

Visit to Coillte's Curragh Chase Forest Park

Reflections from B. Ed. 3 Elective Students

Reflection 1

Our class trip to Curraghchase was enlightening. From our time in the park we learnt a variety of different ways that the outdoors can be used to educate children not only in the subject area of geography but in other curricular areas. Additionally, I learnt that a deep knowledge of nature is not required to teach the children. Both the students and teachers can learn together through the interaction with nature.

All of the activities that we engaged in on the trip are relevant to school placement. The measuring of tree height and also the age of the tree is extremely relevant as it integrates the subjects of geography and maths and can be used for various class levels. One activity that I particularly enjoyed was the "Web of Life". This activity is inclusive and allows the children to express their understanding on opinions.

There is no denying that outdoor learning is fundamental in the child's holistic development. The children learn about their surroundings and can engage with the environment they live in.

We learnt about a variety of resources that can be used on school placement. The 'Hand Lense' is used to magnify aspects in nature. This provides the children with the opportunity to get a closer look at leaves or the barks of trees for example. Another resource that I learnt about was the nature detectives website. This website provides printouts of leaves, tree buds and animals. These nature keys can be used to help the children to identify plants/animals in nature.

Overall, our trip to Curraghchase was extremely beneficial as it opened my eyes to the many ways nature can be used to educate children.

Reflection 2

The trip was very useful as a lot of the activities shown were very applicable to a geography lesson, such as the sound map, listening to trees, measuring activities and examining with magnifying glasses. The guides were also very reassuring when we raised concerns about our own lack of knowledge in some areas, stating that we do not need to be experts to be comfortable taking the class outdoors to investigate. We were also shown useful resource materials like keys for identifying leaves and trees. Most of the activities could be differentiated for all class levels, such as the web activity with the string, which

we were told we can find the resources for online. It was a very useful, applicable and enjoyable trip overall.

Reflection 3

Our visit to Curraghchase forest park to me, was really beneficial to experience and understand how possible it is to bring your class outdoors and incorporate fresh air into everyday lessons. I really enjoyed touring the forest with our guide and was impressed with the amount of knowledge he had about Ireland's native trees, the history of the forests and why which trees were growing around us. I especially enjoyed the hands on activities such as the web of life and can really imagine myself using this with my own class in the future. I was also interested in the different ways we were shown to measure a trees height and age. I thought that using the small magnifying glasses allowed us to get a closer look at nature and really understand how geography can be linked with different subjects e.g. art. As well as really enjoying learning information about the trees and completing these activities, I was fascinated to see how working and learning outdoors enhanced my own learning and definitely understand how it can change and benefit children. After this trip, I will definitely be more likely to bring my children outdoors and allow them to experience nature through learning. This trip to Curraghchase Forest park has also taught me that as a teacher, it is okay not to know everything about the trees and nature, but to start off with one tree and allow the children themselves to explore and investigate nature.

Reflection 4

Undoubtedly our trip to Curraghchase Forest Park yesterday the 22nd of October was enlightening and an educationally enriching experience. Prior to our visit to Curraghchase I had very little if not, zero knowledge of what educational activities and games that I could use on school placement or over the course of my career and I was certain that any outdoor lessons were out of my depth. I had very little knowledge of trees, the various species or even the fact that some trees originate in Ireland and others are imported and are planted here.

Thankfully my outlook has utterly changed after our exciting outdoor experience. Although my knowledge of the outdoors still isn't excellent, at least I am aware of what I should and could know before taking the children outside to engage in integrated lessons about nature and their surroundings. Some activities and moments of yesterday's trip were of immense interest to me and I loved exploring the leaves, trees (and swans) throughout the day. One particularly interesting aspect of the trip was the number of lesson ideas we accumulated throughout the day. We engaged in a web of life for older children and younger children with Rachel. We also engaged in a pendant making session with Ray which I know the children would be in awe of. We saw a man-made dam. We saw many different species of trees. We engaged in using little

microscopes to explore our surroundings and we also were shown how beautiful nature and the outdoors can be. We were shown a real bat, something I had never encountered before and finally, we learned how to integrate different subjects such as Math, Science and Geography, with the outdoors. This for me was the most interesting and worthwhile aspect of the trip. I didn't just gain knowledge of the outdoors, but I gained an innate interest too and hope to share this interest and curiosity with my students in years to come.

