

Forest School in the United Kingdom

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Forest School in the UK is a relatively new discipline in the pantheon of outdoor pedagogies and pursuits. It is a way of spending repeated and prolonged time in wilder spaces focusing on developing both emotional intelligence and a love of the natural environment through simple shared tasks chosen by the participants. It evolved from observed practice in Scandinavian kindergarten, but in the UK is used to great effect across all age groups.

A new idea tends to go through a developmental phase when it is natural for practitioners to spend much of their energies and time in establishing the ground rules and agreeing the general principles, which is the case with Forest School. By the middle of 2012, the Forest School Association was established to identify agreed guiding principles and a shared ethos, which have been published on the Association website (www.forestschoollassociation.org). A platform for discussion and debate was created, and four successful conferences held in different locations around the UK. Those activities have enabled the Forest School community to move to the next phase of growth. Practitioners have started researching more rigorously, and the Association has formed a research group working with Good for Woods, a lottery-funded research project led by the Silvanus Trust and the University of Plymouth in partnership with the Neroche Scheme, the Woodland Trust and Forest Research (www.silvanustrust.org.uk/index.php?page=good-from-woods). Reflecting on the origins of Forest School and the research conducted is the basis for this chapter.

Into the 21st century

In 1993 a team from the UK, from Bridgwater College, Somerset, visited Denmark on an exchange; the lecturers were inspired by the emphasis the Danish early years settings gave to facilitating children's wilder and adventurous outdoor play activities. On their return to Somerset, the team reflected on what they had seen, and related it to known theory and practice in the early years in the UK. They also debated the cultural differences and educational trends in England and Denmark, considering what approaches could be imported wholesale and which needed 'translating'. From these reflections they devised the first Forest School programme, initially for children aged 2 to 5 years attending the college day nursery, and later for other groups of students attending the college.

The model has now become widely accepted across the British Isles as a valuable model for being outside in wilder spaces with all ages and client groups, and for a variety of purposes. Working backwards through history from that point it is possible to explore those theoretical influences that led first to the development of the initial pedagogy, and later to the philosophical principles and ethos that underpins Forest School in the UK today.

The 20th century

One step backwards leads to another Danish link, which came from the adventure playground movement started in the 1930s by a retired Army major who was concerned about the effects of urban life on children, and particularly on their opportunities for creative play. The idea for adventure playgrounds was brought to the UK in 1948 and thrived until the 1980s, allowing the development and recognition of playwork as a separate and distinct way of working with children (Shier, 1984). Playwork continued and today is a discipline, influencing the ways holiday play schemes, after-school clubs and breakfast clubs in the UK are run. However, health and safety restrictions in the late 20th century almost brought those first urban adventure playgrounds to an end. Recent years have seen a revival in London (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010), and adventure playgrounds are once again available in urban settings.

Key links exist between playwork, adventure playgrounds and Forest School; they both encourage activities to be participant led, and allow for construction, destruction and change. This approach fits with the theoretical ideas of playworkers about the value of 'loose parts' as being vital to the free exploration of ideas and creativity (Hughes, 2012, p. 110). Loose parts are elements that might be described as *found objects* and are useful for creative activities of all kinds. Another shared element is the facilitation of risk taking, an otherwise endangered undertaking in modern risk-averse UK society (Gill, 2007). Else (2009) claimed that this risk taking is necessary, 'as it helps us fully experience life' (p. 83), and explains that risks can be both physical and mental. This risk taking is illustrated as an important, although sometimes potentially difficult, learning opportunity in Forest School for children and adults who have experienced adversity in their lives before experiencing Forest School (Wicks, 2011). Claiming this link with the pedagogy of playwork illuminates why Forest School practitioners see their work as important to children's healthy development at all ages.

