

## **ARC Northwest Coast Seaside Towns and Communities Research Development Network**

### **Subgroup: Education and Leisure / Intergenerational**

#### **Beach School Project**

**Background:** Wellbeing is a major issue in schools, we're in the bottom nationally and internationally, and young people's mental health and wellbeing is continuing to decline. School curriculum is important in supporting mental health and wellbeing as children spend so much time at school. The beach school idea evolved from the success of nature-based play and the 'Forest school' programme where children's holistic development on a personal, social, and emotional level is supported by time spent in natural spaces, such as the forest or the beach. Beach schools can provide an alternative to traditional educational approaches of classroom learning.

We have been working with teachers since 2017 in around 50 schools. Teachers meet up three times a year on the coast (Sefton, Fleetwood, Morecambe) and undertake Continuing Professional Development through exploring the potential of beach school in terms of the types of pedagogy to use, as well as exploring some research findings and the impact it can have on children's development, mental health, and wellbeing. Our aim is to suit the practitioners as opposed to suiting a commercial model. Additionally, within this network, we are thinking about how the benefits children gain from the beach school could be extended out into the community, so it becomes intergenerational. It is a community-based network not only involving schools but anybody working with children, in addition to environmental organisations and charities.

**Aim:** to explore the role that beach school interventions can play in children's, teachers', and the wider community's health and well-being and to address health and wellbeing inequalities in disadvantaged areas in the Northwest.

**Benefits:** Beach school benefits include improving mental and physical health and wellbeing, developing cross-generational links with the community, and addressing inequalities experienced by coastal regions. Through building connection with nature, it does not only benefit children personally and socially, but it also benefits the beach itself as children develop a sense of stewardship to protect it. Beach schools may have particular benefits for children who might struggle in the traditional school environment.

### Research evidence on how to tackle the issue:

- Forest schools for children, adults, and children with special needs (Roberts, 2017; Harris, 2018)
- Nature-based play (Dankiw et al., 2020)
- Physical education on the beach (Gallotta et al., 2022)
- Nature walk for children with learning disabilities (Floresca, 2020)

### Aims and Principles of Beach School as defined by the members of the Northwest Beach School Network:

#### Pupil focused:

- To **improve outcomes** for pupils in terms of knowledge and skills; personal and social development; mental and physical health and wellbeing; environmental behaviours, values and attitudes.
- To provide a space for **freedom of exploration** and an **escape** from the pressures and restrictions of everyday (school) life.
- To engage those **pupils who may be disengaged** by traditional education.

#### Community focused:

- To develop environmental advocacy within **the local community** that **crosses generations**.
- To improve **health outcomes** and address the **inequalities** experienced by coastal regions, particularly with regards to mental health and wellbeing
- To encourage pupils to be **advocates** for their local environment and promote positive environmental behaviour changes.

#### Environment focused:

- To instill a sense of **ecological justice** in pupils which they can **share** with families and communities.
- To use the beach as a space for developing curriculum knowledge around **sustainability and ecological awareness**, including people, place, bonds and humanity
- To ensure that everyone values and protects **non-human life**.