Reflection 5

I thought that the visit to the Curraghchase Forest was a very enjoyable and beneficial experience. I have gained new information about trees and have learnt about activities to do with children that I could use in the future on school placement. I learnt many new things during the visit. I learnt that there are three types of trees in Ireland. They are called native, non-native and invasive. A reason why there were some trees in the forest were tall and narrow is due to the trees competing against each other for light. I also learnt that there are three types of evergreen trees in Ireland. They are holly, ewe and pine. One of the activities that inspired me was the activity where the children listen to sounds from nature in the environment such as birds or leaves. They then draw what they hear. This activity inspired me as I think that it is simple but highly effective. This activity can also be done in the school grounds and it also integrates with art. I think it would be a fun and interesting activity for children to do.

There is a lot of value to outdoor learning. Children always enjoy the experience of going outdoors. Through outdoor learning children can explore the environment, learn about different aspects of the environment such as trees and they can also look at things in the environment in a different way than they usually would. Outdoor learning is very effective as children can become active in their own learning which makes the learning more meaningful. I can incorporate outdoor learning in school placement through exploring the school yard or going to a park near to the school. Activities I could do with the children when outdoors could be finding the age of different trees. I learnt about the nature detectives website. I also learnt about the magnifying glass which can be used to look at nature in greater detail. Other resources I learnt about was cutting a small piece of a bark of a tree into a circle and then tying it with a string which the children can keep.

Reflection 6

Our visit to Curraghchase Forest was really enjoyable, with the beautiful weather making it even better. We were shown a number of useful and practical activities we could use with primary school children in the future. Both Rachel and Ray emphasised the benefits of bringing children out into nature, rather than being indoors for the majority of each day. They taught us ways in which we can learn with the children through investigating nature and researching the types of plants and mini beast we come across together.

We took part in a number of activities, one of which involved each member of the group being given a magnifying glass, we were shown how to use it and then given time to look around the floor of the forest to find different objects we could look at more closely. This was a very interesting activity as we were all able to look at different things and work individually. I think primary school children would thoroughly enjoy this activity as they would be able to work as investigators and then report back to their peers about the kinds of things they found. We were also shown how we could use natural materials to make a pendant for each child to keep as a momentum. A simple pendant can be made by each child by providing them with a biscuit of wood, a piece of string, and a screw driver to make a hole in the wood. This activity has a number of benefits, as the children learn about the different types of wood on different trees as well as work on their fine motor skills.

Overall, the trip was very beneficial to us as student teachers as it highlighted the value of outdoor learning and all the practical ways in which we can engage in outdoor activities in our teaching.

Reflection 7

I learned a great amount from my visit to Curraghchase Forest. Firstly, I learned about the different categories of trees that exist in this forest habitat. These include native trees, non-native trees and invasive trees. I enjoyed listening to the history of this forest and the interesting features on the grounds of Curraghchase, such as the main house that is now home to a large bat habitat. I also enjoyed learning about the LEAF project, and it is something that I would like to research more into in the future.

An activity that inspired me during this visit was the activity regarding the making of pendants out of pieces of wood. I think children would really enjoy this and it shows how nature can be linked throughout the curriculum, especially through the arts.

There is so much value in outdoor learning. For example, I learned first hand how forests create and manage themselves. I saw the different ways that trees compete to survive, and how their competitiveness can effect the way that they grow and how they position themselves in the habitat. I learned that outdoor learning supports peoples' well-being, with the outdoors being a place where children can be allowed to be still, calm and reflective. Also, being in such an impressive woodland environment such as Curraghchase would be a valuable outdoor experience for children who are from more built up city areas.

I will incorporate my learning from this visit through using nature notebooks and nature tables on placement. I will also integrate nature through the different subject areas, especially through maths, science, art and history. The trigonometry example from yesterday's visit was a very good example of how maths and nature can be integrated meaningfully.

I learned about resources such as the *Nature Detectives* and *LEAF Ireland* websites which I will use in the future. The visit was a very beneficial experience, and one that I will remember and draw from when teaching.

Reflection 8

I found Curraghchase Forest very enjoyable, interesting and beneficial. The landscape was beautiful and highlighted the beauty of nature. The cold Autumn evening added to the colourful landscape as it was very colourful and bright. We were given a brief introduction and summary of the history of the Forest which was very interesting. The land held many different types of trees and made it very fascinating. We went on a walking trail with the man leader and looked at many different types of trees, leaves and nature. I learned the differences between the trees by their leaves. We learned also an activity useful for children on a nature trail. When we went with the woman we did a spider web activity linking different species and features of a woodland. We also looked at the age of trees and how to calculate their height and age. We then were given magnifying glasses to explore the woodland further.

