



The Breeze Forest School Project

**The Breeze Project 2018-21
Evaluation Report,
Executive Summary**

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Contents

Executive summary	4	Recommendations	15
The Breeze Project and Scotswood Garden	5	Recommendations for schools	15
Evaluation design	5	Recommendations for research	15
School B – Northgate School	6		
Northgate Theory of Change	7		
Impacts across the Breeze Project	10		
Enjoyment and engagement	11		
Improved relationships, social and communication skills	11		
Connection to nature and wellbeing	11		
Behaviour and emotional regulation	11		
Sense of self	12		
Engagement in learning within the classroom	12		
Impacts within the home environment	13		
Divergent outcomes	13		



Executive summary

This report details three years of co-produced research between Newcastle University, Scotswood Garden and four schools in the North East of England between September 2018 and July 2021. The research evaluated the impact of the Breeze Project, which uses a Forest School (FS) approach to work with schools to support the needs of children and young people (CYP) aged 5 to 16 years with social and emotional difficulties.

Through a theory of change methodology schools have articulated their rationale for engaging in the project and anticipated steps of change leading to outcomes and we have heard from CYP, parents and carers, school staff, FS practitioners, as well as research observations and school documentation, evidencing the many and varied impacts of the project (for full details see main report).

Researching during the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated interruptions and adaptations to the original design of the project but this has allowed us to compare impact across a number of models; benefits have been seen across all groups but a longer-term approach of regular sessions has been shown to maximise impact (see case studies Schools C and D for comparisons of Breeze models) and the greatest impact seen on classroom and school learning where CYP took part in Breeze for a full school day weekly for between one and two and a half school years (see School A).



The Breeze Project and Scotswood Garden

Scotswood Garden is an award winning independent charity in the North East of England. It is located in one of the most deprived neighbourhoods in the UK, classified in the highest 10% for income, education, skills and training, health and crime deprivation (DCLG, 2019). The 2.5 acre garden was established in 1995 and today provides woodlands, ponds, heritage orchards, fruit and vegetable gardens, wildflower meadows, bee hives and attracts a range of wildlife including small mammals, birds, insects, fish and amphibians, including the rare Great-crested Newt, in the heart of the city. The garden offers a range of community projects and services including open days, a volunteering scheme, older people's services, FS training and a range of education and youth work.

The Breeze Project was conceptualised by Harriet Menter, the Education Manager at Scotswood Garden, in response to a growing local need for services to support CYP with mental health and wellbeing needs. The project was designed to work in collaboration with local schools, identifying small groups (5-12) of CYP experiencing social and emotional difficulties who attended Breeze weekly over a school year. It was intended that in the first year of Breeze the FS practitioner from Scotswood Garden would begin by planning, delivering and reviewing sessions in collaboration with school staff and that concurrently two members of school staff would complete the FS training (one at Level 1 and a second at Level 3). By the end of the school year, schools would take over the delivery of the project with Scotswood Garden providing distanced support whilst also supporting a new school to get started the next year. In reality some staffing changes and unforeseen circumstances, including the Covid-19 pandemic, meant that there were variations in what happened in each school (see main report).

Evaluation design

The evaluation was designed to work in co-production with Scotswood Garden and the participating schools to understand and document their experiences, to collect evidence of impact and to use the research findings to inform the delivery of the project as it progressed. Regular meetings with Scotswood Garden and school staff, alongside the researcher attending and observing Breeze sessions, meant that pre-pandemic research observations frequently fed into weekly evaluation and planning of sessions. This together with termly Breeze Advisory Group meetings meant that the research, alongside the knowledge and experiences of the schools, Scotswood Garden and the advisory team, informed the project as it developed.

The evaluation used a theory of change methodology to articulate the anticipated pathways to impact for each school, drawing upon practice, research and theoretical knowledge and through detailing individual steps of change and how each step may lead to future steps. Once a theory of change is constructed, data is identified that may confirm or refute an individual step of change; data may be quantitative and/or qualitative and one individual step may have a number of identified data sources. Theory of change further allows us to track change as it happens, rather than waiting for long-term goals that can take many years (Dyson and Todd, 2010; Laing and Todd, 2015).



A theory of change was developed through in-depth interviews with each participating school and Scotswood Garden at the start of each school's involvement in Breeze; as these theories were formed through shared conversations, experiences and knowledge, there are similarities between each school's theoretical model. The theories of change were revisited over the project to assess whether or not change was happening as anticipated and where new knowledge suggested adaptations to the model these were made on a school basis. The focus in theory of change is to clearly articulate and evidence how change happens over time. Each school's model can be seen within the case studies.

