

Summary

Community by Nature: An examination of an outdoor learning intervention for young people at risk of exclusion

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Purpose of this Project

The aim of this project was to examine the outdoor nature-based learning intervention run by Community by Nature. Formerly known as Sefton Play Council, Community by Nature (CbN) is a Merseyside-based charity whose aim is to improve the lives of children and adults in the local area by encouraging participation in community learning, play, and forest engagement. Using the outdoors natural environment (i.e., a woodland setting), CbN deliver a unique, alternative learning programme for young people (aged 11-16) who struggle in a formal classroom environment. A consistent team of skilled and experienced staff lead this programme and they seek to build respect and trust through engagement with small, repeatable (yet absorbing) tasks. With some similarities to the UK forest school approach, this programme was aimed at supporting young people who are close to exclusion or who are otherwise disengaged in school.

For 2-4 days each week (between 10am-2pm) young people involved in CbN's intervention take part in a range of practical, challenging activities including woodland survival skills, woodland management, and outdoor woodcraft (such as outdoor-cooking; building fires; coppicing; tree-pruning; use of tools like knives, bows, and saws; shelter-building; building rope-structures, etc.). Previous research has shown that these sort of activities not only teach practical skills but also promote kinaesthetic and sensory learning approaches, as well as the development of pro-social citizenship skills. For example, involvement in the preparation and sharing of a meal at lunchtime is encouraged not just to teach young people how to cook, but also to promote their social development and ability to work with others. Crucially, the programme is delivered with small groups allowing for close supervision, continual support, and nurturing of young people. Young people typically engage in this project for a period of 6-12 months, though some remain involved for longer.

Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) were consulted by CbN to evidence the effectiveness of their intervention specifically for improving young people's social and emotional wellbeing, and reducing their risk of future involvement in anti-social behaviour and criminal activity. Though previous research has indicated that more work needs to be conducted into the effectiveness of nature-based interventions as a solution to anti-social behaviour, anecdotal evidence collected by the CbN team suggests their intervention is effective at improving such outcomes in young people. As a result, CbN have been granted capacity building funding by the Youth Endowment Fund to improve their impact evaluation, establish the potential impact of their programme (including potential benefits to wellbeing, aspirations, and stress), and identify the mechanisms underpinning any beneficial effects. Thus, we at LJMU were contracted as the independent research team to examine the intervention, assisting CbN in unpicking the pathways that lead to change through the use of a mixed-methods approach.

The present summary (continued overleaf) seeks to provide key points regarding methods, findings, and recommendations.

*please contact Kate Jameson, Community by Nature for further specifics on intervention

Methods & Results

Aims & Hypotheses

To examine the CbN intervention, we adopted a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative methods so as to address the following research question:

In what ways does CbN's natural outdoor-based alternative education intervention impact on 1) the social and emotional wellbeing, 2) mental health, and 3) the aspirations of young people at risk of exclusion /criminal activity?

We specifically hypothesised that CbN's intervention would be associated with improvements to each of these three factors (i.e. social and emotional wellbeing; mental health; and aspirations). In addition, we also aimed to:

Establish the critical components and mechanisms underpinning any intervention impacts, and to identify any areas of concern.

Data Collection & Analysis

The first phase of the examination was conducted with eight young people (aged 11-16) from a secondary school in Merseyside, who had previously been identified as at-risk of future exclusion. These young people participated in the intervention two days a week over a five-month period and completed two surveys (one at baseline and one following completion of the intervention) that measured psychological outcomes as well as attitudes towards various pro- and anti-social behaviours. Inferential statistics (t-tests) indicated that young people's goals and aspirations became significantly more positive after participating in the intervention, and their perceived stress levels reduced. Wellbeing and self-regulation scores also increased after receipt of the intervention, although this change did not reach statistical significance.

A sub-sample of these young people (N=3), alongside intervention staff (N=2), school staff (N=1) and previously enrolled students now in their late teens (N=3), later took part in semi-structured interviews in order to identify longer-term perceptions of impact as part of the second phase of the examination. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to analyse interview data, and three themes (with associated sub-themes) were identified: 1) the outdoor intervention as a preferable learning environment (opportunities for novel experiences, building confidence, developing trust and mutual respect); 2) the outdoor intervention as a transformative experience (social development, emotional development, changing lives); and 3) the future of outdoor learning interventions (recommendations for CbN, making outdoor learning even better). These themes indicated benefits to wellbeing, pro-social behaviour, and the young people's prospects over time as they talked of the future, the advantages of being outside, learning practical skills, working as part of a team, and making new friends.

Discussion & Recommendations

The findings of this examination demonstrate that the intervention was considered a viable and acceptable intervention by current students, previous students, and various staff involved in the programme. The results of the two phases showed that CbN's outdoor learning intervention helped reduce stress and boost goals and aspirations, while supporting emotional and social development that may lead to improvements in pro-social behaviour and wellbeing over time. Evidence suggests that the CbN intervention supports vulnerable young people by introducing novel hands-on experiences, providing an alternative learning environment outside of the classroom, and by encouraging more positive, meaningful, and trusting relationships through interactions with staff and other young people. Conversations with previous students in particular demonstrated the long-term positive implications for young people's prospects over time and provided evidence that at-risk individuals were able to turn their lives around as a result of the programme.

Our recommendations for the future of the intervention are summarised below:

- Keep the intervention's focus on students at risk of exclusion, especially those who may not have anyone at home to talk to.
- For students who are struggling in a classroom or similar academic setting, this type of experiential learning offers an important alternative environment where students can learn practical and abstract skills (such as problem solving) that may support employment and further training.
- Ensure that the right staff continue to remain involved. The intervention works in part because of the ability to provide trained staff who can build trust and support the emotional needs of at-risk young people.
- Developing and implementing a mentoring programme will help to involve students for longer and support their transition into adulthood via pathways to employment or further education. Mentorship will also help to give students more say in the sessions and will provide long-term support to further enhance young people's social and emotional development (by providing them with responsibility, secure relationships, and mutual trust and respect).
- There is a need for further examination of long-term outcomes with a larger sample. This will allow us to answer more specific questions relating to the intervention's theory of change.

Conclusions

Overall, we conclude that the intervention shows promise in supporting the various social, emotional, and behavioural needs of young people, especially for those at most risk of exclusion. In the future, the intervention may be improved further through the implementation of our recommendations as well as other initiatives (such as the development of networks & introduction of stable funding streams) outlined in the full report.

Contact

For further information regarding the design and delivery of this intervention, please contact Kate Jameson, Community by Nature. email: kate@communitybynature.org.uk

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