

Forest in the City

Louise Black, deputy headteacher of an urban primary school in London, on the importance of outdoor provision for all, and how the children she works with benefit from connecting to nature.

'Given a chance a child will bring the confusion of the world to the woods', wrote Richard Louv, in his seminal book *Last Child in the Woods*. 'They will wash it in the creek, and turn it over to see what lives on the unseen side of that confusion... In nature, a child finds freedom, fantasy, and privacy; a place distant from the adult world, a separate peace.'

I work with children who bring a lot of 'confusion' through the school gates. As a Deputy Headteacher in a primary school serving families from the deprived Patmore Estate in Battersea, London, I see daily the mismatch between the complex and hectic lives of my students and a relatively rigid national curriculum that provides them with few opportunities to stop and breathe, and be playful, let alone develop creatively as independent learners.



But last autumn we made a decisive change. With the financial backing and full support from our academy trust, The Elliot Foundation, we transformed our dilapidated asphalt running track into an onsite Forest School and outdoor learning space

- our very own Forest in the City. Its impact has been transformational.

Take Jamari*, for example, a year 4 student who presents with attachment issues, struggles with boundaries and finds transitions very problematic. He lives on the local estate and like most students at our school has never had access to a garden. In his initial interview with me he described his experiences of being outside as "going places with mum in the car. Like auntie's house and to see friends" and having a shared space "out the back" but being "never allowed" to go down there.

Understandably, then, Jamari wasn't convinced when we first introduced Forest School. During the sessions he actively disengaged. However, the

allure of a freshly toasted marshmallow eventually won him round. And when he realised he could spend two hours every week shinning up trees and dragging pieces of wood around, I could see him secretly beginning to enjoy himself. He tried to convince me otherwise, of course. But one day when I watched him be the first to successfully use a fire steel, there was no hiding his happiness. Or mine.

He had been given the freedom to play, to explore and to succeed. And fundamentally he felt like he belonged. In the final week of the summer term, he rushed down to my office with one of our tin mugs in his hand, "Miss, Miss, I found one of our Forest School cups in the hall. It's ours! It shouldn't be there!". His urgency, his need to find me, his sense that this cup was 'ours' said it all.

**This child's name has been changed to protect anonymity*



noticeably unrepresentative of the diverse local community.

Addressing this glaring inequality was always at the heart of our project. We wanted to democratise access to Forest School, just as it was intended by its early pioneers in Europe. In the Danish model, for example, harnessing open air culture ('Friluftsliv') is seen as a pivotal building block in achieving a more inclusive way of life.

We've adapted this logic at Griffin. We want all our students to enjoy the benefits of having a connection with nature, and to foster a sense of pride in their local natural environment. And for those who need it, we offer therapeutic sessions to support their Social, Emotional and Mental Health needs. Over time, we are also excited to see how the experiences that our students bring to our forest will begin

to shape and alter the direction we take the learning.

And it's not just us. There is now a small but growing movement of other education providers in London, like The Garden Classroom and Wild Bears Forest School, who share our vision to provide urban children from working-class backgrounds with a chance to develop a long-lasting connection to the natural world.



I have long been a passionate advocate of Forest School, ever since attending a training session as a young teacher led by one of the Bridgewater College leaders who created 'Forest School' after their 1993 study visit to Denmark.

But anyone who has interacted with Forest School in the UK will also be aware it has a big inequality problem. Both practitioners and students tend to be white and middle-class, and sessions are usually private and prohibitively expensive.

I have experienced this first hand, having attended many sessions across South London with my two young girls. Wonderful sessions with wonderful leaders. But sessions which have also been costly and



Growing and changing through the seasons, Forest School at Griffin is a space for our children to connect with nature and with themselves. A space for clarity. And a space that belongs to every single student in our school. It is our Forest in the City.

[Griffin Primary School website](#)

Follow on Twitter:

[@26LBlack](#)

[@PrimaryGriffin](#)



Louise Black is working as a Deputy Headteacher at Griffin Primary in South London, leading on the curriculum across the school and also EYFS and KS1. She is passionate about Forest School, Outdoor Learning and play.

