

Chapter 10

Forest School – The UK Context: How This Nature-Based Outdoor Education Became a New ‘Term’ in the UK and What Challenges Does it Face in 2022?



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10.1 Introduction

I am sat on the train to Newcastle, a city in the north east of England, and a passenger next to me leans over this screen and says “I see you are writing about Forest School...my two daughters go to a Forest School.” I reply and ask how old are they and where do they attend. “Oh, through their primary school – they did it in reception (3–5 years old) and now do it about once a term.” I smile! “What is Forest School to you?” the person says as he picks up on my ironic smile! This is a symptomatic conversation. Forest School is now a term embedded in the UK education system and many folk now have heard the term. The irony is that many see it as ‘bushcraft’ skills and ‘playtime in the woods’ but it has principles and practices that are so much more, often challenged by the different paradigms in the UK education system in 2022.

In this chapter, I will look briefly at the UK Forest School definitions, history, the ethos, values and principles, some examples of practice and current challenges.

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10.2 What Is a Forest School

It is a hard thing to define. While there are many books on Forest Schools and Learning in Nature, the term has become a catch all, especially at nursery/kinder-garten and primary school level. I would like to share a vignette of a Forest School session with a special needs group at Bishops Wood Centre in Worcestershire from a few years ago to give a feel of one setting running Forest School.

(A mixed group of 10–13 year old's.)

It's mid-January as I approach the 'Forest School gate' – a rope between two posts – I hear the sounds of delight at the far end of the woodland clearing, a voice shouting from behind a tree, "I'm over here!" and above this a gentle wind blowing through the oaks and birches. There is also a robin singing its heart out despite the exuberant sounds of people – both old and young. I gently lift the rope and walk the muddy path that has obviously had feet splashing sploshing everywhere and there are two planks. Maybe a bridge protecting human feet from a troll? As I approach the 'base camp' there is a small fire surrounded by wooden planks on tree stumps, and next to this a semi-permanent shelter with a basket and trolley. The basket is open and spilling out of it are a camo-net and ropes. Next to that are some stakes and what look like home-made mallets. On one of the benches are two youngsters making a batter – half of which seems to have made its way on to the bench. They are both beating the batter in tandem...and they smile at me and ask if I like pancakes... "Pancakes with crab apply jelly wot I made". The squeals of delight came from two children and an adult on a rope swing and the adult near the pancake makers is busy weaving a basket. There is a slightly older girl wandering and talking to herself who seems to be threading something on to a piece of wool as she walks. The four that are running everywhere are completely engrossed in their own hide and seek game. The adult greets me and says, "Just in time for dinner, Jon!" and she turns to one of the pancake makers. "Do you reckon it's lunchtime yet Holly?" Holly replies, "Let's just wait a bit for the first pancake to be ready then we'll call everyone else over." A minute later both pancake makers make a loud bird type call. Everyone returns and asks if it is indeed lunch time and without hesitation all kick into gear and gather the handwashing materials....

This scene is indicative of what you instinctively feel is a playful learning community that is looking after its own needs, interacting with the woodland in a playful yet respectful way, and where it is tricky to see who is leading who. It's Forest School underpinned by a certain ethos and values!

The definition of Forest School in the UK, arrived at after an extensive consultation in 2010 and 2011, is

Forest School is an inspirational process offering ALL learners regular opportunities to achieve and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or natural environment with trees. Forest School is a specialized learning approach that sits within and compliments the wider context of outdoor learning.

