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'Sandplay, Clay and Sticks': Multi-Sensory Research Methods to Explore the Long-Term Mental Health Effects of Childhood Play Experience

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ABSTRACT *In this contribution we discuss the advantages of using multi-sensory methodologies in our study into the long-term mental health effects of different kinds of childhood play space. Working with a small group of young people aged 16–21 years old; we used a multi-method approach including practical workshops where the young people took part in a day of woodland activities and artwork sessions. We argue that use of such practical methodologies is particularly appropriate in research with teenagers and young adults, helping to overcome their self-consciousness and supporting their need to explore and articulate memories, feelings and ideas.*

Introduction

Working in a research context with young people in their late adolescence and early adulthood presents challenges of engagement and co-operation which are often less obvious in other age groups (Valentine, 2003). Young people in their late teen years and early adulthood—in transition from child to adult—create a characteristically demanding dynamic which can test the skills, eventual outcomes (and patience) of the researchers facilitating a research group. Individuals in this age group can be very articulate when feeling assured, but also they can tend to be vulnerable, self-conscious and consequently less prepared to share thoughts and ideas. Furthermore, the young person may wish to be perceived and responded to as a fully fledged adult whilst being susceptible to childish (mis) behaviour, which in turn demands parental (and disciplining) responses from those adults in charge of the group. Thus, the emphasis in the interaction between researcher and the young person, whether individually or in a group is often infused with their need to achieve adulthood and autonomy in the eyes of older adults, but for a variety of reasons they may still be subject to resorting to various challenging behaviours, including exhibiting boredom and lack of interest in the task (see Juckes Maxey, 2004). Within this context, a young participant can find it difficult to engage with or prioritise the agenda of a research project,

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however relevant the topic. Hence, as Alan France (2000) observed, there are enormous benefits in engaging young people actively in 'youth-friendly' approaches where the research design and method recognises and 'speaks the language' of the young people involved. Identifying and responding to such specific needs and challenges through use of appropriate methodology, such as participatory and practical techniques, is essential if the research is to be successful and meaningful for both researchers and the young participants (O'Kane, 1998).

In this piece, we draw on our experience designing and conducting a study, with young people aged 16–21 years of age, into the long-term mental health benefits of childhood play space in natural woodland landscape. We discuss how practical workshop style settings, either outdoors or indoors, can encourage young people to be effectively and enjoyably engaged in the work of a research project, with each individual finding adequate space to explore and share their experience. The study was undertaken in response to the Forestry Commission's initiatives in the North West of England to improve and develop both urban and rural woodlands for recreational use (Jones, 2002; Tabbush and O'Brien, 2002). Woodland has been identified as offering important opportunities for children (and adults) to develop multi-sensory play skills and interaction with wildlife, plants and natural materials (Macnaghten *et al.*, 1998; Ward-Thompson *et al.*, 2004). Over the last two decades young adults in the UK have experienced and grown up through a unique change in the nature and perceived safety of their childhood play spaces (Jones, 1997; Holloway and Valentine, 2000). For children living in urban and rural locales, changes in the place of play have been exacerbated by increased road traffic, rising crime rates and parental fear of crime—rendering many previously safe play-spaces out of bounds (Valentine, 1997; Valentine and McKendrick, 1997). At the same time, there has been a reduction in opportunities for children to play freely in natural and woodland environments as these habitats have become increasingly subject to the pressures of development. Given the growing recognition of the parlous state of the mental health of young people in both rural and urban locales (Kay, 1999; Alexander, 2002; Prasad, 2003), together with existing evidence for the link between natural landscape and psychological health (Parry-Jones, 1990; Thurber and Malinowski 1999; Williams, 1999; Milligan *et al.*, 2004), there is a need to better understand the potential impact of changing play space on young people's mental health.