Logic model				
INPUTS/RESOURCES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES		
		Short-term (immediate impact - cognitive change)	Medium-term (behaviour change)	Long-term impact
<p><u>Measures</u>: wellbeing measure, community wellbeing measure, strengths and difficulties questionnaire, scale of positive affect, intergenerational contact</p> <p><u>Previous relevant research</u>: -Benefits of Contact with nature for children (Chawla, 2015). Children's risky play from an evolutionary perspective: The anti-phobic effects of thrilling experiences (Sandseter &amp; Kennair, 2011). -Risky Play: Why children love and need it (Gray, 2014).</p> <p><u>Skills &amp; expertise</u> -Pedagogy/teaching skills -Research skills and expertise -Public advisor/stakeholder involvement -Funding</p>	<p>-Data from qualitative study (observations by teachers and narratives from pupils) and practitioner discussion.</p> <p><u>Preliminary findings</u>: Children describe feelings of joy and excitement, sense of freedom, feelings of calm, exciting and thrilling, happy and relaxed.</p> <p><u>Teachers' perceptions</u>: Personal responsibility, social development, improves mental health, provides freedom, develops environmental and social responsibilities, children with additional needs seem to thrive, improve wellbeing and PHSE, children enjoy it (though not every child), learning is more embedded and remembered, behaviour is always good, children enthusiastic and engaged.</p> <p>-Varied play and educational opportunities</p>	<p><b><u>Children</u></b> -Increased sense of freedom -Improved attention in children -Increased knowledge about nature and the environment -Increased recognition of the importance of protecting the environment -Change of attitudes towards the beach and outdoor activities - improving the empathy other children feel toward each other (e.g. towards those with a learning disability) by seeing the value they bring (in an environment that suits them better)</p>	<p><b><u>Children</u></b> -Increased physical activity -Increased engagement with place -Increased engagement with nature -Increased time spent outdoors -Increased engagement with learning (especially for children with a disability) -Improved engagement between diverse groups of children <b><u>Parents/family</u></b> -Improved level of family engagement due to increased interest in children's learning (e.g. involvement in Parent Teacher Association) <b><u>Teachers</u></b> -Better management of risk and impulsivity -Increased climate-change related education – re-thinking education <b><u>Wider community</u></b></p>	<p><b><u>Children</u></b> -Improved physical and mental health, wellbeing -Improved learning outcomes -Stress reduction -Improved self-efficacy, self-esteem, confidence -Improved nature connectedness -Improved intergenerational connectedness -Increased subjective happiness, positive affect -Improved flourishing and resilience -Better qualitative experiences -improved relationship between children <b><u>Parents/family</u></b> -Improved physical and mental health, wellbeing -Better qualitative experiences -Increased subjective happiness, positive affect <b><u>Teachers</u></b></p>

<p>-Risk thermometer (risky play)</p>	<p>-Social programmes -Learning from limitations of previous research (e.g. longer-term interventions are needed)</p>		<p>-Increased community engagement -Increased use of coastal asset by the wider community -Reduced littering</p>	<p>-Improved confidence -Better qualitative experiences - Increased subjective happiness, positive affect <b>Wider community</b> -Increased social cohesion/capital -Increased community and place wellbeing -Reduced social isolation -Increased subjective happiness, positive affect -Contribution to reducing health inequalities <b>Environment</b> -Cleaner beaches (sustainable environments) -Contribution to reducing climate change</p>
<p><b>ACTIVITIES</b> <u>Qualitative study</u> exploring teachers' and pupils' perspectives and perceptions of the beach. <u>Discussion among practitioners</u> around the health and wellbeing benefits of beach schools <u>Systematic review:</u> Effectiveness of curriculum-based outdoor learning activities and identification of intervention components.</p>				
<p><b>EXTERNAL FACTORS:</b> <u>Education policy</u>, which may be against social constructivism (developing knowledge as a result of social interactions and language use through shared experience) – creativity may not be viewed as an important strength. <u>Attainment:</u> central government's lack of awareness/will/focus of the need to deal with the holistic development of the child, his/her personal development, social development, which all feed into educational attainment. Attainment without investment is not possible. Children's need investment into building social skills, teamwork, empathy, confidence, self-esteem etc. The government requires grades, graphs, charts as opposed to a fundamental foundation that brings attainment. <u>Risk assessment:</u> lengthy procedure, hindering implementation. <u>Time and resource:</u> costs associated with travel and providing equipment, time needed to engage with space and for professional development, cost of formal Beach School qualifications.</p> <p><b>ASSUMPTIONS:</b> Holistic approach is necessary to deal with the holistic development of the child, his/her personal development, social development, which all feed into educational attainment. Parents are expected to support this type of learning. All, or at least the majority of, children like the beach and the sea and gain pleasure from these encounters.</p>				

## References

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