nursery where the children could revisit their trip to the forest but this time through the lens of the video camera. Children would gather in a cosy place and watch everything on the grand scale of the interactive whiteboard.

Daphne describes the results: 'Revisiting of the forest learning experiences through weekly reviewing helped children's understanding deepen, shining a searchlight on their own lines of enquiry and stimulating the desire of peers to try out similar explorations and learning experiences. They enjoyed being the main characters in their stories and the stories of the forest community, thereby encountering meaningful literacy experiences. Children became teachers, an empowering position for young children. They also became drivers of their own learning, a vital life skill.'

A boy with a few words of English, his second language, announced, 'Anjum forest, Anjum forest.' He had taken a month and more to settle into nursery but the cinema experiences built up a strong desire to play there.

The commitment to documentation and reflection was also valued by the parents with many bringing back stories of conversations they had with their children at home about the forest. Even Parents' Voice letters after the project continued the themes of listening to the children and celebrating their work.

Rachel, a full-time working mother, was delighted with the opportunity to have a window on her daughter's special experiences. 'It is also evident that Esme gained a great deal from this lovely opportunity. Here are her replies to the questions I asked as I typed: Mummy: What did you do at Forest School Esme?

Esme: We made a den and we made a potion for the caterpillars and fairies to eat. And for the worms and spiders and stuff like that and we made one for ourselves and some days we had our snacks in our den.

Mummy: What will you remember most?

Esme: All the spiders and trees, the woods, the grass, my friends – phew this is hard work!

Esme: Can you write, "We had such a great time and thank you"?'

### *Never-ending stories*

Throughout the project we were repeatedly reminded how accommodating the natural environment is to these young people. It offers a full sensory experience, allowing engagement at many levels in a very nourishing and uncomplicated way. The feel of a tree, the smell of its leaves, the earth at its base, the sound and movement of the wind brushing the leaves, the touch of the bark and the challenging yet perfect space it offers for a little body to fit in are just the beginning. It also supplies direct, uncomplicated inspiration for the imagination. By uncomplicated, we mean unmanaged and unprocessed, allowing for direct, intuitive appeal, rather than imposed, manufactured meaning.

The stories the children spun around pathways, dens, careful arrangements of sticks and groupings of tiny animals were never-ending. For example, Jacob, aged 4, commented on his own photographs shown on a laptop back at nursery: 'That's the rabbit hole tree, and that's his bedroom and that's his home, and the rabbit comes out of his hole...and that's his rabbit's front room. He does not live in the tree.'

The resources on offer could be scattered and re-formulated in many different ways. This allows for a more creative engagement with them. A stick can easily become a hundred things: a plastic boat usually remains a boat.

Filipa, the creative practitioner, recalls hearing a child tell a story of the very tiny bird that will come to nest in a pile of twigs. 'The sense of the tininess of the imagined bird is carried in the voice and the gestures of the body bent over the pile of twigs. The intense empathy towards this tiny creature is conjured through the inanimate sticks.'

There was a sense for all involved that these children had been offered experiences that extended well beyond the forest where they worked. Educators noticed the impact on the children back in the nursery as they grew in confidence and their capacity to work together.

Sandra, an educator, noticed a change when children were back in nursery, how much more confident they had become and how well they were relating to each other. 'They gelled together as a group and they were much more confident to go up to children in a different group too.'

Our work in this forest continues in 2009 with a new group of children and parents. Supported by funding from the Ernest Cook Trust and Cambridge City Council, we plan to deepen the work by identifying more formal times and spaces for shared reflection with both parents and educators. A learning group will be formed from interested adults (educators, parents, creative practitioner and volunteers) to work together, reflect on the learning and think how to make it visible. Filipa will meet with parents each week before the children arrive at the forest to exchange insights and thoughts from the previous week. She will join the educators at their planning meetings to look closely at the forest learning and consider how to make links with the time back in the nursery. Whole families will be invited to come and play in the forest on a number of Saturday mornings as we seek to inspire all parents, carers and siblings to savour the forest too.

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*Ruth Sapsed and Filipa Pereira-Stubbs, Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination, and staff and parents from Colleges Nursery and Family Centre.*

*Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination ([www.cambridgecandi.org.uk](http://www.cambridgecandi.org.uk)) is a charity that works to develop the creative potential that exists in everyone. We invite people of all ages to engage in creative activities that are both playful and purposeful. These open-ended experiences have no pre-determined outcome and enable those we work with to recognise, value and express their own imaginations and curiosities.*