Relatively few qualitative research projects examine the role of multi-sensory experience in childhood experience and development. This is a significant omission given the need for a deeper understanding of the processes involved in the long-term effects of childhood play on subsequent mental well-being in young adulthood (Philo, 2003; Valentine, 2004). Recognising the specific needs inherent in working with young people our research design drew on innovative, practical methodology previously and successfully used with adults (Bingley, 2003). As in our previous studies, practical workshops were designed to bring together qualitative techniques commonly used in social science research with well-established psychotherapeutic techniques that facilitate access to memories, fantasies and recalled multi-sensory awareness of the past (Totton, 2003). The psychotherapeutic techniques used draw extensively on the theoretical approach of D. W. Winnicott and Object Relations Theory (Winnicott, 1971).

By psychotherapeutic techniques we refer to two areas of psychotherapeutics; first, the interactive techniques of empathy and appropriate intervention which aim to create a 'holding or facilitative environment' (Winnicott, 1971), where a *mutual* and respectful enquiry can take place in a state of trust between people (in this research situation, between researcher and participant) (see also Phillips, 1988; Bollas, 1992). The second area of psychotherapeutics, drawn on in these methodologies, is art therapy and play

therapy techniques. These techniques are used extensively with different age groups as a means to provide different and varied media of expression for multi-sensory and non-verbal experience, memories and ideas. Sandplay, and other forms of art therapy using toys and artists' materials, was originally developed as a free association play medium for children and adults to express inner feelings and meanings through play, art and models, which could be interpreted and explored with a therapist (Winnicott, 1977; Dalley, 1984; Mitchell and Friedman, 1994). Play therapy, in a similar way, uses a wide range of materials with which the child (or adult) can express and make sense of their inner world. However, this techniques differs from art therapy in that the play therapist accompanies the client in their process of play but the emphasis is on free expression and involves very little or no interpretation by the therapist (Axline, 1969; Cattanach, 2003).

There are many advantages to using these kinds of psychotherapeutic techniques when exploring spatial, non-verbal relationships, such as those between space, place and the individual, given that one is working in an expressive, creative, non-verbal medium appropriate to the research enquiry. The empathetic interactive techniques aim to provide a relaxed, non-threatening environment. The art and play therapy aim to provide a creative, non-verbal medium of expression. However, before we go on to describe our project we feel it is important to draw the reader's attention to some inherent limitations of the approach. First, to be both ethical, and we would argue successful, the researcher needs ideally, to be trained in some basic therapeutic skills and have gained experience working in a therapeutic environment. The researcher has to have a clear sense of the differences between a therapeutic space and a research space. Research workshops do not set out to be, nor should they be 'therapy', although research can engender self-awareness and insight, but this is incidental. Second, there can be a disadvantage in using these techniques in terms of time, available space for workshops, and the intensive nature of sessions, all of which are not always appealing to participants, who may have busy lives or who are threatened by such intense, expressive spaces. Therefore, we recognise that there are limitations in using practical methodologies. But, as we explore in the rest of the contribution, we feel these limitations are outweighed by the enormous potential of psychotherapeutic and practical methods when researching geographic, spatial relationships, especially in work with younger age groups.

The Multi-method Research Design using Practical Workshop Sessions

The aim of using the multi-method approach was to illuminate the relationship between the multi-sensory experience of childhood play and the long-term effects of different play spaces on mental health and well-being. Sixteen young people (four young men and 12 young women aged between 16 and 21 years of age) from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds were recruited in mostly rural areas in Cumbria and North Lancashire—regions where the Forestry Commission plans to improve neglected woodland or develop new sites as amenities. Participants were from an ordinary cross-section of the population: we did not select young people with a known history of mental health problems. Ethical approval for the study was given by the Institute of Health Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University, and full written consent given by every participant including parental consent for those less than 18 years old. The range of methods used in the study is summarised in Table 1. Each participant was invited to take part in all these three phases of the study, although not everyone who took part in the initial focus group or final individual interview either chose or were able to join the workshop. Permission was sought from all participants before any visual or audio

Table 1. Summary of methods and data collection

Phase One: Initial focus groups/individual interviews
Phase Two: One-day workshop (two separate workshops ran over one weekend in order to ensure small group size and roughly similar age range)
Workshop activities day involved:
(i) Woodland walk
(ii) Coppice craft session
(iii) Focus group feedback session
(iv) Sandplay session
(v) 3D Modelling session
Phase Three: Follow up one month after workshop with in-depth individual interview

recordings. Participants were free to request recordings be stopped or sections taken off record at any point in the workshop. This aspect was considered particularly important because of the sensitivities around visual records.