The effects of the 19th century

Taking another step back in history, the concerns around urbanisation and the resultant disconnect from nature had begun in the UK as soon as urbanisation took place. Urbanisation was largely a result of industrialisation, which in the UK started in the mid-19th century. The socialist reformers Margaret and Rachel McMillan and others made the links between children's healthy development and learning, and to opportunities for them to spend time outside. The sisters opened the Open-Air Nursery School & Training Centre in Deptford in 1914, the first truly open-air early years facility in the UK, and aimed their programme at the children of families living in urban deprivation. However, after the 1940s the recognition of the importance of outdoor spaces for children in the early years tailed off in the UK until the early part of the 21st century (Selbie & Wickett, 2010). Nevertheless, training for workers at all levels in the early years sector in the UK included recognising the work of the McMillan sisters in the pantheon of pioneers, and their espousal of the outdoors as the healthiest place for young minds and bodies. This recognition is probably why Forest School has been adopted so readily by early years settings.

Early years professionals recognise in Forest School a way to provide for exploratory play outside, and, more importantly, they understand the benefits the outdoors brings. As a consequence,

the advice in the English Early Years Foundation Stage Guidance (Department for Education, 2012) requiring the provision of outdoor play opportunities fell on receptive ears and improved the provision of outdoor experiences in early years settings. The spread of access to Forest School sessions provided very young children with opportunities to develop as healthy, independent and energetic learners engaged with their local environments (Knight, 2013).

Influences from the 17th century

Another strand in education that resonates with Forest School, and which can be traced back to the thinkers of the Enlightenment, emphasised *how* rather than *what* children learn. Claxton's approach, which he called Building Learning Power (BLP), intends 'helping them [children] build up the mental, emotional, and social resources to enjoy challenge and cope well with uncertainty and complexity' (Claxton *et al.*, 2011, p. 2). This goal resonates for most UK Forest School practitioners (Wellings, 2013). In conversation with teachers using BLP, Forest School practitioners have agreed that Forest School and BLP appear to complement each other perfectly, probably because the seeds of both pedagogies lie in the Enlightenment. At the time that Locke was expressing the importance of critical thinking and of treating children as rational beings, Hegel was propounding the rights of children to an education and Voltaire was espousing the freedom of all to engage in critical debate. When these ideas are filtered through the later educational practices of Pestalozzi, Steiner and Montessori, and the educational pragmatism of Dewey, the outcome is a Forest School pedagogy that is 'learner-centred . . . responsive to the needs and interests of the learners . . . [and] develop[s] emotional intelligence' (Knight, 2013, p. 19).

Forest School has also concerned itself with the environment, while BLP has remained focused on activities inside the classroom. These roots are reflected in traditional teacher training and practice. To see why Forest School is steadfastly set in the forests and woods of the UK requires the reader to further understand the Northern European traditions of contact with the outdoor world.

Viking influences

Understanding how and where Forest School trends and traditions have developed requires recognising that the importance of access to the outdoors has been preserved more easily in countries with fewer people, more space, less industry and stronger links to nature. For example, *Friluftsliv* is a term often linked to Forest School. It is a Norwegian word loosely translated as *open air life*, which was first used in print by the famous Norwegian writer, dramatist and poet Henrik Ibsen in 1859. Norway's law of *allemannsrett* encourages *Friluftsliv*. Literally translated, *allemannsrett* means *all man's right*. Norway honours the right of access to, and passage through, uncultivated land in the countryside, regardless of who owns it (Sandell, 2007, p. 90). It is also applied to cultivated land when it is frozen and snow covered. *Allemannsrett* can be traced back to the Viking period and is institutionalised in Norway through the Outdoor Recreation Act 1963. Similar rights of access extend across most of the Scandinavian countries as symbols of the importance of the outdoor environment to the cultural life of citizens.

