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## FOREST SCHOOL



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## “Forest School and the Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto” What makes it different from all the other outside the classroom educations?

by John Cree

**T**here is no doubt Forest Schools fulfils many of the Learning Outside the Classroom (LOT) objectives. Indeed on the LOTC 'making the case' web page there are strong arguments for “the development of frequent, continuous and progressive learning experiences outside the classroom for all the young people in your school”.

One of the main features of Forest Schools is regular contact with the natural world, preferably weekly throughout the year in all weathers. Forest Schools is even singled out in two of the nine areas highlighted by the LOTC – ‘sense of place’ and ‘early years’.

Also sited on the LOTC website are the research review findings of Rickinson et al (2004) which found the key positive impacts of outdoor learning were;

- increasing knowledge and skills;
- increased social development;
- enhanced self esteem and confidence;
- improved physical and health development;
- and a change in environmental behaviours and attitudes.

I would find it hard not to argue that all these are the goals of a Forest Schools programme – but so would many other environmental/outdoor educators in their programmes. So what is it that Forest Schools does/is that distinguishes it from other ‘outside the classroom educations’?

When asked to define Forest Schools there have been many who struggle to put their finger on it. The definition arrived at by ‘the network’ in 2002 is:

*“An inspirational process that offers children, young people and adults regular opportunities to achieve, and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland environment”.*

However, for me, this still does not get to the heart of the strength of Forest Schools and that is the pedagogy it employs – one of child centred/initiated learning.

I recently had a debate with someone close to Forest Schools about whether it is really, *‘just good playwork in the natural world’*

or as some 'serious' classroom practitioners have referred to it as,

*"faffing about in the woods!"*

"No, no, no" I retorted

*"it is a carefully thought out approach to learning that takes its lead from the learners rather than the leaders/practitioners, activities or curriculum. It is an ideal vehicle for developing the capacity to learn and for the learners to take control of their learning on their own terms."*

Now this may sound like anarchy, however it is the skills of a good 'child centred' leader that can pull this off – always having the learning and development of the learner at the front of their mind and still fulfilling the curriculum. It is about shifting the power from the leader to a more 'shared' approach that is truly democratic, something rarely witnessed in our classrooms. Many environmental and outdoor educations are teacher/leader led or activity lead – and often they need to be. You wouldn't send a learner on a climbing trip without being lead by a qualified skilled leader. Likewise to learn many of the ecological concepts which govern how life works on the planet and which are often abstract, (you can hardly see energy flowing from the sun to us), it takes imaginative activities designed and led by leaders with the ecological knowledge. However, Forest Schools is fundamentally different in it's pedagogy.

So what does 'child centred' learning mean? It is so easy to say but actually so hard to do!

Many in environmental education would say 'if it is motivating them' and they are 'getting caught up

in the magic of learning in a natural environment' then this could be construed as child centred. Activities that appeal to the child's sense of play, sense of wonder, use their language and utilise their curiosity, are seen as child centred. I for one would agree with this – to a degree. However there is still a good deal of adult/teacher centred learning caught up in the 'activity'. That is not to say it isn't a good thing, but we are fooling ourselves if we believe this is 'true' child centred/initiated learning. Play has been quoted in the past as the 'purest form of learning' (Bruce, 1991) , Forest Schools is more than play. It takes a 'significant other', the Forest Schools leader and helpers or even peers, to help learners achieve their full potential and realise the knowledge and skills that they couldn't otherwise realise without the 'leader'. I actually prefer the term Forest Schools facilitator.

One of the key features that distinguishes Forest Schools from other outdoor educations is the role of the leader as 'observer' – if you let the learners explore 'themselves' the most amazing things can be seen. I have been involved with Forest Schools for the past eight years and more recently taken up the training banner. One of the most inspiringly simple actions that has seriously challenged teachers and 'outdoor/environmental' educators alike is that of observation. It takes great courage to stand back (actually I prefer sitting back as it is less threatening and is on the same level as the learners) and take on the responsibility of not interfering but observing and letting the learning flow. In fact I would agree with Mary Drummond (2003), this is probably an educators most awesome responsibility.