Our methodology included an initial hour-long focus group discussion. The discussion group was designed, firstly, to explore the participants' general perceptions of the current state of mental health and well-being in their age group; secondly, for participants to describe their current recreation patterns and their recalled childhood memories of place and play. However, the central element of our study design was the one-day practical workshop to which all the participants were invited to attend following the discussion groups. As far as possible, we placed the participants into one of two groups according to age (one group with predominantly 16–18 year olds and the other 19–21 year olds). This, we felt, would accommodate the different needs of older and younger ages whilst ensuring workshops were relatively small, easily managed groups. Working in small groups was considered important given that the nature of the day's activities required time and space for participants to relax and to focus on the tasks. The workshop day was planned around two woodland-based activities taking place during the morning;

- Supervised walk in small groups for half an hour in local woods in North Lancashire. Each group included between three to five participants, one of the two trained coppicers, a researcher and one or two research support workers whose task throughout all the workshop sessions was to record observations in the form of audio field notes, video and photographs.
- Practical greenwood polelatheing and woodcarving session led by three experienced, skilled coppice craftspeople, used to working with people of all ages and abilities.

In the afternoon we organised two indoor artwork sessions based on specialist, well-established, psychotherapeutic methodology (including art and play therapy) to facilitate the group to access embodied memory, fantasy and imagination about childhood play space and woodland;

- a sandplay session followed by a session of 3D model making;
- individual and group feedback of associations, memories, ideas (subjective sense of place).

Approximately one month after the workshop each participant was individually interviewed for between 30 and 45 minutes as a follow-up session. This interview provided an opportunity for participants to re-examine memories and experiences stimulated by the workshop sessions. All participants had the opportunity to view photographs of the

workshop activities, in particular of their own work, and to review the outcomes and ideas that emerged. We also provided feedback over the next two months in the form of a 10–15-minute edited video clip of each workshop day, which was made available to every participant.

The visual (video and photographic) recording of sessions is an important aspect of the data collection during practical workshops as the emphasis is on observing non-verbal interactions in woodland and the making of 3D artefacts and models. However, recording does need to be sensitive and unobtrusive; and the people recording will be checking that participants are comfortable with the process, and will always stop if requested. This aspect was found most relevant to the 16–18-year-old age group, and less so to the older members of the group. During the workshop very few participants reported that they were aware of the recording, and when awareness or discomfort was reported it was only during artwork sessions; even then awareness of recording was considerably lessened when in deep concentration. They did not report any awareness of recording during the walk or craftwork sessions. Visual data is analysed using visual 'frame by frame' analysis of body language and action in relation to verbal feedback and reflection by participants; this follows analytic techniques drawn from moving image analysis (Rose, 2000); content analysis (Bauer, 2000); and psychoanalytic method (see Mitchell and Friedman, 1994; Bingley, 2002). The video footage was edited into two 10–15-minute videos: one of each workshop day. We also edited a total of 62 video stills and photographs. Both these video formats and the photographs were used successfully by the largest school group in their 'year end', National Curriculum 'creative activity projects', which from their perspective added to the sense of engagement and relevance of the research project to those members of the group.

The Practice: From Walking to Greenwood Lathes—From Sandplay to Sticks

As we describe above each workshop session was designed to facilitate multi-sensory awareness and reflection about firstly, childhood and present day experience of natural woodland environments and secondly, the resources such places represent for promoting and maintaining mental health and well-being. The workshop day began with a walk, lasting approximately half an hour, through local, partially coppiced, mixed woodland. Everyone was encouraged to observe and reflect upon the woodland environment, and focus on any aspects, which they felt had meaning for them.

The walk proved a good introductory activity designed as a gentle but defined physical and mental engagement to the research topic. The walk was also an effective 'icebreaker' amongst participants in the group who did not know each other. In spite of an apparent lack of concentration from some of the group, the feedback was unequivocally positive from all participants. We found that even those in the group who had chatted together without taking obvious notice of the woodland around them, demonstrated later that they had absorbed and observed certain elements that caught their imagination or reminded them of childhood play. Both workshop days were sunny. Most of the group pointed out that had the weather been wet and cold they would had probably not attended at all. Particularly the group on Sunday surprised themselves by finding a brisk walk at 9.30 on a sunny though frosty December morning to be pleasant and invigorating (Figure 1[1]).

