

Special Children

Meeting Children's Additional Educational Needs

- Virtual reality helps pupils with autism gain independence
- Getting pupils with challenging behaviour to stop and think
- A new CAMHS approach helps pupils thrive
- How to support pupils with attachment difficulties



Finding my voice

Learning outdoors can help language skills develop faster

PULL-OUT RESOURCES
Practical strategies to promote a love of reading

Out in the woods, students
always find plenty to do



Finding my voice

Mike Baldwin outlines a project he is working on that improves the communications skills of pupils with learning difficulties

There's something magical going on in the woods behind Belvue, a special school for children with moderate and specific learning difficulties aged 11 to 19 in Northolt, west London. Children who formerly found communication difficult are finding their voices.

It all began six years ago with Zainab, a girl with autism and limited functional language. She struggled following her transition from primary education and found changes to her routine and the busy secondary school environment extraordinarily hard to cope with. As autumn progressed and the days became shorter, she took to screaming for her father as dusk fell – the changes in light level were confusing and incomprehensible to her.

Zainab moved into my class in Year 8. My TA and I believe in the need to explore the world with our students, so we took Zainab for a walk in our newly acquired wood next to the school – she instantly ran away from us. We knew she couldn't get far, so rather than causing her alarm by chasing after her, we waited. Five or six minutes later, we heard a voice call excitedly from the other side of the wood: 'Mr B, Mr B, where are you? Where are you?' We were astonished. Something had happened in those few minutes that had helped Zainab find her voice.

“ Each day the students developed a little more language, confidence and independence ”

Inspired, we were soon exploring the wood. Our students love it there; they are more proactive than they are indoors, where the nature of the typical classroom limits the scope of what they can do, and perhaps even their expectations of their own capabilities. We laid out paths, lit fires, cooked soup, made tea and toast, built a woodland garden (for which we received a gold award in the Ealing in Bloom competition), climbed trees, and planted thousands of bluebells and snowdrops. Each day the students developed a little more language, confidence and independence. The wood became the heart of our curriculum.

The context

Belvue School is in an area of high social deprivation with a significant number of immigrant families, many of whom face multiple challenges as they strive to nurture their children. They do the best they can, but few have gardens, fewer still get to explore the natural world, and limited independence makes typical teenage exploration very challenging.

When we first take a class to the wood, some children are scared. They worry that they will get dirty or hurt or that the resident fox will eat them; they do not know what to do. Once they begin to relax a little, they realise that they can explore and begin to have fun. Then suddenly, there is a moment when they let go and immerse themselves in all the woods

have to offer. At this point, their ability to communicate often begins to improve, and they start to make connections.

Let me give you two examples.

Interpreting the natural world

Like other secondary special schools, we have always had difficulty finding age-appropriate texts, so we write our own. Based on the weather, the seasons and aspects of nature, these help students to develop an understanding of a small part of the world that they inhabit. We may read the story every day for weeks or months, initially led by adults, but as the students become familiar with it, they take over. We always hope that they will connect new vocabulary with meaning. One rhyming story about a snowy London winter includes a repetitive chorus, which reinforces key vocabulary.

A winter dark and a winter deep,
A winter cold with snow;
A winter wet, a winter freeze,
A winter from long, long, ago.

One snowy day we took the class to the wood. A student with Down syndrome came up to me with a look of bewilderment and surprise on her face. She signed: 'Snow cold.' She had connected the story's refrain with the world around her and it was a revelation.

This is typical of the breakthrough moments we have in the wood.

Communication and creativity

Another example concerns a student with significant and life-impairing sensory-seeking behaviours. His sensory diet provides him with lots of opportunities for proprioceptive and vestibular movement to help him learn to meet his own sensory needs. Working in the wood lends itself to this. If the group decides to build a fire, he collects the firewood, repeatedly bending down and straightening up to put logs into the wheelbarrow – this helps him to be calm and still, and replaces an aspect of his therapy-room-based sensory diet.

This student has by far the most language of those in the class, but is least able to use it due to sensory overload. Learning is very hard for him. By giving him strategies to meet his own needs, we have enabled him to interact better with the world and to begin to learn.

He recently wanted to climb a tree. Together we chose one and set a safe climbing limit (as a precaution, I removed the branches immediately above this height). Up he scrambled while I watched from a discrete distance.

Students learn practical skills, like sawing safely



“She had connected the story’s refrain with the world around her and it was a revelation”

I later found him lying on a branch with his arms wrapped around it. When I asked if he was OK, he immediately responded: 'Yes, I can see the hills.' Then he started shaking the branch up and down. 'I'm riding a horse,' he exclaimed, suddenly able to put his mind into a creative place where he could begin to role play. The woods had worked their magic once again.

The impetus to find out more

So what is the secret? At my headteacher's suggestion, I applied for a grant from SHINE (an education charity that focuses on teacher- and school-led innovation and replicating success) to do some research into why our pupils' communication skills improve when they are in the woods.