From www.forestschoolassociation.org.uk

10.3 Evolution of the Term Forest School (in the UK)

The term Forest School was formulated in 1993 by a group of nursery nurses at Bridgewater College, under the direction of Gordon Woodall, who established and named their own 'Forest School'. This was after a visit to Denmark, led by Jane Williams-Siegfredson, to experience some early years practice in Denmark. The history of Forest school has been written about in a number of places (see Knight, 2013a; Maynard, 2007; Cree & McCree, 2012/2013; Gans, 2018) and taken much of its inspiration from the Scandinavian pedagogy, particularly in the early years. Although considered as 'new', Forest School is based on many years of tradition of outdoor learning pedagogy, developing the 'whole' being and often less acknowledged land-based traditions. It is always good practice to look at the theories and traditions which this 'modern' nature-based learning is 'leaning into', enabling us to apply some universal principles and 'build' new constructs, as well as validate old ones. One could say the play & community-based pedagogy has been heavily influenced by many indigenous cultures, their learning and observation of young people and the natural world. Witness the growth of modern-day movements like the 'Art of Mentoring', 'School of Lost Borders', 'Forest School Camps' and more. The Chinese and Persian philosophers such as Lao Tzu and Rumi, and the Jain, Buddhist and Yogic traditions, to name but a few, of the ancient Indian philosophies have also had influence. Indeed the 'Outdoor Schools' movement or 'Gurukula' in India with philosophers and educators such as Rabrindranath Tagore and Krishnamurti have had an impact on UK 'alternative' outdoor education in the twentieth century with the establishment of Dartington Arts College and Brockwood.

The training in the UK, which started at Bridgewater College, includes acknowledgement of theorists such as Froebel, Piaget, Vygotsky and Comenius. Many would argue that Froebel is probably one of the largest influencers on Forest School pedagogy in the UK because of his belief in marrying natural world contact and connection with learning and play. Vygotsky, added another dimension in the early twentieth century, 100 years later – the social and holistic/gestalt nature of true learning. He emphasised the importance of learning with others (community of learners), language cementing learning and more than knowledgeable peers and teachers helping learners meet their true potential. Vygotsky's 'More Than Knowledgeable Other' (MKO) is an important part of Forest School. Once we see the 'big picture' by integrating all the areas of development we see another meaning/aspect of learning and development – the '*gestalt*'.

Other UK twentieth century influencers of the current Forest School provision that were born out of the world wars were the Scout and Guide movement, Woodcraft Folk, Forest School Camps, Susan Isaacs and the outdoor schools of the 1930's, and 'outward bound' movements. In other parts of the world, we see the emergence of various nature education 'movements' in the 20th and early twenty-first century, in places such as Scandinavia, Germany, Australia, New Zealand, Canada, South

Korea and Australia (there are many more!). These countries all have ‘nature based’ educations that are culturally different – Abornpedagogue, Fruilitsliv, Skogsmulle, Metsamoori, Wald Kindergarten, Bush Kinda and Te Whāriki, to name but a few of these ‘approaches’ (McCree, 2015).

It seems there has been an upsurge in nature connection initiatives in the UK and across the world, from organisations such as the National Trust, Royal Society of Protection of Birds and Wildlife Trusts to name but a few in the UK. Many of these are now using the newly defined Nature Connection indices in their outdoor education programmes as explored by Derby University Psychologist Miles Richardson, see <https://www.derby.ac.uk/research/centres-groups/nature-connectedness-research-group/>. Briefly these cover 5 pathways;

- Senses – tuning in to nature through the senses
- Emotion – feeling alive through the emotions and feelings nature brings
- Beauty – noticing nature’s beauty
- Meaning – nature bringing meaning to our lives
- Compassion – caring and taking action for nature

The international ‘natural play space pedagogies’ I have mentioned above and growing dissatisfaction with a crowded industrial, outcome-based UK curriculum saw the Bridgwater Nurses lighting the blue touch paper in 1993 for an incredible growth in ‘Forest School’ in the UK. Forest School is now seen all over the UK as a part of many schools or run as an informal programme and is growing in many countries (Knight, 2013b and McCree, 2015).

As I write there will be thousands of early years – even pre-tots, primary and secondary school students, special needs groups, families and certain adult groups experiencing nature education programmes, often under the name of Forest School in many different settings and institutions. Forest School sits within the wider context of nature-based education. Rough statistics estimate conservatively that we had in 2011 (the last count) 13,000 learners accessing regular longer – term Forest School programmes (Wellings, 2012), and in 2015 there were estimated to be 17,000 trained Forest School professionals in the UK at all levels. The last survey carried out at a local authority level was in Worcestershire in 2013 showed there were 350 settings in the county running some sort of Forest School provision. All of these groups will have their theoretical and practical underpinning, to one degree or other, based on practitioners, theorists and pragmatists of history. No statistics have been collected more recently of how widespread Forest School has become, I would hazard a guess there are thousands of settings calling their provision ‘Forest School’. The Forest School Association (FSA) does have a recognised providers scheme but this is only for those who are willing to step forward and use the scheme as a reflective tool for their practise and gain a nationally recognised ‘badge’ of quality. As I write this there are approximately 150 settings either registered or being registered under this ‘benchmark’ scheme (see Forest School Association Annual Report, 2022a).