Data collection was decided in collaboration, with the schools, Scotswood Garden and the researcher all participating in collecting data. It was important that all participants in the project felt comfortable and able to play an active part in the research and further that the research did not place an unnecessary burden on the project or participants. With these parameters in mind, individual data collection plans were developed for each school and adaptations made where necessary following the pandemic (March 2020 onwards). Wherever possible multiple sources of data were identified for individual steps of change: being able to triangulate data allows us to examine the likelihood of an action from a number of perspectives and gives confidence in findings. This is particularly important when looking to evidence outcomes that are not easily measured, for example whether children develop positive self-narratives can be assessed by examining testimony from children, school and FS staff, parents/carers and researcher observations. An abbreviated version of case study B is given below as an example:

School B – Northgate School

Northgate is a secondary specialist school for young people (YP) who are unable to attend mainstream provision due to social, emotional and mental health difficulties; many have a history of poor school attendance and/or have been school refusers and placements vary from a few weeks or months to long-term with a high number of in-year transfers.

The research focused on six young people who took part in weekly FS sessions for a minimum of nine months (equivalent to one full school year) between September 2019 and July 2021.

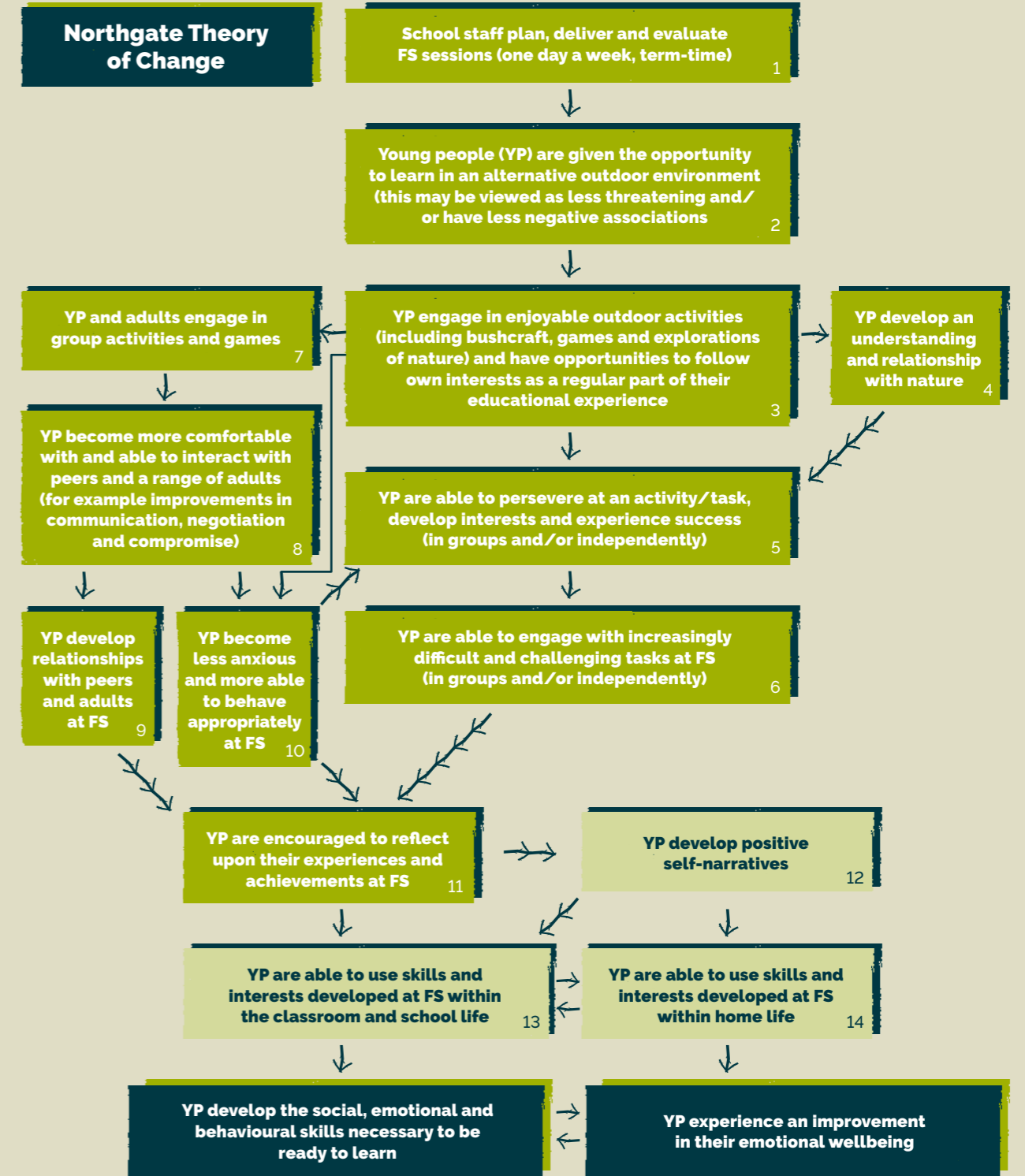
The assessed theory of change below shows the progress made over the project with substantial evidence to support the majority of the steps of change and the remaining steps judged to be partly evidenced.

