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The World of Friendship Forest

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Abstract

The World of Friendship Forest project is located in the Finnish town of Salo, where the School of Uskela, Anjalankatu Unit has implemented various smaller projects in their nearby forest to engage students in meaningful and interesting activities which provide benefit for the whole town community. The school provides special education for grades 1 to 9 (ages 7 to 16) and the European Project Open Schools for Open Societies (OSOS) projects so far have involved 60 students in total. The students of the school have extensive learning difficulties and behavioural and emotional troubles. Most students have a low socioeconomic status. Majority of the students also have low self-esteem. From the point of view of students' overall development, it has been important to provide them with socially significant activities and to provide students with experiences of success and sense of togetherness. The main partners in the project have been the sports office of the town and schools of Tupuri and Uskela, Kavilankatu unit and the University of Turku.

Keywords: Activities in nature; Forest school; Empowerment; Nature trail; Co-operation; Learning by doing

Introduction

The roots of this OSOS project lie in 2012 when the forest club of our school got permission from the city to build a nature trail. The forest club began to make a nature trail and bridges over the ditches. We have made firewood on the lean-to of the area and built a grill there. We have been responsible for cleaning the lean-to. In winter, we have kept the nature trail clear of snow. The school has made birdhouses in the area on crafts lessons. We have installed the birdhouses in trees and taken care of their cleaning and repair. We have made several excursions to the forest,

for example, to pick berries and mushrooms to be used on home economics lessons. The OSOS project was built based on these experiences.

Figure 1: Building bridges

In addition to this official OSOS-project, the school has been very active and open to society in many ways similar to the OSOS-spirit. Twice a year the school organizes a scrap-metal collection event in the Tupuri area (where our friendship forest is also located). Metal collection generates income for the school's student body, which finances for example student class field trips. At the same time, students learn to actively participate in recycling. We have also collaborated with the waste management centers in the Salo area, which has allowed our students to become familiar with waste disposal stations. During the visits to the stations, the students have actually seen how much waste is generated and how recycling works. Our students are also involved in organizing Be Active PE days for other schools. Last year our school's eighth-grade students arranged various sports events for several different schools in the Salo area. In the last two or three years, our school pupils and adults have also been involved in the development of the ICT Learning Center. The project was named IoT: Campus for Kids, in which several ICT companies from the Salo area took part alongside the schools. Together we organized an event for the schools utilizing the latest technology. The event was held on the premises of the former Nokia / Microsoft. The event program included introductions to game programming, robotics, sensors, possibilities of 3D printing, digital-assisted music study and VR-/AR-technology. Unfortunately, the project did not manage to form a permanent ICT learning center due to financial challenges. However, a similar center is planned for Salo in the near future and we are involved in the development.

Concept

The intention was that development work in the forest would benefit not only the school but also other users. At the same time, the city was planning a disc golf course in the area. The city was aware of our active use of the forest and asked us to participate in the construction of the disc golf course. At the same time, we started to create a virtual nature trail for use by schools and municipalities in the area. From the planned projects, the lean-to, disc golf, nature trail, trail run, exercise equipment and mountain bike trail would all be available for free use by the community.

Figure 2: Disc golf platform built by the students

The key idea in all activities is learning by doing. Through meaningful projects, students also learn the contents of several different subjects. For instance when creating and installing birdhouses, one must learn about the requirements of the different bird species for the ecosystem, territory, points of compass (excessive heat of the sun), the installation height and the protection from predators, the endurance of the attachment cord and finally also take into consideration growth of the tree.

During the construction of the disc golf course, we have practiced estimating the amount of timber needed, considered the sensible length of timber from the point of view of purchasing and learned to calculate the weight of timber. We have also learned about the different torque requirements of screw types, support requirements of wooden structures, crosswise measuring and building a structure with the help of a level. Along with all this, students have done some metalwork and put together a wood chipper complete with an axle and a drawbar. We have

also studied the different layers of a forest and used a USB-microscope to study small organisms found in the environment. The premise is that nature is best studied by being in nature and not by reading a book, which is already difficult for our students.