When my bid was accepted, we sat down together to restructure my timetable. I gave up teaching design and technology to move to the wood, where I now teach communication-based activities to Key Stage 3. I've also become the school's education researcher: if there is an aspect of school practice that merits investigation, I gather and read the academic literature to see how we might

apply the findings to our setting.

Since my first walk in the woods with Zainab, the school has embraced outdoor learning. We have created several learning spaces including a yurt (where we can work if it's really wet), a Celtic roundhouse (built last February) that we are in the process of roofing, and two fire pits with story circles (where pupils light fires, cook and take part in stories and music). The construction of a pair of innovative, architect-designed, woodland classrooms, which are linked by a barn that functions as a gatehouse, is nearly finished. There is something of Narnia about these, with their triad of sweeping curved roofs, floor-to-ceiling picture windows, and wood-burning stoves.

SHINE project goals

Our SHINE project is about understanding what constitutes best practice in this field with a view to creating more opportunities for students with communication difficulties to learn language that will help them in life.

I am supported by Sara Longman (a remarkable teaching assistant), an occupational therapist (who has helped me apply OT programmes to a woodland context), and two speech and language therapists. Together we are compiling evidence to help us understand the relationships between the wood and improved communication.

We have teamed up with the School of Social Sciences at London Metropolitan University who will help us analyse the video footage we take to capture progress. The outcomes of our research will help us to develop a curriculum that can be used in inner-city and rural schools alike.

Not every school is fortunate enough to have woodland, but some have a green space. At the very least, they will have a playground, which could be turned to advantage by installing some earth-filled troughs around the edge where teachers could bury interesting items for students to discover. Digging around in the soil to see what they might turn up is an activity our students just love.

Schools can also look for opportunities beyond the school gates. We have a nature reserve nearby where our post-16 students spend three or four days a week on work-related learning.

Language supports independence

Without functional communication, life is impaired. Without the capacity to think in structured language, it is very hard to do anything for yourself. Once we have understood what is improving our



Mike Baldwin (left) receives a grant to fund Finding My Voice research

students' communication, we would like to address other aspects of students' lives.

This year it is Finding My Voice, next year we might add Finding My Independence, which will help students to explore what independence means for them. In some ways, this is already happening. For example, at the start of the year, one student with Down syndrome was beginning to speak at the two-word level. Back in December as he was toasting some bread in the flames of the fire, I asked him what he wanted on it and he replied: 'My toast I want chocolate.' Delighted with this response, I helped him restructure it using Makaton so that he can now say: 'On my toast I want chocolate.' If he can make toast, he can learn to make simple meals.

“Without functional communication, life is impaired”

Of course, without a control group running alongside the project, we have no definitive proof that our children's achievements have been facilitated by their experiences in the woods. However, as a teacher of 16 years, ten of which have been in special schools, I have never seen language skills develop so readily in so many pupils in any other setting – anecdotally, being in the woods seems to support the process of language acquisition.

Developing life skills

For us at Belvue School, these advances have resulted in a general expansion of the school action plan and this year learning outside the classroom is on our School Improvement Plan. Together, all members of staff are beginning to consider how we can use our grounds and

locality to support and promote learning, and we are extending our already comprehensive education of students in the real world.

We've been working towards this for many years. For example, every week, one class is timetabled for a Foody Friday with their teacher. They sit down together to plan a meal, go to the supermarket, buy the food, bring it back, cook it and eat it together. A number of classes have now taken the concept a stage further, and go into the woods to cook on an open fire.

Meanwhile, more and more staff are planning trips to places they perhaps would not have considered before. By working in the woods, we have developed our own confidence as practitioners; we now recognise that play (formerly the preserve of primary schools) can be age appropriate, and that it is a vital tool in the development of communication, social skills and wellbeing.

Quality of life

Most of our pupils will need supervision in adulthood. Many will always have very limited communication, despite all of the work we put into this. Some do not have the capacity to write, or to count beyond three, let alone understand what a number represents. For them, this is about enriching the experience of learning whilst developing wider communication and understanding, and developing lifelong interests and skills.

Many of our more complex students go on to college when they leave us, but after that there is little provision for them. They may occasionally access a day centre, and their families will always do their best to support them with little help. Unfortunately few will find employment or have a role in society.

By showing them that they can get enjoyment from being outside, whether it is gardening or walking in the woods, hopefully we're setting up lifelong interests, hobbies and practices that will support healthy living, whilst continuing to find their voices.

Mike Baldwin is the education researcher and a Key Stage 3 teacher at Belvue School in Northolt, London

FIND OUT MORE

- SHINE: <http://bit.ly/sc235-28>
- The curriculum will be published via the Belvue School website towards the end of the summer term. www.belvueschool.com