With one or two exceptions, few in the group knew very much about woodland management, wildlife or history, even those young people who had always lived locally and visited these woods. They talked with interest to the coppice workers about the wood;

Figure 1. Woodland walk.

asking about its history and the work involved, together with issues about wildlife, birds and trees. A few participants picked up small pieces of loose-lying, non-living woodland material (leaf, twig, fir cone, bark), that they felt some affinity or association with, and could use as an adjunct to the artwork and discussion sessions in the afternoon. In this way the walk helped to set an engagement with the research into the rest of the day. One 17-year-old girl, felt she had discovered a new world in the woods that she had never realised existed before, having only gone on mountain fell-walks as a child and teenager.

> I really loved [the woodland walk] because it really did remind me of being a child again, even though I'd never been in a wood as a child really. It was just like everything you saw was so exciting and everything was completely different. So I did feel like a child again in that respect. (Feedback about the walk)

Several other young people, including the 17-year-old girl in the quote below, commented that, having gradually lessened the amount of time spent in woodland in their teen years, they could now imagine going for walks in woods again.

> I liked the walk. I forget how good it is to walk. My dad used to make me walk every Sunday or something. Ahh! I used to hate it. But ... I do enjoy it, it's really nice. It's nice looking out like for certain things, different things in nature. (Feedback about the walk)

We observed different degrees of openness, compliance and interest to the walk, depending on a young person's previous experience and their consequent range of sometimes quite complex reactions to natural landscape. As Thomson and Philo (2004) note, children of all ages develop a 'highly differentiated local geography of permissions and sanctions', which determine their 'territories' of play, and are variable according to age, gender, class and ethnicity. In terms of the research design, the walk as an introduction to the workshop was important for several reasons, all of which link into the concept of creating a framework of safe territory, within which the young participant can explore other (less usual) territories and perceptions of a variably known or less known space.

By asking the group to take a supervised walk in the woods, we gave adult sanction to an activity that would be out of bounds for many participants to do alone, even in this age group, either because they, or their parents and themselves, have decided that woodland is dangerous territory (Burgess, 1996). We provided protection: the young participants were then free to simply walk and experience woodland. As we see in the quote above,

the young woman remarks that she 'forgets how good it is to walk': a reflection on a negative effect of staying within habitual (safe) geographic territories, that for her has resulted in a 'forgetting' of the potentially beneficial experience in taking a woodland walk. Participants were thus able to not only engage at a multi-sensory level with the experience of walking in woodland but by doing so they accessed memories and ideas with greater ease than, for example in the focus group discussion. Thus, the simple activity of walking seemed for many participants to have an the effect of encouraging them to shift out of their habitual 'frame' of activity, creating a space for each individual to perceive and reflect on this woodland area from different angles, drawing on memories of childhood play and adventure, challenging or re-charging their fantasies of woodland dangers, and also re-awakening mythic fantasy of woods and forests (Schama, 1995).

The participants then took part in a two-hour, traditional coppice craft session, at a nearby woodland site, with the option to learn some greenwood crafts. This aspect of the research design was specifically chosen as a means to encourage a focused engagement in multi-sensory physical and mental activity. Previous use of these techniques—in landscape perception and mental health research—with adult and older adult age groups had not included such active use of traditional craftwork (see Bingley, 2003). However, by drawing on outdoor activities, many of which are well-established in younger children's education and recreation (see Tranter and Malone, 2004), we hoped to explore how effectively these activities can be used in research to engage with and 'speak the language' of this age group.

The craftwork session was highly physical and by its very nature demanded complete attention (or risk cut fingers or toes). Participants were taught how to quarter logs, use a shave horse to prepare wood for a greenwood lathe, and then make a 'rolling pin' on a polelathe (Figure 2).