The Forest School training continues to be delivered by a number of providers. The current numbers are hard to ascertain, however, there are 20 FSA UK Endorsed training providers, both approved and in approval (see Forest School Association Annual Report, 2022b). The FSA recognises 9 UK Government approved awarding bodies that accredit Forest School training. Most training is conducted to a level 3 and is an integral part of the principles described above and outlined in more detail below. Educators from different backgrounds can gain the qualification from teachers, through to many independent providers and NGO educators.

Even the UK government has recognised this now, as an important ‘movement’ in having a role in improving the health and well-being of the nation. Forest School is named in its 25-year environmental action plan – published in January 2018 (DEFRA, 2018). With the rise in mental health issues in many developed countries, in particular the UK, a Nature Connection and Forest School approach is increasingly being seen as a ‘green intervention’ for vulnerable people.

10.4 Ethos, Values and Principles of Forest School

In 2012, as a result of almost 3 years of extensive consultation the UK established its own Forest School professional body, the Forest School Association (FSA). The six principles, outlined below, were formulated through consultations with almost 2000 practitioners and a final consultation exercise at a national UK Forest School conference in Swindon in 2011 (see Wellings, 2012). It is significant that this conference was addressed by Sue Palmer, who spearheads the Upstart movement in Scotland to try and raise the school entry age to 7, as per Scandinavia, and have a more play based, outdoor curriculum (Palmer, 2016). These are informed by an ethos and ‘values’ that Forest School practitioners share.

In a nutshell this is a holistic form of education creating a vibrant nature-based learning community. ‘Holistic’ is a term often banded around in the education world. A holistic approach is an ‘integrated’ approach to learning which means accepting the ‘whole’ person – warts and all. It is an approach that works with everyone’s needs and sense of self – accepting we are all imperfect, but we are WHO WE ARE and worthy of love and acceptance. A tall order, but very much something that underpins the practice of Forest School and we have to struggle with it. What we are hoping to develop from these values is the building of resilience, creativity, self-worth, emotional literacy, connection to and caring for the non-human world, so our planet and society thrives. Forest School is, therefore, trying to create something akin to a ‘family full of kinship’ with human and non-humans ‘being’ together – a village of learning and living. The important aspects that make Forest School special are the playful ‘equal relationships’, and the deeply empathic connections that develop.

It is love of the natural world and humanity that uplifts and becomes what cannot be ‘valued’ in a monetary way. The spiritual communal value of birdsong, for example, and all other ‘more than human’ beings along with a ‘giving back’, underpins Forest School and practice within ‘natural law’.

The overall goal of Forest School is “to help people develop into resilient, creative compassionate individuals who value the natural world (human and non-human) and care for every living being’s welfare.” (Cree and Robb, 2021). These goals rely on the intrinsic values that underpin Forest School principles and practice. Cree and Robb point out that these values, which need to be constantly revisited, are at the heart of what we do as nature educators and extend to the various aspects of Forest School practice.

There are six Forest School principles that have been explicitly expressed, on the UK Forest School Association (FSA) website, that are underpinned by the above values. During the consultation process working criteria for each principle were developed – see <https://forestschoollassociation.org/full-principles-and-criteria-for-good-practice/> for details.