Where this cultural expectation does not exist or has been eradicated, for example as in England, a need for a remediation movement such as Forest School is needed. Forest School allows settings and schools to encourage children to get outside and engage with their surroundings from an early age. Through Forest School experiences children can come to embrace outdoor activities as a normal part of their own cultural life, despite this element being missing

from the lives of many in their parents and carers' generation. To see why Forest School practitioners might consider this fundamental aim for their practice, it is helpful to engage with the 20th century Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss, who proposes a need for this link that goes deep into the human psyche, and that has existed for a long time.

Links from an agrarian past

Næss proposed eight principles to underpin a worldwide deep ecology movement seeking solutions to global environmental problems (Drengson, 1999). The Green Parties in Europe have widely adopted these principles. This eco-philosophical framework emphasised the importance for people to have a love of nature as well as a love for other humans, embracing the concept of biophilia (Wilson, 1984), and the idea that people have an innate and subconscious need for a relationship with nature in all its forms.

The expression of environmental responsibility in the Forest School ethics document (Knight, 2013) is a reflection of the two-fold ecological stance of most UK Forest School practitioners. First, Wilson's ideas about biophilia are helpful in identifying why people feel healthier and happier outside (Cree, 2011). Second, if children do not develop a love for and a respect for nature at a young age they will fuel the environmental crises in the future: 'like a fire, humans tend to consume and consume until the fuel is gone' (Holland, 2012, p. 144).

Forest School practitioners believe that an important part of their work is to engage learners in developing a connection with their surroundings. In an agrarian past the human links to the landscape were clear. It directly provided benefits for people or it did not, as in the case of universal threats like flood, famine and fire, which suggests that the past should not be idealised (Heywood, 2001). However, there is no longer always an immediate link of observable consequences, so Forest School practice acknowledges that people need to recognise their agrarian roots and those links to the past that promote health and wellbeing, take the best of the past and acknowledge the benefits of the future. During their activities, practitioners make opportunities to point out seasonal and weather-related changes, and discuss consequences and expectations with participants.

Tribal places

People who live closer to nature respect its power. Tribal peoples from all parts of the globe and all periods of history, including the UK's own tribal cultures in pre-Roman and Roman times, found objects and places in nature to value and/or venerate. Forest School practitioners recognise that learners in Forest School sessions develop rituals, songs and stories that result in connections to self-identified objects and places. An early record came from Waller (2007), who observed such identifications by pre-school children in spaces that they used regularly for wilder outdoor play. He evidenced children developing their identity and social relations through a sense of place.

I have also observed this story-making engagement with spaces when working with young children, and have connected this experience to creative work done by older children and adults in Forest School. I have observed the impact a sense of place has for 'commitment, growth and in Forest School. I have observed the impact a sense of place has for 'commitment, growth and learning' (Knight, 2013, p. 138). Creating this sense of place is possible by repeated access to identifying objects and places, and allowing time for the rituals to develop. An important feature of Forest School is repetition since sessions take place week after week, and are not a one-off event. The development of that sense of place through repetition is one of the consequences of this approach, which builds confidence 'to meet nature on her own turf' (Knight, p. 53).

Storytelling in tribal cultures is often the responsibility of a bardic or shamanistic figure, who maintains and perpetuates the transmission of important cultural ideas and beliefs. Many Forest School practitioners use opportunities for storytelling in their sessions, particularly starting them around a campfire at a time of meeting and reflection. The campfire as a central and focal point is another common link between Forest School and the tribal past. This storytelling is often the way in which positive attitudes to pro-environmental sustainability can be fostered in the participants (Cree & Gersie, 2014). It also develops emotional literacy as participants (i.e. children or adults) are led through allegorical tales and parables. Active listening and response tasks linked to the stories develop empathy as well as the participants' skills in recognising their own feelings and how to deal with them.

This multi-layered approach enables each person to take his or her own route through to a deep personal understanding of their place in their outdoor space. The Scottish Government's plans for Sustainable Education (Scottish Government, 2010) recognise the importance of natural heritage places for developing sustainability, acknowledge the role that traditional sites play, and use local outdoor places in developing a sense of community and learning (Learning and Teaching Scotland, 2010). I would argue that this recognition is timely regarding the importance of developing a sense of belonging to a particular natural environment through repeated usage of those places and spaces, something that Forest School has incorporated into its pedagogy from the start.