They could also try wood-carving. All these crafts were taught and supervised by three experienced coppice workers, one of whom was an environmental artist who regularly worked on projects with primary and secondary schools. Only one or two of the participants had any previous wood craft experience. Most commented that they had imagined the woodland craft session would entail working with large machinery, and were surprised that traditional crafts with hand-made greenwood lathes and shave horses were still practised. The feedback below by two of the 17-year-old girls, from the follow-up interview, echoed the general feeling about the activity throughout our participant group:

> The best bit was the wood carving bit. I loved that. That was ace. . . . I loved it. I really want to do it at school now, but the person who did it has left. (Feedback about the coppice craft session)

Figure 2. Preparing logs for polelatheing.

> It was fun doing it though... it was just something really different that I've never done before and it was fun. (Feedback about the coppice craft session)

Three participants were sufficiently inspired by the polelathing and wood carving to ask for further information about the short courses regularly offered by the coppicers who worked with our group. One young man with some physical disabilities found the craft session less enjoyable than other participants, as he felt he could not achieve as much as he would have liked in the time available. Nevertheless, everyone showed a marked and high level of concentration and engagement throughout the session; focusing on learning the basic skills and completing the tasks. There was a clear sense of achievement and delight by the end of the morning.

Designing the research fieldwork to include a physically and mentally demanding activity, based on an important aspect of woodland proved to have the greatest impact on the participants. These woodland activities were not only enjoyable but also challenged individuals to shift out of habitual frames. But most particularly the greenwood skills created an opportunity to be, for moments at a time, intensely focused on the multisensory interaction between the individual and the wood as an element. The fact that the activity demanded moments of a high degree of fine-tuned concentration interacting with wood, a phenomenon that encouraged a shift into focused engagement and (hopefully) a deeper reflection on the relationship between woodland and the individual, was one reason why we choose to include this session in the research workshop (Figure 3).

Only two members of the group had any previous experience of working with a natural material in this skill-based way, so for the majority of the group this session presented a completely new perspective on woodland. The opportunity to do something new and different encouraged the group to be fully and enjoyably engaged and this was another important reason to include the craft session.

After lunch, we conducted two focus groups in the village hall, with the participants. Here, they were encouraged to reflect on their woodland and coppice craft experiences, as well as any memories that had arisen from the morning's activities. For some participants this discussion session proved to be marginally harder than the practical sessions, in that some (though not all) individuals felt less comfortable sharing ideas and keeping their attention focused in a verbally orientated session. The discussion was useful in that it provided an opportunity to re-group and share ideas with the researchers, as well as each other, before the indoor practical sessions. The discussion posed few obvious problems for some of the more confident and articulate young people, particularly those in the older group, and the conversation was lively and informative. However, the discomfort observed for some young people in a verbal setting

Figure 3. Polelatheing: working with the wood.

highlighted the value of using practical methodologies thus providing different non-verbal spaces for exploration and expression.

The day concluded with two indoor artwork sessions. The first session lasted approximately 45 minutes. Participants were asked to engage in sandplay. This is a technique whereby participants are given dry or wet sand with which to 'play'. Some of the time they are asked to work with their eyes closed, in order to focus on the non-visual, especially tactile, sensory experience. After about 10–15 minutes small 'tools' such as plastic containers or scoops are introduced. As Figure 4 records, people often model sandcastles, but many other structures are also created and some people preferred to just handle the sand in unstructured free-form ways.

The purpose of the exercise is two-fold. Firstly, sandplay heightens non-visual sensory awareness in a relaxed way; which tends to enable people to re-connect with play space. Secondly, the process also stimulates childhood memories, levels of awareness and ideas, all of which may have continued to retain varying influences over our active thoughts and reactions, whilst remaining at the fringes of everyday consciousness (Kalff, 1980; Ryce Menuhin, 1992). Thus, the participants are able to fully engage at a sensory, tactile level, and also creatively reconnect with childhood modes of awareness, before they are introduced to the key session in the workshop, in which they model their impressions and connections with woodland.

When designing the workshop we had wondered if this age group would find the idea and practice of sandplay *too* childish and possibly resist or refuse getting involved. In fact as the feedback below, from two of the teenagers, reveals they found a relaxed ease with this kind of play recalling childhood:

> It was like kind of going back to Primary School, when we used to play in the sand and have a water tray and stuff and things and just play and do what you want really.