According to Alexander (2006), one of the chief architects of the current primary review, classroom discourse is



*It is the creativity of a natural woodland environment and the intrinsic empathy humans show for the natural world [...] combined with a skilled 'FS facilitator' that makes this 'the best place' for child centred learning.*



'overwhelmingly monologic' in form. Teachers typically offer children opportunities for making only brief response to their questions, in fact some studies (Moyles et al, 2003) have shown that up to 80% of the talk in classrooms is teacher talk – even from those that claim to be 'interactive'. Far too often, I have observed learning outside the classroom following a similar pattern. Frequently on the FS training I have conducted over the past 18 months teachers and practitioners openly admit they find it hard not to interfere and shut up! So a real distinguishing factor of Forest Schools is the role of the leader to facilitate child centred learning through prolonged observation.

One other real key distinguishing factor of Forest Schools that enables this to happen is the regular prolonged nature of Forest Schools, which should be at least once a week throughout the year. This enables the children to take more control once they are comfortable and the practitioner to be 'on tap', not 'on top' and sensitively intervene when there is a learning opportunity. The implications this has for classroom practice is phenomenal. Just last month I was assessing a trainee leader, Laura, in a Dudley reception class with predominantly 'English as an Additional Language' pupils.

Laura started the session off asking the children to explain to me the rules of Forest Schools and what they had done the previous weeks. She then asked them what they wanted to do, this was their fourth session. They formed their own groups and off they went, while Laura, her assistant and I watched the ensuing play. After approximately 10 minutes a small person grabbed me by the hand and here is the dialogue that ensued;

**CHILD** "Jon come and look at my new home" (he had been working on a shelter the previous week)

**ME** " Great.....its a bit cold in here"

**CHILD** "Yes it's wet and drafty" (this was a cold, windy, wet West Midlands day!- but I did think to myself - good language)

**ME** "mmm". 15 seconds silence (this is important, teachers on average give maximum 5 seconds thinking time – (Kontos, 1999))

**CHILD** "I need a door"

**ME** "have you any door shapes in mind"

The next exchange was, for me, pure child centred learning and a perfect example of this 'on tap' approach. Laura had been listening in while sharing a mud castle being made by two of the children on one of the mole hills.

At least a minute's silence, wandering around and thinking had gone on.

**LAURA** "do you remember the shapes we were looking at last week in the class"

**CHILD** "ahh – a rectangle. That's the one with two long and two short".

The child then went off to find two long sticks and two short. He then mused a long time and came over to me again.

**CHILD** "not sure how to join these"

**ME** "would you like me to help"

**CHILD** "yes"

**ME** "do you have any ideas on how to join them"

**CHILD** "mmm", (more silence) "string!".

And low and behold without any prompting from either me or Laura he asked her for string, which she asked her assistant to get from the classroom. The child ended up making a door he was very proud of (still drafty, mind!).

While this may seem a small incident, for Laura, who is clearly a skilled early years practitioner, it was symptomatic of a huge shift from being 'on top' to 'on tap'. She admitted she had to fight all her instincts to intervene and show him what he might do. The resulting learning from her point of view, and the child's, was far more powerful. What he had done was take ownership of the learning, invested his own thoughts into the door and applied learning inside the classroom to a real life situation outside the classroom – exactly what the LOTC manifesto is espousing. What, for me, was so gratifying was watching Laura observe our interaction and intervene with just one small but powerful memory jogger and being 'on tap' for the string!

The study carried out by O'Brien and Murray into Forest Schools (2005) did show up some of the distinguishing features of Forest Schools from other 'outdoor educations'. Ie

- the use of a woodland setting
- a high ratio of adults to pupils
- learning linked to the National Curriculum and Foundation-Stage objectives
- the freedom to explore using multiple senses
- regular contact for the children with Forest School over a significant period of time



It is my belief, however, that the principle power of Forest Schools is its capacity to encourage a greater disposition for learning through a truly child centred approach. It is the creativity of a natural woodland environment and the intrinsic empathy humans show for the natural world, as espoused by the biologist E O Wilson (1979), combined with a skilled 'FS facilitator' that makes this 'the best place' for child centred learning. ■

#### Author's Notes

Jon Cree is training Co-ordinator for Bishops Wood Centre, Worcestershire County Council Children's Service. Jon runs the FS training, both the level 1,2 and 3 courses and CPD for Worcestershire County Council Childrens Service at Bishops Wood, is a member of the Institute for Outdoor Learning FS Special Interest Group and the FS Open College Network Trainers Network.