The six principles are:

- Forest School is a long-term process of regular sessions, rather than one-off or infrequent visits; the cycle of planning, observation, adaptation and review links each session.
- Forest School takes place in a woodland or natural environment to support the development of a lifelong relationship between the learner and the natural world.
- Forest School uses a range of learner-centred processes to create a community for being, development and learning.
- Forest School aims to promote the holistic development of all involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners.
- Forest School offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.
- Forest School is run by qualified Forest School practitioners, who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice

Cree and Robb (2021) expressed these principles in their own words to try and encapsulate both the principle and values that they felt are implicit in each principle;

- Forest School is a long-term programme of regular contact with the natural world that make deeper, caring human and nature connections
- Forest School develops a relationship between learners and the natural world that features mutuality and compassion.
- Forest School practitioners work in a learner centered way whereby an ‘equal’ learning community is developed where there is a combination of autonomous and communal learning, featuring joint decision making regarding the learning. Forest School follows a constructivist (see footnote) approach whereby the learning, in and of, the real natural world and themselves emerges.
- Forest School develops the whole person, supporting cognitive processes and fostering creative, resilient, physically healthy independent learners

- Forest School encourages risk-taking in a safe context, enabling learners to move into their learning zones where they can manage and ‘own’ their own risks, be they emotional, physical, cognitive or social risks
- Forest School is facilitated by practitioners who are qualified and continually reflect on, question and develop, their own learning and Forest School facilitation.

A healthy building needs sound foundation – a healthy human needs ‘good’ foundations. It is my belief that ‘good’ essentially needs to include ‘good’ for the living world, humans and non-humans alike, to create human systems that protect and repair nature’s ecosystems. Applying a Forest School approach to the outdoors, embodies an experience in which children can experiment, explore, receive nature and intrinsically learn to value the living world.

And what is lovely is to see a developing caring attitude towards each other and nature
(Deborah Thomas – Forest School leader in training, West Sussex 2017).

10.5 How Effective Has the Forest School Programme Been in Delivering the Above Principles and Realizing the Aspirations I Have Outlined Here?

There have been a number of universities involved in research into Forest School – recent notable papers Plymouth University (see Waite & Goodenough, 2018), Kingston University (see Harris, 2015) and for a critical look into Forest School see Sackville and Davenport’s book ‘Critical Issues in Forest School’ (2019). An extensive piece of research into the barriers to delivering Forest School, as per the criteria I have outlined above, ‘Bringing Children Closer to Nature’ was carried out by the Sylva Foundation jointly with the Ashden Trust and the FSA (Hemery et al., 2019).

Sue Waite and Goodenough (2018), Plymouth University, outline in their latest study how Forest School can create an ‘alternative pedagogy’ in the English school system. They recognise Forest School can indeed provide space for a culturally ‘lighter’ and more inclusive pedagogy, but warn how the learner led and ‘light’ culture can get superseded –

With the increasing presence of FS within UK schools, higher level structural political influences inevitably impinge on how FS is positioned and enacted in the mainstream arena. The learner-led principle may be superseded by a focus on curriculum objectives when co-located within schooling. (Waite & Goodenough, 2018)

The Sylva study in 2019, one of the largest to date in terms of numbers of practitioners, looked at barriers to the implementation of what is often referred to as ‘full fat’ Forest School, i.e., a programme that adheres to the six principles, in wooded and forested areas in the UK, mostly England. Interestingly most realised the importance of long-term connection and regular visits to the woodland in order to build reciprocal relationships between the human and non-human. Lack of funding, a

crowded curriculum and poor support from senior management in schools were seen as the biggest barriers to creating a truly long term ‘quality’ programme.

Well-being training and woodland care were seen as two of the most important needs at this time for educators. This, I would suggest, has grown with the pandemic and state of the UK woodlands, as outlined in the UK 25-year Environmental Action Plan (DEFRA, 2018) and England Trees Action Plan 2021–24 (DEFRA, 2021).

One of the key findings was the need to justify Forest School within the school curriculum and the need for a policy shift at government level such that outdoor and nature-based learning should be a requirement. Teachers needed more tools to measure the impacts of Forest School, which can be a tall order, given the recognition of the overall value from all educators involved in the survey was the holistic nature of Forest School.

To that end the Forest School Association is developing an App to measure the wellbeing impacts of Forest School (FSA Annual Report, 2022b), and in 2021 the FSA started a Nature Premium campaign to get more government funding for weekly nature contact in schools (Nature Premium, 2022). This campaign is gaining momentum as the government, and various recent surveys, have shown how important nature contact is for learning, health and well-being (Natural England, 2021).

