

A View from the Other Side - Signs of New Growth

Four years ago at the conference in Dunedin I gave a similar talk on the state of Environmental Education in the UK. The last four words are the addition this time.

Go in almost any school and you will see that they are an “Eco School” and probably a “Forest School” too. Other initiatives include Growing Schools, Learning Outside the Classroom, Adventure Learning and Learning Through Landscapes.

Underneath educational life remains much the same, constant change, pressures to perform “better” and now, to perform even better in a depressing financial state.

Below are four key drivers that limit Environmental Education and the two vital ones that stimulate it and a final one that can justify it:

COST

CLIMATE

CULTURE

CURRICULUM

CURIOSITY

CREATIVITY

CONSERVATION

Forest School

The development of Forest School in Britain began in the mid 1990's. It is based on a Scandinavian idea that considers children's contact with nature to be extremely important to their development as a whole person. It focuses on teaching children about the natural world.

A group of students from Bridgwater College visited Denmark in 1995 and decided the approach was appropriate for use in the UK and considered how to apply what they had witnessed to childcare provision in the college's Early Years Centre.

A review of Forest Schools nationally with a particular emphasis on the urban experience reports on a wide range of Forest School projects that are being successfully developed in towns and cities. Greenwich has now 150 trained Forest School practitioners and 70 forest school settings across the borough.

There are now estimated 10,000 Level 3 trained Forest School practitioners in the UK embedding the Forest School pedagogy and ethos into the delivery of environmental education as part of the school's curriculum across the UK.

Evaluation of Forest School selected across the UK to represent the diversity of Forest School in primary school settings reveals that Forest School is enjoyed by children, valued by teachers and appreciated by parents. Benefits are particularly noted in the language development of children reported to have special needs. (Currently research is being undertaken in this area) In spite of the impact it is having on learning as well as the physical and social wellbeing of children it remains "under the radar" in terms of a nationally recognised learning approach.

The Forest Education Initiative (FEI) supported by the Forestry Commission have established cluster groups across Britain for woodland learning and these have now evolved to a point where 80% of their members focus on Forest School as the priority interest and involvement.

Both the Scottish Government and the Welsh Assembly value Forest School and are now supporting Forest School development to ensure it is offered as part of the Early Years Foundation Stage.

Forest school is still developing with links being established to many areas such as neuroscience (see attachment and reference to *R Louv Last Child in the Woods saving our children from Nature Deficit Disorder*). Several areas of the UK are still relatively behind in embedding it into their Early Years Strategy. Oxfordshire, Warwickshire, Gloucestershire, East Anglia and Shropshire County Council's to name a few have designated Forest School development staff within their structure. Cumbria has no such coordination and is therefore behind in terms of communication and CPD opportunities.

Forest School nurseries and Kindergartens are being set up all over the UK from Mindstretchers in Pethshire www.mindstretchers.co.uk to Wild Flowers Kindergarten in Hampshire www.wildflowers-kindergartens.co.uk

My role is to write a business plan for the proposed National Governing Body. The aim is to ensure the future standards of Forest School practice and

training as well as bringing Forest School into the arena of education in the same way Montessori and Steiner schools are accepted as recognised practice.

Funding such an organisation is an issue. The Forestry Commission have indicated they will contribute to the funding, however additional funding sources are vital for the initial set up costs. Thereafter membership fees and course registration fees will go a long way toward sustainability.

Dr Tanya Byron and Chris Beardshaw have acknowledged the importance of Forest Schools and offered themselves as high profile supporters.

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The Proposed Forest School National Governing Body

I have consulted with approximately 120 people – a mix of Forest School practitioners, local co-ordinators, NGO's, local authority staff in Wales, Scotland and some regions in England, other governing bodies and OCN. The business plan is beginning to take shape and is based on the points below:

- A need for some agreed National Occupational standards to be available for awarding bodies to ensure an industry standard is maintained in the development of qualifications. Also with a view to establishing the qualifications on the national learning database for possible funding opportunities.
- A quality mark demonstrating a nationally recognised and accepted standard of quality in forest school practise and training.
- A plaque or sign for schools who demonstrate a continued support of the forest school ethos and pedagogy.
- A recognised UK forest school website with links to other forest school organisations and a communication hub for special interest groups (SIGS) for market segments such as Special Educational Needs, 14-19 provision, Wellbeing etc. streamlining the FSTN, Forest school Cluster Groups and IOL SIG into the process.
- Establish baseline standards for all those who wish to be NGB recognised and recommended training providers.
- Coordinate national CPD opportunities for practitioners and trainers to maintain their quality mark. Offer opportunities to share good practise in FS through the web, conferences, Facebook etc.
- Re-establish the key principles of Forest School in the 21st Century and the criteria for Forest School practise in the UK.
- Maintain a national database of forest school practitioners and contacts with opportunities to upload CPD and maintain a personal profile.
- Map providers across the UK with bubble markers for schools to access local provision in turn advertising for each practitioner/trainer.