> It was really relaxing with the dry sand because it nearly put me to sleep ... Like a kind of form of meditation sort of thing ... but it was fun.

Certainly, the sandplay session facilitated participants to connect with a sense of childhood through tactile, (not necessarily artistic) expression and this encouraged an easy transition into the last session of the day.

The second of the artwork sessions, was key to informing our research questions. All participants were invited to create 3D models to represent some aspect of their experience of woodland. They could choose to reflect a childhood memory stimulated by the woodland activities; depict some imaginary place they associated with woodland; or express ideas and concepts they had about woods in general. A vast range of natural and artists' materials were provided, from logs, small branches, twigs, birch bark and dead leaves

Figure 4. Sandplay: sandcastles.

to textiles, thread, wool, beads and buttons, to metals, plastics and cardboard, plasticine, sand and clay. People could use a range of small hand tools and adhesives. Support was on hand from an expert coppicer using larger hand tools, such as drills and saws. The aim was to offer the participants a wide range of materials to choose from, which they felt would best express their experience and perception of woodland landscape. The technique is drawn from art and play therapy. The aim of these play-based therapies as described by Axline (1969) and Cattanach (2003) is to provide a wide range of materials through which the individual is free to express their inner ideas, thoughts and feelings.

The 3D models proved highly thought-provoking and stimulated expression of a wide range of aspects of childhood play experience, ideas and fantasies about woodlands and natural landscape. Without exception every participant found they were able to overcome their self-consciousness in front of their small group and choose a selection of materials to create a unique, expression of one or more elements of their ideas or experience (Figure 5).

For example, one teenager found vivid expression for her views on environmental damage by people building walls around woodland:

> That's like representing like pain, like the blood sort of thing . . . So building walls is hurting Nature, you know.

Another young man, who had experience of living in woodland as a child having learned some coppice skills in childhood, spent the modelling session hand sewing an intricate patchwork to describe his perception of the diversity of woodland (Figure 6).

He found this aspect of woodland especially appealing and important, as he describes in this conversation with one of the coppicers during the 3D modelling session.

> R: . . . the fact that entire communities survive off of woods and all sorts of different people affect them and depending on who works there depends on what the wood looks like. Whether it's being coppiced or whether it's being used for charcoal or whatever or how it's managed and all those sort of things. So I just thought I'd go for the diversity, trying all these different . . . All the influences.
> Coppicer: So you were aware of being in a managed environment rather than just a natural?
> R: Well, not always managed, but influenced. Yeah, so, like woodland environment is defined by how people use them.

Figure 5. D model of 'hurting Nature', completed with red ribbons as 'blood' and bolts as 'pain'.

Figure 6. Patchwork of woodland diversity.

Another young woman expressed her disquiet and anxiety about woodland through a model of woodland monster (Figure 7).

She had also grown up in a house set in woodland but had never felt confident to play alone, neither had she been taught about woodland skills or wildlife; a perception that her model clearly demonstrated:

> R: . . . first of all it was meant to be the ruin that we saw in the woods. But then, I kind of put like two eyes on it, and I then I thought it does look like a monster, so then I made it look a little bit more scary (laughs).
> I: Did you find the woods scary?
> R: No. I would if I was by myself, I probably would. But, erm, not when I was with like my friends.

Both sandplay and 3D modelling sessions had been planned to conclude with individual feedback and a chance to discuss the exercises. In the event we found that participants were more comfortable discussing their models individually and informally, once they were in the process of completion. Recognising that by the end of the 3D modelling session participants were tired and few were interested in feeding back to the group, we made a decision not to push anyone to talk about their model at the end of the day, relying instead on the more relaxed, informal chat about their models in progress during the session. Nevertheless, as the quotes from the individual interviews recorded at a later date suggest, participants were very willing to share and reflect on their

Figure 7. Woodland 'monster'.

experience, their ideas and thoughts about the models when not inhibited by feeling self-conscious in front of other members of the group.