Figure 4, overleaf:
Northgate theory of change
Assessed July 2021

Key:

- ▲ Substantial evidence to support
- △ Partly evidenced: evidence to support but either incomplete at this stage or substantially evidenced for particular YP only
- ▲ Not evidenced in this period but no evidence to refute
- ▲ Evidence to refute step of change

Examples of data for each step of change can be seen in Appendix 3 of the main report.



Each of the steps of change are discussed in the main report but below we can see examples of how steps feed into each other over time and can also respond to the changing context and challenges the YP are experiencing:



Step 2

Northgate recognised FS as an important opportunity to support students' wellbeing and development and during the pandemic as part of their recovery curriculum in supporting the YP to re-connect socially and develop relationships with peers and staff:

"The central feature of the Enrichment programme in Key Stage 3 is the school's involvement in a forest school project ... The sessions are designed to develop confidence and resilience through a hands-on learning experience in a woodland or natural setting." – School curriculum documentation

Many of our young people haven't left the house throughout lockdowns so it's a readjustment period for them, especially with that social aspect."
– School, January 2021

There was a commitment to providing the YP with this regular experience in an alternative outdoor environment despite the extremely challenging context of the pandemic with the school developing risk assessments including measures such as providing each young person with their own backpack of resources and developing protocols for shared equipment to enable sessions to restart when schools reopened. The benefits were recognised by school staff and YP:

"Outside it's more relaxed and you have that space, it's nice to be able to talk to them and they can open up more if others aren't too close ... they might ask for help with something when they wouldn't usually in the classroom." – School, Jan 2021

"In a classroom it's full of tension but out here it's really calming." – YP, June 2021

Step 3

There was a commitment to supporting the YP to engage with outdoor activities that they found enjoyable and to support individual interests and choices within the group.

"They often take on different roles within the group according to their interests and abilities, so one might be the chef and another lead on building structures." – School, Jan 2021

Parents and carers have commented on how much their children have enjoyed and benefited from FS:

He absolutely loved it, loved every minute, he was on a high when he came in." – Parent/Carer Feb 2020

"Luke thoroughly enjoyed forest school especially whittling and being outdoors. He enjoyed making fire, building dens, navigating with a compass and using a knife in woodwork, as well as cooking outdoors." – Parent/carer Feb 2020

YP valued the learner-centred approach and time away from curriculum and attainment focused constraints: **"I like it because you can choose and there's quite a lot of choices (YP, July 2021); In school it's all about work but here we have free time."** – YP, June 2021

Luke thoroughly enjoyed forest school especially whittling and being outdoors."
– Parent/Carer, Feb 2020

Step 4

There was further evidence of YP developing an understanding and connection with nature; some of the YP were initially reluctant about the outdoors, some had had very little experience of the outdoors and others had concerns about mud and insects but very soon all the YP became comfortable within the environment and showed an interest in nature:

"A crow joins the group and the YP discuss what it might be doing and thinking, they call him Tommy, 'he's here for his lunch, he wants your lunch', 'here comes Tommy again, I wonder what he's doing', 'he's after your spot, this is his patch', 'he wants to join in!'" – Researcher observation, June 2021

"I started noticing the tiny details that other people take for granted and how nice it looks." – YP talking about taking photographs of nature, July 2021

Some YP relished the space the woodland afforded to run around, some developed their knowledge of trees, plants and animals and others spoke about how nature impacted upon their mood and state of mind.

I've also learnt that nature can be very calming." – Young Person, June 2021



Impacts across the Breeze Project



Research with four schools and CYP aged 5 to 16 years across three years has displayed a wealth of evidence of the ways in which the Breeze Forest School Project has supported CYP both in their sense of wellbeing and in developing skills to enable engagement in learning. In analysing the impacts seen across the four schools the following themes have been seen:

Enjoyment and engagement

The Breeze Project has been very well received by CYP across all groups; this was consistent across those that completed a full school year of the project (or more) and in shorter term groups. Young people particularly appreciated spending time with friends (old and new) and within the natural environment, the majority appreciated the learner-led pedagogy and freedom from the normal structures of school, although some secondary aged students found making their own choices challenging at times.

It's exciting, you get to learn new things every week for projects that you want to do. – Young Person

Improved relationships, social and communication skills

FS facilitates opportunities for group work, games and play, taking a holistic approach to learners' development and a focus on relationships. We have seen how this led to developments in communication and social skills and improved relationships, both between CYP and with school staff. Schools have reported on the increased need to support a broader range of CYP experiencing social and emotional difficulties following the Covid-19 pandemic.

