

As part of my investigations into a career in education, I was put in touch earlier this year with Tricia Pillay at St. Helen's pre-school by a recent colleague of mine and parent of one of the pre-schoolers. We agreed that I could volunteer once a week for five weeks to give me an idea of how the pre-school operates. I hadn't worked with the pre-school age range before, so I was keen to gain the new experience. I was also interested in the forest schools sessions run on Monday afternoons and Thursday mornings, which were very relevant for me, having recently studied environmental conservation.

On my first day, I arrived to see sixteen small faces staring wide-eyed at me. I'm twenty-seven years old, but could I remember what it was like to be three-and-three-quarters again? Within minutes, a couple of the boys asked me to see a fantastic structure they had built at the side of the room, which they were so proud to show me. I think it was a tent, but that just shows how limited my thinking was! It was also possibly a fire station, a fire engine, a base and a clubhouse. Their imagination was a delight to behold.

Over the following weeks, I joined the pre-school on the field next-door for forest schools. This system seems to have grown out of the concern that children aren't experiencing the outdoors as much as they used to and could learn a lot about the world while having fun at the same time outside of the classroom. The pre-school staff guided the children in a range of different activities designed to develop their creativity and practical skills. These included story-telling, looking for insects and flowers, foraging for sticks, leaves and seeds to draw pictures with, and sitting and talking together over mugs of hot chocolate, for example. The children had a wonderful time dashing around the field, finding never-seen-before natural objects in the grass, and making up amazing games among the trees, all with no complaints about the occasional bad weather. They appeared to be developing a respect for nature and a growing curiosity of being part of it.

Throughout my time, the friendly staff described their experiences and insights into working in education, which gave me a useful idea of my options for the future. They also guided me on how to care for the children and how best to encourage them to help themselves. All in all, I was made to feel like a colleague to the staff rather than just someone seeking work experience, and a fellow student to the children rather than just a teacher.

Martin