There are a number of Forest School case studies on the FSA recognised providers website showing schools and other settings running Forest School programmes as outlined by the principles described above. This is despite the financial and curriculum limitations of an English curriculum that doesn’t have nature-based learning specified as a requirement and still spends a large majority of its time on literacy, numeracy and science and technology outcomes with pretty tight parameters that leave little room for teacher creativity.

To show how Forest School has adapted to the political and social situation and still trying to maintain the ethos and principles here is one case study of Bramblewood, a 2-acre site, right in the heart of Worcester City, see <https://www.thebramblewood-project.org.uk/>

10.6 Bramblewood Forest School Case Study

Like many programmes run in the UK this is a provision that works with schools but is independent of the constraints of an outcome-based curriculum. Bramblewood Forest School opened in 2018 on an allotment (community gardening plots) site, situated next to the main Worcester to Birmingham canal, at the heart of Worcester City in the West Midlands of the UK. 18 months before, it was a 1.3 acre site of overgrown allotments, open woodland ‘scrub’ with a fairly new hazel coppice (planted about 20 years ago). The whole allotment site, including Bramblewood, occupies approximately 9 acres; all owned and leased by Worcester City Council (Fig. 10.1).

When the two women who started the project, Helen and Sam, arrived, got the keys, took on the lease and fell in love with the land, the whole site was covered in



Fig. 10.1 Worcester City and Bramblewood – the forest school site is to the left of the allotments

bramble. Gradually, through extensive clearing of bramble and ‘needles’, it was a site for homeless in the city, and much tending they revealed a healthy hazel copice, many cherry plum trees and larger ash, horsechestnut and willow trees. They had uncovered a real ‘oasis’ of life – a green beating heart of the city full of insects, small mammals, birdlife, badgers and a resident fox overseen by buzzards and raven.

The programme started with two Saturday Forest School sessions, one in the morning and one in the afternoon which have continued (on and off through COVID) and have welcomed, for 4 years now, regular children between the ages of 5 and 12. They all pay a price depending on the resources of the household. There are a number on bursaries selected by the two local schools according to need and vulnerability. These bursaries are gained from fundraising activities by the Bramblewood adult volunteers and sponsorship from local authorities and ‘green’ businesses. During the week there are 3 days provision of Forest School for children ‘referred’ to the organisation who have specific needs which are not being met by other services or provision (be they schools or alternative provision), along with a growing number of children who are home educated. The site is responding to, for example, one child, who is ‘flexischooling’, and two who are unable to access any other provision, as outlined in their own education behaviour plans. The latter are all funded through central funds allocated locally to the local authority.

Alongside this provision, the other days see adults attending sessions for volunteering and their own wellbeing, homeless and mental health recovery groups also regularly attend. They too follow the Forest School ethos as outlined in the six principles. There is always something to do on this site; be it green woodwork,

Fig. 10.2 Celebrating the seasons is a key aspect of forest school provision at Bramblewood – Beltane crown marking the time of flowering and energy flow in spring



maintaining the compost toilet and other structures on site, various crafts, storytelling, journaling, sit spotting, planting and tending a Forest Garden within the site, establishing a tree nursery, maintaining paths, putting up birdboxes, checking on hedgehog boxes, etc., etc. And importantly always cooking and gathering round the fire. Bramblewood is a community refuge, that has already rippled out into the community regarding those involved in the site have enriched other garden and public spaces increasing biodiversity and emboldening nature connection elsewhere in the city (Figs. 10.2, 10.3, and 10.4).



Fig. 10.3 Two weekly forest school learners muse at the entrance to the Bramblewood site – deepening friendship with each other and the land

Central to the ethos here is a combination of nature connection and a learner/play centred approach, nurturing learners who have had their own anxieties and traumas, especially in these times. Through the funding from various sources the organisation, a community interest company, has secured enough funds to employ 3 part time staff, all Forest School trained. While this is not ‘secured’ long term, such are the times, the organisation has now established itself on a fairly firm footing. Here is an illustration of the Bramblewood ethos, underpinned by the Forest School principles (Fig, 10.5).

Fig. 10.4 The all important forest school community gathering place – cooking and chatting!