Reflection 9

I thought that the trip to Curraghchase Forest was enjoyable as well as beneficial. I found it very interesting to learn about the different types of trees and other woodland in the forest. I thought that the 'web of life' activity, which we did with Rachel would be a lovely idea for school placement. It was a simple way to show the children the interdependent links which exist between animals, plants and other aspects of nature. It also allows children to actively participate in their own learning, by working together to create the web using the information cards. The magnifying lense which we used to study items within the forest would be a great resource for teaching also, as children get to take on the role of the investigator, which allows them to take charge of their own learning once again. After the trip to Curraghchase, I would definitely feel less anxious about taking children on a similar type of experience when teaching Geography in schools. It is a fantastic way to provide them with an alternative environment to the classroom and it adds an element of fun to the overall learning experience also.

Reflection 10

On Monday October 22nd we took a trip to Curraghchase Forest Park to learn about the Leaf Project and to inspire us to use the outdoors when teaching geography. I had not heard of this forest before the trip and was amazed at the size of the park. Ray met us off the bus and we could immediately sense his enthusiasm for his work and the spaces around us. He gave us a brief insight into the history of the land and I was shocked to hear that Ireland is only covered by 11% of forestry, as it is widely considered to be very 'green' country to visitors. We saw the limestone remains of the house and got to see a bat up close and personal. Ray and Rachel then introduced us to the Leaf Project. The

initiative sparked my interest as it has similarities with the Green Schools Project, but it is more focused and by the sounds of things, possibly more achievable and also a fresh, new concept for schools.

Rachel highlighted the importance of taking the first step in getting children out of the classroom. This can be achieved by simply reading books in the school yard and bringing the children outside to practice measuring and other maths skills. This showed me how easily the Leaf project aims to work within the school curriculum by merely changing the setting of current lessons, without compromising on content. She encouraged us to have the courage to teach the children about one tree at a time as it is not necessary for the teacher to “know it all”. This resonated with me as I feel my own fears of my lack of knowledge about each specific tree would prevent me from bringing children outside, in my future career, as is true for many student and existing teachers. She showed us lots of great online resources in order to support our teaching as we familiarise ourselves with the content. We took part in many simple tasks including the web of life, estimating the age of a tree and using magnifying lenses to inspect the environment to name a few. I found these exercises to be quite simple to execute from a teacher’s perspective, and highly enjoyable to take part in from a student’s point of view.

Ray took us on a short nature trail, pointing out valuable learning opportunities along the way. At one point we all sat down and Ray gave each of us a small piece of timber to hold onto. I immediately thought of a range of teaching opportunities a simple piece of timber could provide. Children learn very well through physical interaction and so to give each child a piece of the forest to hold and keep would not only enhance their learning, but also act as a beautiful reminder of their forest walk. He told us stories about how some children react on these walks as they have never walked in a forest before. Having grown up on a mountain with a vast forest just behind my house, I was truly shocked to hear this. It caused me to reflect on how my experiences of walking and playing in my local forest growing up influenced my relationship with nature. If a child does not have such experiences because of where they live for example, they might struggle to understand the importance of trees and nature as a whole throughout their life. As a teacher I would like to provide children with opportunities to explore nature in a fun and educational way, something I had not considered much before this trip.

The site was truly beautiful and the lovely sunny weather allowed us to take some beautiful photographs to keep and possibly use in future lessons. I thoroughly enjoyed this trip and came away with plenty of knowledge and lesson ideas, as well as new insights into my beliefs as a teacher and the way in which I prioritise outdoor education.

Reflection 11

I thoroughly enjoyed my trip to the Curraghchase Forest Park on the 22nd on October. On arrival we were greeted by Ray and Rachel whom told his about the park.

Rachel shared some simple but fun activities we could do with children when exploring outdoor. The food chain game was both educational and interesting. It encouraged us to think about the different birds, insects, trees and animals that make up our ecosystem. I also enjoyed finding out the height of a tree. I was amazed at how simple and quick it could be calculated.

Ray talked about the background of the forest park and showed us different species of tree as we explored the grounds. His enthusiasm was inspiring and I realized the outdoor should we incorporated when teaching. It's a free simple resource.