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**Photos:** All from the author

**BOYS** and **GIRL'S** reflections  
of a 6-week  
**FOREST SCHOOL**  
programme





**A**s part of my degree in Adventure Education, I was required to spend a year working in the sector - I decided to spend my year working as a teaching assistant at a local primary school. In my placement year I also wanted to undertake my Forest Schools (level 3) training. Already believing in the philosophy of Forest Schools and wanting to be able to be a teacher with an 'outdoor edge', I knew this was for me.

During Forest Schools sessions, children are encouraged to follow their own interests and explore their natural surroundings. At the beginning of each session, a taught skill is introduced to the group. In my sessions skills such as whittling, fire building, shelter building and coppicing were introduced and then children were free to take part or pursue their own interests. I lead the Year 4 class (12 children at a time) for six weeks. Once a week the children would visit local woodland for a morning. There was no real rationale for choosing the year 4's other than I was the TA in their class during the week and knew the children well. After the six weeks had finished, I interviewed all the children and asked them to reflect on their time in a Forest School.

I wanted to use the interviews to evaluate my own teaching and learning, to see what the children got out of Forest Schools and if it had any impact on them. While reviewing the recorded interviews it was quite clear that boys and girls had very different perceptions and opinions on their time in a Forest School. The purpose of this article is to highlight them briefly and try to explore the answers they gave.

After watching the videos back and noticing this difference in gender perceptions of Forest Schools, I attempted to turn to literature to investigate. I was unable to find any research on gender differences at Forest Schools. I therefore, had to look at studies that investigated male and female perceptions of nature, connectedness to nature and biophilia. I see these as some of the important elements of Forest Schools, and relevant to the themes mentioned in the children's reflections.

In various studies that looked at gender differences in environmentalism I found that women report stronger attitudes and behaviors towards the environment compared to men. This was found to be the case across age and race. It was found that females across most cultures are shaped by socialisation to have a stronger ethic of care, social responsibility and to be more compassionate and nurturing, whereas males are generally brought up to be competitive and autonomous (Arnocky and Stroink, 2010).

Research into biophilia or ecocentrism, comments that women are 'evolutionary programmed' to respond more positively to therapeutic interactions with natural settings (Kellert and Wilson, 1993). Males however, have been found to benefit more from being outside, as the environment allows them to take part in physical activities that they would be disciplined for indoors (Jacobsen, 2012).

The research presented draws a myriad of similarities in their findings, yet there are some flaws in methodology, for instance most research only took snap shots of children's experiences in the outdoors. The research also fails to investigate the role of the teacher/ facilitator/ outdoor leader in children's perceptions of nature. Instead it focused on biophobic parents perceptions of nature. All studies that looked at connectedness to nature used questionnaires that were either filled in online or indoors.

The piece of research aims to elaborate on children's views of outdoor education programmes such as Forest Schools using qualitative methods of data collection.

At the end of the six-week programme children were interviewed using a semi-structured interview. Children were interviewed outdoors in a wooded area in front of a video camera. They were given seven questions to answer, but were also encouraged to talk as much as they liked. There was no interviewer present, 17 boys and 14 girls took part in the interview.

- If you had to describe Forest Schools to a stranger, how would you explain it?
- Should all children take part in Forest Schools?
- What have you learnt to do at Forest Schools?
- Have you learnt anything about yourself at Forest Schools?
- Have you learnt anything about working with others at Forest Schools?
- Is there anything you would like to change about Forest Schools?
- Is there anything else you would like to say?

The answers collected from the children were listened to and themes identified. Figure 1, clearly shows that there was a difference between boys and girls in some of their answers. I will investigate the most contrasting answers given by the children.