This setting shows how the non-governmental sector is trying hard to work with schools and social systems that are struggling and is achieving good outcomes for learners in terms of their own growth and development and their connections to nature such that a caring reciprocal relationship is developing.

The recent growing ‘well-being and mental health’ need for green spaces in urban settings for the human and ‘more than human’ communities has seen an increase in this type of Forest School provision throughout the UK. In London, for example, this type of provision working with schools, who do see the importance of well-being and nature connection, has seen a growth in independent providers, working alongside the established nature-based NGO’s such as the wildlife trusts, RSPB, London Royal Parks etc.

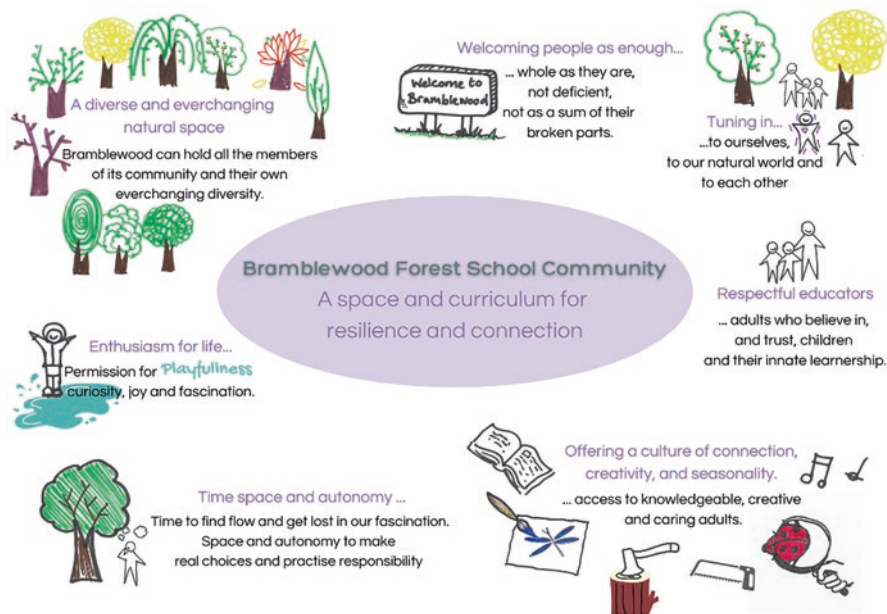


Fig. 10.5 The Bramblewood ethos

10.7 Conclusion

What I have outlined above are the positive aspects of provision that is trying it’s hardest to implement the principles. However, for every one of these settings there are many that are running some sort of outdoor learning provision that involves infrequent visits to green space and possibly, if lucky, a residential programme at some point in their education. And this is often called Forest School because it is outside and probably takes in lighting a fire and some of the so-called ‘bushcraft’ skills. The reasons I have outlined in this chapter for this ‘lite’ version of Forest School are many and no doubt are being replicated in other countries where resources, educator confidence and a clash with outcome based curricular are key factors in this more limited provision.

What is missing for me, apart from support and acknowledgement from decision makers both locally and nationally, is the greater emphasis on how this regular contact and connection with local green biodiverse rich places is not necessarily resulting in quick enough lifestyle change on a societal level to repair broken ecological systems and broken human systems. Having visited many Forest School settings around the country over the years..and this is in the hundreds, I still see, generally, a basic lack of ‘real’ understanding of how separate we are from the natural world

and ecological systems, plus the grief at the loss of species and changes in ecological processes supporting life. It takes a courageous and deeply felt ‘ecological’ Forest School practitioner to be able to bring to the fore the ecological collapse we are facing when the tenet of the Forest School movement is healthy holistic development and celebration of the nature contact and connection made in the woods and trees. While I have always espoused the deep connection and delight in relationship building with the more than human in a human-centred created community in the trees there comes a point where these rich playful connections need to shine a light on the grief and understanding of the current planetary crisis. Where better to share these insights and cracks in our life support systems, and important pivotal ecological understandings than around the fire while listening to the dwindling populations of songbirds. I will finish with this question... At what point in this journey of regular contact should that ‘crack’ be opened?

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