[Figure 3: Students using the wood chipper]

One final goal of the project was to give the students experiences of success and meaningfulness while benefiting the whole Salo and Tupuri communities by developing the nearby forest area. The aim was to positively influence the students' self-image and self-esteem by giving them an opportunity to create something for their surrounding society. During the project, the camaraderie between students increases and they form deeper relationships with the adults of the school. During different seasons, the forest offers unforgettable experiences such as swimming, gathering and preparing food, and camping outside.

Implementation

With city sports office, the students have constructed a disc golf course (throwing platforms, guide signs, clearing of the terrain and chipping of sticks), installed picnic tables, and built new bridges in the area. With the school of Tupuri, we have developed a virtual nature trail which is in a design and testing phase. With the Uskela School - Kavilankatu unit, we have organized joint excursions to the area with disc golf and grilling with friendship class students.

[Figure 4: Disc golf basket and a quad bike used for material transportation]

The progress of the project within the school has been quite transparent, including active communication with the city sports officials. The project progress and work stages have been widely communicated in social media (Facebook). The largest newspaper in the area, Salon Seudun Sanomat, has reported on the completion of the disc golf course and forest clubs. The same newspaper will include a wider news story about our school's OSOS project during the spring.

The aim is to work with the Department of Teacher Education of the Turku University so that teacher students will implement lessons in the forest environment. We also offer this to other schools in the area. During this spring, we will collaborate with the University of Turku to pilot this concept with a slightly smaller group of four to five primary schools. During the project day, we will organize a variety of group work sessions related to different subjects. The forest area offers opportunities for different kinds of scientific experiments such as water quality measurements.

To help increase the usage of the forest area, the school has just acquired new bicycles for the use of students and teacher by collaborating with a business partner. Next, we plan to create several geocaches near the nature trail (Geocaching is orienteering with the help of GPS-technology combined with the thrill of treasure hunting). Through the work, the variety of activities available at the location will increase.

Conclusions

The students feel that the days spent in the forest area during the project have been meaningful. Many of the students have proudly presented their work on the disc gold course at home to their parents and relatives. The students are excited to go to the forest regardless of whether it is for developing the local area, for informal learning activities or just for general leisure-time during a collaboration event. Some students even ask regularly about when the next forest day will be. When students have an opportunity to experiences such meaning, achievement and feel pride, the project has been a success.

Overnight excursions to the area have also been organized. A year ago Jorma, one of the teachers, took a group of youngsters to the forest for a week. The first three days in the forest were spent during the daylight hours and the last two in their entirety. It was below zero degrees Celsius outside, but a stove kept the tent warm and cozy for sleeping. The students chosen for the week were the ones who had caused the most trouble at school. The time in the forest offered many chances to talk about considering other peoples' feelings and discuss how to work better in a group. The informal and casual interactions during the week were easier, more manageable and more efficient for the students than the traditional methods used during school days. After the week, behavior of said students improved significantly for a long time.

Figure 5: Overnight camping at a field close to the forest

Our school unit is the only school in Salo where all students have special needs. This creates unnecessary stereotypical prejudices in some people about our students and their ability to perform in the society. Through visible social outcomes such as the OSOS-project, we have managed to break these stereotypical stigmas placed on the students. Our students are continually being seen in a more positive light and the idea that every individual is important is taking hold. It is all just about how the students are regarded and directed. There are many ways to learn and here at Anjalankatu we to try offer each student a chance to improve.

It can be considered a measure of our successful work with the students that almost all of them move on to higher secondary education. In practice, most of our students will move on to vocational studies, which means that our practical approach to learning serves them well in the coming educational studies. Only very few of the students drop out during the higher secondary education. In this respect, our school is comparable with other schools despite the fact that our starting point is significantly more challenging.