**Figure 1 (overleaf), Response to Forest Schools Themes.**

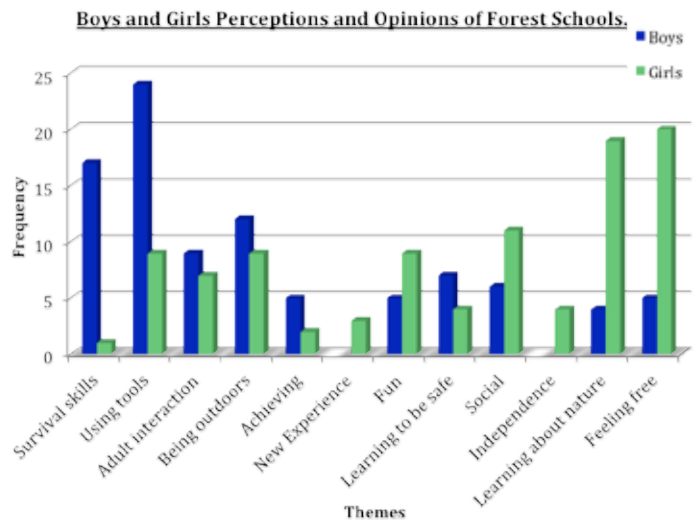
Boys mentioned 'survival skills' as an important facet of Forest Schools. This is an interesting theme that arose, as during my sessions not once were the children told that Forest Schools was about learning survival skills. A justification for this response could come from influences of TV personalities such as Bear Grylls. Due to the few female survival experts on TV it is not surprising that

girls mentioned it less. While reflecting upon this theme I questioned my own presence as the leader and what effect being a young male 'outdoorsy' role model can have on the boys in that group. It would be interesting to investigate the effect a male or female Forest Schools leader has on the children's perceptions.

Another contrasting theme was 'learning about nature'. It was mentioned less than five times by boys and nearly 20 times by the girls. Even though the children were doing exactly the same activities during Forest Schools, it was the girls who made a bigger connection with nature. A phrase that was also used by the girls only was 'learning with nature'; I chose to link this theme in with 'learning about nature'.

The choice of language is very curious as it may indicate that girls see the natural environment as more than an outdoor classroom but also as something they share a connection with. This deduction is supported by studies that measured individual's connectedness with nature, (Mayer and Frantz, 2004). There are many thoughts regarding females' affinity to nature; some believe that an ecofeminist-evolutionary standpoint can help to explain how this is part of the nurturing process that is developed through motherhood.

The last contrasting answer was 'feeling free', with girls expressing more affiliation. This answer is the most interesting. Possible explanations for this answer may be explained by females 'evolutionary programming' and that people have a biologically based need to feel connected with



the natural world. Further research is needed to explore this theme more, what does it mean to feel free while outdoors? Why is it that the girls mentioned this significantly more than the boys?

It was interesting to note that males mentioned 'feeling free' far less. This could be due to the interview style chosen. The boys all gave much shorter answers to their questions the boys tended to give less descriptive answers that were more physically expressive compared to girl's answers that are more narrative and linguistically longer. Boys chose to talk on average for 3:45 minutes, whereas girls chose to talk for an average of 5:12 minutes. Therefore boys may have mentioned feeling free eventually but found it hard to communicate this.

The interview style I chose could be seen to have both positive and negative qualities; with no interviewer children may have felt less intimidated. However, having no interviewer meant that some themes that should have been investigated further were not.

In conclusion this short piece of research revealed marked differences between the responses of boys and girls in relation to their Forest Schools experience. It prompts further research and a discussion of whether these differences can be explained through an evolutionary perspective. The responses highlight how powerful experiences in nature can be. I look forward to exploring these themes (and others) in more depth as I develop my own personal and facilitative philosophy of natural encounters.

On a final note, I would like to collect a variety of data from children of all ages who take part in Forest Schools. If you could help out with my final year dissertation, I would be very grateful if you could email me at [Sgarbut1@chi.ac.uk](mailto:Sgarbut1@chi.ac.uk) and we can discuss this further. ■



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#### About the author:

Stuart Garbutt is in his final year of Adventure Education at the University of Chichester. He aims to take part in a teacher training programme next September and become a primary school teacher. He believes fully in the power of outdoor education and loves to teach outdoors, he looks forward to pursuing his career in education. **Photograph** Main image by Elspeth Mason. Insert images from the author.