- Establish itself as the first point of contact for impartial FS information, advice and guidance on all forest school matters.
- A need for a national professional body to represent FS, lobby for funding and work towards acceptance within the education sector as a recognised pedagogy.
- Establish a Forest School awarding body to ensure the future parity of training and the provision of high quality training and delivery of FS sessions throughout the UK. This would not require current practitioners to retrain, but begin the process of qualification alignment.
- Ensure FS maintains its uniqueness within the outdoor learning sector and holds its ground as a distinct practice where lack of knowledge creates ambiguity over its place alongside environmental/outdoor learning.

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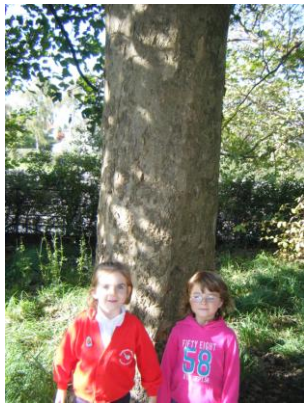
Week one - Thursday 7 October

This week the children gathered at our story telling tree and we all introduced ourselves using our Forest school name e.g. Zoe Zebra, Magic Max.

Then we played a game where the children explored the woods and when I sang '123 where are you?' the children said '123 we are here' and came back to the story telling tree.

Next we 'met a tree'. We introduced ourselves to the tree and thought about why we chose that particular tree to be ours. We also tried to identify the tree. We showed our tree to the class. Then we had biscuits, hot chocolate and juice!

Next we made our initials using natural materials and made a bark rubbing by our tree. We played a creeping up game and we each brought something back to the class to remind them of our first session. We have a journey stick and we have tied a piece of bark from the story telling tree.



Week two - Thursday 14 October |

This week we gathered by the story telling tree and told everyone our Forest School name! We thought of a reason why we felt happy today. We went to visit the trees that we met last week. We told the tree some 'news' and tried to notice if anything had changed or was different about the tree.

This week, we shared the secret about why the story telling tree no longer stands tall in the wild area! It is really a home to a dragon called 'Sneezy'. He has lived in the wild area for many years and one day while he was out, some little people moved in and set up their homes!. Sneezy returned and was very angry! He did not want to share his home with the little people so he blew down the tree! He destroyed all the homes the little people had made. Sneezy decided he had done a very bad thing and felt very sorry. He wrote the little people a special letter. We had to find the letter in the wild area. It was from Sneezy asking us if we could make some new homes for the little people. So we used sticks, twigs, leaves, stones and made a new village for the little people!

Week three - Thursday 21 October

This week we had a school open day so we had lots of visitors in the wild area. We hope they enjoyed having a look at some of the things we do at Forest Schools.

We had another letter this week but this time it was a thank you card from the 'little people'. They loved the villages and houses we made and they left a silver pine cone for everyone! We had great fun searching for them. The little people loved their homes but they asked us to make some schools for them. We had great fun making schools with football pitches, gates, park and dining rooms.

Mrs Lewis started making 'dream catchers' using willow and natural materials. We will continue with this after the half term.

We visited our tress again and finished by playing a new game called 'tree guiding'. We worked in pairs - one person closed their eyes and the other 'guided' them to a tree in the wood. The person with their eyes shut feels the tree and is then guided back. The person with their eyes shut has to decide which tree they visited!.



Week Four Thursday 4th November

Even though it was a rainy day we went up to Forest Schools and had a great time!

First we gathered by the story telling tree and we told everyone our Forest School name. We told everyone our favourite colour and a reason why.

Next, we visited our tree and we noticed lots of differences. Riley noticed some slugs had moved into his tree and Paige noticed the leaves had changed colours and lots had dropped off!

Then we turned into 'colour catchers'. We had a colour chart and we had to find something in the wild area to match the colour. We found leaves, twigs, flowers and grass.

After our snack we continued our work on our dream catchers. We also enjoyed visiting our houses and schools. We had great fun making 'extensions' and Jordan made a fantastic bonfire in case the little people wanted to have a bonfire party!



Week five - Thursday 11 November

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This week we started to learn a Forest School song! It is all about our 6 weeks at Forest School. We are hoping to perform our song to Mrs Taylor and our school council next week from the wild area.

This week we had great fun making giant picture frames and everyone found something natural from the wood to tie on to our frame. We had a look at a 'close hitch' knot and 'square lashing'.

The children loved 'free play' this week and all returned to their 'houses and schools' they had made to add bits on! Kelby found a secret door which we think may be the door to Sneezy's house underground! Joseph Jackson found a tiny frog too!



Week six - Thursday 18 November

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This week was our final week at Forest Schools. We visited our trees for the last time. We enjoyed making artwork using leaves and natural materials. We enjoyed exploring the woods for the final time.

We invited Mrs Taylor and the school council up to the woods and we performed our Forest School song to them! We made FOREST SCHOOL using sticks along the path and we found some sticks to keep to the beat!

The children, Mrs Lewis and myself have thoroughly enjoyed the 6 sessions. Thank you for all your positive feedback and I hope we can return to Forest Schools once again before the end of year 2.