New biology, old brains

The benefits of repetition are evident when considering what is known about brain development, an area of research that has been fruitful as recording, imaging and scanning techniques have improved. Although the basic structure of the brain has not changed in evolutionary terms since prehistoric times, two aspects in recent years about how the brain develops have had an impact on increasing an understanding of children's learning. The first is that people have sensitive periods when it is easier to learn some things than others. This idea is related to the attention given to an experience and the number of times it is repeated (White *et al.*, 2013). Therefore, early, repeated and engaging exposure to nature is likely to have a lasting effect on children's understanding and valuing of nature. It also helps to develop the vocabulary with which to communicate that knowledge and understanding if those experiences take place in those early years that are sensitive periods for language development.

The other aspect that develops the brain best is a rich environment providing opportunities to engage physically with that outdoor richness, rather than simply to watch (Farah *et al.*, 2008). This argument supports bringing learners to the best learning environments and getting them out and dirty, which is more successful as an educational strategy than watching nature programmes on TV. As Sunderland (2013) said, 'We can be splendid or terrible . . . Our brains carry the potential for both.' Without environmental stimuli children are unlikely to become as splendid as they have the potential to be. Forest School is not the only way, but it does have the advantage of facilitating deep and time-rich engagement with those elements that individual learners find fascinating at a particular time.

For some time researchers have linked access to nature with healing (Kaplan, 1995) and with developing coping strategies to prevent mental health problems (Perry, 2002). The UK National Health Service (NHS) has become interested in the impact of outdoor experiences on health and wellbeing in recent years, to the extent of supporting access to green spaces on or near NHS land (Centre for Sustainable Healthcare, 2014). This access is not exclusive to Forest School, but specific to Forest School is that it can be started with very young children, that it is a repeated and lasting programme of engagement outside, and that it utilises the holistic nature of

learning through experience. The level of scientific understanding is new, but human brains are old, and looking back to ways in which people evolved illuminates the needs of people today.

Evolutionary adaptations

To be healthy people need to feel more than just respect. They need love and, in this case, love of the outdoors. Theories of evolutionary psychology illuminate the importance of ancient links with nature to health and wellbeing, and also to the health and wellbeing of the planet. Kellert (2002) and Kahn (2002) both emphasised this duality. Humans are an adaptive species, and could not have survived and multiplied without being adaptive. However, people do not always make the healthiest choices as a result. Walter (2013) showed that adult learners benefit from being outside as a remediation of the effects of continued exposure to a screen-based society. Observations of young children show them as adept screen users, but concerns are being raised about their social and language development (Gifford, 2014), and recently about the development of their distance vision (Ernest *et al.*, 2014). Being both indoors and focused on screens restricts visual development opportunities. Associated with these restrictions is the recognition that most screen-based activity requires receptive language development but seldom expressive language development, and rarely in a face-to-face social engagement. Children who engage in Forest School sessions are inevitably going to be screen users, since screens are a part of their normal way of being. However, they will also be outside at regular intervals using their eyes to look at distant objects, socialising with their peers and learning new words to express the world about them. Nature will always survive in some way or another – known as the Gaia principle (Dyke & Weaver, 2013) – but restoring a link to that nature will help people to survive.

Conclusion

Forest School in the UK is analogous with one of its trees. It has its roots in the evolutionary past, prompting a love of nature. It has its trunk in tribal and agrarian societies, enabling people to develop bushcraft, social and language skills. The many branches of practice show how Forest School can happen in urban and rural settings, provided the ethos is maintained (Knight, 2011)

The leaves are the breathing links with the theorists who have shown how people learn and develop, and the research that continues today. With love, respect and care, Forest School practitioners can produce healthy and happy children who will be the fruits for tomorrow.

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