"We see them developing those interpersonal skills, teamwork and personal and social development ... Being able to engage with one another and the task they have chosen, as they often find that difficult in class." – School, Jan 2021

You learn how to get along with people, good teamwork. Working on things you never normally do in school. – Young Person

Connection to nature and wellbeing

CYP across all groups talked about their appreciation of the natural environment and the positive impact that this had on their lives; this was sometimes in relation to the calming effect they felt within the woods, enabling them to take time out from pressures within their lives, a sense of freedom and/or in relation to a new found wonder or interest in nature. Connection to nature was not a primary anticipated outcome of the Breeze Project but was seen to be important for the CYP particularly in relation to their sense of wellbeing.

I started noticing the tiny details that other people take for granted and how nice it looks ... it just makes me feel happy.
– Young Person

Behaviour and emotional regulation

Where CYP have had difficulties with emotional regulation and behaviour they were much more able to regulate this within the FS environment and, given longer-term engagement (minimum of one school year) to develop and practise skills, learners were able to use these skills to manage their behaviour and emotions at school and in some cases within the home environment too.

"Huge benefits. Martha has had a lot of 'interventions' at school but none have benefited her as much as forest school. She is noticeably happier on forest school days and there are no problems getting her up, dressed and out of the house like on other days. The forest school effect lasts right up until that evening when she is calmer, more chatty, higher in spirits and less spikey." – Parent/Carer



Engagement in learning within the classroom

Through supporting learners to take risks appropriate to them at FS, CYP have been able to over-come anxieties and develop skills to support engagement in learning such as perseverance and resilience; in some cases this has been seen to support learning back in the classroom. This has been most successful where consistent school staff support learners both at FS and within the classroom environment as they are able to help CYP to make the connections between their successful experiences at FS and the challenges they face within the classroom.

All the children have had successes at forest school and that helps to build their resilience in class where they often struggle.” – School

Impacts within the home environment

Whilst there has been evidence of impacts transferring to the home environment, this has been difficult to evidence for the majority of CYP as the circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic have restricted parental involvement in both Breeze and the research. Nevertheless, given the evidence to support impact within the classroom, it is reasonable to think that this transference would also be possible across more CYP within the home environment but would most likely require greater involvement from parents and carers with the FS approach.

I think Carly feels more relaxed about her day when she knows that it is forest school ... she often comes home and has a massive melt down after school. Not so much on forest school days.” – Parent/Carer

Divergent outcomes

We have seen evidence of the numerous ways in which CYP have developed as a result of their FS experience across four schools, all young people benefited in some way but not all in the same way. FS's learner-centred pedagogy enables young people to develop in ways important to them (although this is often not a conscious decision); some CYP worked on developing their communication and social skills which led to improved relationships, others were able to reduce anxieties that enabled them to engage in challenging tasks or a connection to nature improved their sense of wellbeing and emotional regulation. The learner led pedagogy of FS does lead to divergent outcomes but in researching across schools we have identified the key ways in which FS can benefit a broad range of CYP.



Sense of self

There is evidence across all the case studies of CYP developing a more positive sense of self; for many young people this stemmed from successful experiences at FS (often involving appropriate levels of risk) from which they recognised skills such as perseverance and resilience and expressed feelings of pride, with teachers and parents also observing increased self-confidence in the CYP. Further for some CYP, developing FS interests over time led to seeing themselves as a 'nature' or 'outdoorsy person', contributing to their positive self-identity.

I've never been good at anything before but I've found my thing.”

– Young Person



Recommendations

Recommendations for schools

In adopting a FS approach, schools do need to think carefully about what they intend to achieve and how this is likely to be achieved. The theories of change produced through this research provide models of how a FS approach can support CYP experiencing social and emotional difficulties and how engagement in FS can lead to improved wellbeing and increased engagement in learning. In these contexts the following have been shown to be important:

- ▲ a minimum of a half day of FS once a week
- ▲ a long-term commitment to FS (at least one full school year)
- ▲ high adult to child ratios to support the needs of CYP and deliver a personalised FS experience
- ▲ role of staff in supporting transference of FS impacts back in the classroom
- ▲ senior leadership support, commitment and vision
- ▲ training a number of staff in FS to widen awareness of the pedagogical approach and embed within the school's curriculum

It is also likely that increased parental engagement would facilitate greater transference of impacts into the home environment.

Recommendations for research

Continued research is needed in order to test the replicability of these theories of change in a range of further contexts and to more fully understand the possibilities for impacts within the home environment, together with the longer term impacts for CYP. A co-produced research approach, combined with a range of methods including visual and participatory methods, have been shown to be effective in gaining rich understandings from a range of participants and stakeholders; it is important that research continues to prioritise the voice of CYP and families and to seek innovative methods to maximise engagement in research. Theories of change have articulated how impacts are achieved through actions and provided models of impact that can be used by schools, practitioners and researchers in continuing FS practice.



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