Overall, the research design was very effective in facilitating these young people to share their experience and reflections around the research questions. As a method the use of practical workshops proved enjoyable and stimulating, certainly for this group, a more 'youth friendly' and appropriate research space than just taking part in a verbally orientated focus group or interview. As one school group reported:

> When we were first told about the day we weren't very enthusiastic, but we decided to volunteer. However we all had a brilliant day. We got to do activities that we normally don't get a chance to do. The day was very relaxed, and we didn't have to worry about anything. All the activities encouraged us to use our imagination, and they took us back to our childhood, when we were worry free. (Written by one of the participants in their School Newsletter reporting on the 'Woodlands Project')

When the individual interviews were conducted about one month after the workshop everyone agreed to be interviewed. Several participants were happier interviewed in their own homes, others preferred to meet with the researcher in school or in their place of study or community work. During the interviews we looked at the photographs of the workshop including any record of the participant's own and 3D models, which helped re-affirm and recall the workshop day. In almost every case the interviews were relaxed and friendly. Participants were very open and willing to share their thoughts, ideas, memories and feelings. There was a sense of having shared a positive experience with the researcher and that taking part in the research had proved unexpectedly interesting. The general atmosphere was completely different from the initial focus group, which had been conducted in a school setting with a teacher present, with many of the participants who had taken part too self-conscious and to engage very freely with the researchers in discussion. We acknowledge that the nature of initial research interviews is a little more stilted and self-conscious than subsequent follow-ups. But follow-up interviews can be equally difficult if the participant has not enjoyed the intervention, or there has not been sufficient attention paid to developing a positive empathetic interaction between participant and researcher. From our experience in previous research work, where research methods include either a high degree of practical interaction or positive verbal interaction, empathy and trust, follow-up interviews tend to be more engaged and ideas and thoughts flow more freely. We conclude that the follow-up interviews in this study demonstrated a good degree of trust had been engendered and this stage of the research data collection was greatly enhanced by the workshop experience. For example, we observed participants engaged with the research topic more fully and with more energy during the workshop than in the quite low key, constrained discussions in the initial focus group. For example, following the multi-sensory, practical engagement with woodland, and the craft activities the young people started to express a surprising (to them) vivid interest about woodland, its history, management and their own memories of woodland. The sessions with sandplay and artwork also stimulated a lot of ideas, memories, and associations which they could then discuss with each other and with us during the sessions. As the participants reflected later 'the activities encouraged us to use our imagination'; habitual patterns were creatively challenged. We suggest practical methodologies encourage the 'use of imagination' through the opportunities, space and time provided for multi-sensory engagement with experience and expression.

Conclusion

Incorporating practical workshop sessions into a research design for this teenage and young adult age group proved highly successful, encouraging and engaging participants in the research and supporting them to explore and consider research questions. This methodology presents a practical opportunity for participants to gain new insights, ideas, and skills. In part, the positive responses arose because workshop sessions, both coppice craft sessions and the artwork, were unanimously described as unexpectedly enjoyable, creative and pleasantly challenging, and young participants found there were positive gains in taking part in the research.

The age group we worked with are less tolerant of the possibility of being bored or disinterested when taking part in activities. They demand a degree of recognition as young adults with a right to exercise their autonomy, but at the same time may need some encouragement to try an activity that does not seem immediately relevant or stimulating. From this perspective working with craft skills and with multi-sensory techniques of sandplay and 3D modelling, proved highly effective in engaging the young participants, supporting them to focus on a particular aspect of their experience. Specifically, these techniques facilitated access to embodied memories and ideas. The style of the workshop sessions also encourages active contributions in participants who may be less articulate in focus group discussions and interviews.

Exploring relationships and perceptions between individuals and the natural world in a research setting need not be a numbingly boring experience. Encouraging a full and enjoyable mutual exploration in research would seem to be more fulfilling and productive for participants and researchers alike whatever the age. Teenage and young adult groups, however, by encouraging researchers to design more active and participatory methods have much to teach us in continuing to develop innovative research methodology.

Notes

1. All photographs are included with the permission of participants, however, to respect confidentiality we have avoided images that would allow participants to be identified. The purpose of photographs is to illustrate the activity, artefact or model.

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