

Background information to outdoor learning in the UK

It must be clarified that Forest School in the UK is not the same as the practice observed in many Scandinavian countries. Denmark, along with other Scandinavian countries, all share a historical-cultural concept called 'Friluftsliv'. This term expresses the idea that the people of these countries have the desire to connect with the natural environment in different ways and over prolonged periods of time. In the minority of cases in the more rural areas of the UK, there may be similarities in the way communities interact with their environment. Across the rest of the UK, where increasing urbanisation has potentially reduced the quality of outdoor experiences, a Forest School approach will provide further opportunities for young people to have meaningful and purposeful connections with the outdoors. Where there is still significant space in many areas of Scandinavia it will hopefully remain a cultural and educational expectation that young children will be in the outdoor environment for long periods of time (Knight, 2013). While the majority of Forest School Programmes are being run for young people in full-time education, there are also limited opportunities across the UK for the approach to be used with teenagers and adults who have emotional and behavioural difficulties. When considering a Scandinavian approach to outdoor learning, this would be focused around early years settings and only bears a vague resemblance to the Forest Schools we see in the UK. The term 'Forest School' is a made up English name for what had been seen in Denmark. The settings one might visit in Denmark are 'skovbørne-haver', (forest or wood kindergarten 'skovgruppe' (forest or wood groups), 'naturbørnehaver' (nature kindergartens) and ordinary early years setting that embrace the outdoors (Williams-Sieghedsen, 2012, p1).

The English National Curriculum and Early Years Foundation Stage in England, and benefits of Learning Outside of the Classroom:

When considering the origins of the Forest School approach, from the visit of Bridgwater College to Denmark in 1993, it was developed initially around early years practice and settings. Bridgwater College staff and students were inspired by what they saw and on returning to Somerset began to deliver Forest School sessions for nursery children at the college. Having developed a system for early years children, they then developed sessions for children with special needs at the college and eventually offered it other students across the college (Knight, 2013).

The Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum (DfES, 2007) now requires all settings to recognise the importance of outdoor learning for children. It can be said that this is an opportunity for practitioners to engage with the value of the outdoor environment, whether or not they feel fully able to deliver a Forest School programme. However it needs to be noted that since the revised version of the Early Years Foundation Stage Curriculum (EYFSC) came into force in 2012, the emphasis on giving children access to the outdoors on a daily basis has been removed.

Importantly though, it does still recognise the importance of the outdoor environment in the development of young children (DfES, 2007 and DfE, 2012).

There has been acknowledgement over the past decade from current and previous governments as to the value of outdoor education for children and young people.

Recent government initiatives have defined the value of outdoor education. These initiatives include The Every Child Matters Agenda (DfES, 2007), High Quality Outdoor Education (Ordinance Survey, 2005) and the Learning Outside the

Classroom Manifesto (DCSF, 2008). These initiatives in conjunction with the PE, School Sport and Club Links (PESSCL) Strategy (DfES, 2002), and The National Curriculum Statutory Inclusion Statement (DfEE/QCA, 1999), will be discussed below in relation to how outdoor education may help facilitate some of the aims associated with these initiatives.

Outdoor learning supports the achievement of the objectives set out by The National Curriculum Statutory Inclusion Statement (DfEE/QCA, 1999), whereby teachers should set suitable learning challenges, respond to pupils' diverse learning needs and overcome potential barriers to learning. This is achieved through active participation by all, regardless of skill level or ability. The ethos at the centre of learning outdoors is the internal experience and process children and young people undergo, and it is therefore intended to be accessible for all (Moore, 1990).

The Learning Outside of the Classroom (LOTIC) manifesto defines learning outside the classroom as 'the use of places other than the classroom for teaching and learning' (DfES, 2006). The manifesto states, 'we believe that every young person should experience the world beyond the classroom as an essential part of learning and personal development, whatever their age, ability or circumstances' (DfES, 2006, p2).

It highlights the importance of these experiences to help make sense of the world around us, making links between feelings and learning. They are memorable experiences that remain through adulthood and impact positively on our behaviour, lifestyle and work. They influence our values and the decisions we make. The research within the LOTIC manifesto emphasises that learning is maximised when

physical, visual and naturalistic ways of learning are combined alongside our mathematical and linguistic intelligence. This is supported by Gardner's Multiple Intelligences theory where he outlines eight different types of intelligence that can be used for different ways of learning, problem solving, receiving, processing and using information (Yavuz, 2001 cited in Yenice and Aktamis, 2010). This will be discussed later in further detail within the context of Forest School pedagogy and related underpinning theory.

It has been identified that there is great value placed on outdoor learning and how it can enrich the curriculum (DfES, 2006; Ofsted 2008; House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee, 2010). The Office for Standards In Education (Ofsted), within their Learning outside the classroom report (2008), concluded that hands on activities (day and residential visits, field studies, investigations of the local area, sporting events and music and drama productions) led to improved pupil outcomes, including increased achievement, standards, engagement, personal growth and behaviour. It explains that outdoor education gives depth to the curriculum and makes an important contribution to students' physical, personal and social education.

The House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee (2010) made a number of conclusions and recommendations based around the transformation of education outside the classroom. These included adequate funding for learning outside the classroom as well as resources provided for the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom and the Quality Badge scheme (nationally recognised indicator of good quality educational provision). In addition there should be equality of opportunity for learning outside the classroom across all classes and backgrounds

and that a families' ability to pay should not be a deterrent to schools offering or pupils participating in visits. There should be an individual entitlement within the National Curriculum to at least one out of school visit a term. There was a recommendation for Ofsted to include learning outside the classroom provision, as part of the curriculum, in its inspection framework. Schools should monitor the number of and range of learning of learning outside the classroom activities provided. There should be further guidance in relation to Health and Safety is published at the earliest opportunity to ensure that this was not used as an excuse for curtailing provision. Schools should have an explicit policy on learning outside the classroom, covering both the educational and health and safety aspects of this provision. Finally, it stated that learning outside the classroom supports pupils' learning and development and has the potential to enrich and enliven teaching across all subjects – importantly it emphasised the need for teachers to be exposed to learning outside the classroom from early on in their career and that there should be clearer and more consistent presence for learning outside the classroom across initial teacher training.

Challenges to outdoor learning provision

There are growing concerns about the lack access to nature by children, and that they are not able to regularly visit outdoor spaces as previous generations have done (O'Brien, 2009). This 'Nature Deficit Disorder' has been described by Louv (2005, p34) in terms of 'the human costs of alienation from nature, among them: diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses'. Risk and bureaucracy are often raised as key issues to interfere with opportunities for learning outside the classroom. There are also increasing

concerns about children's safety in outdoor spaces (O'Brien and Murray, 2007). Parents, it is suggested are reluctant in letting children play outdoors for fear of strangers, traffic or violence. It is also suggested that this has resulted in children focussing more on home-centred activities such as computers, video games and television. This is potentially having a negative impact on children's social and emotional competence while also contributing to reduced activity levels and an epidemic of child obesity (Maynard, 2007). Rickinson *et al.* (2004) in their review of research on outdoor learning identify a number of challenges. Some of these include fear and concern about young people's health and safety. One of the main reasons for this has been down to a number of well-publicised accidents involving school children. This has resulted in reduced confidence in activity centres and therefore head teachers and schools reluctant to offer similar opportunities for their pupils. A point raised by one of the main teaching unions advising their members is highlighted in the review, 'members are advised against taking school trips because society no longer appears to accept the concept of a genuine accident' (Clare, 2004 cited in Rickinson *et al.*, 2004, p42). There seems to be a social trend towards managing and assessing risk excessively, but also towards seeking compensation for acts or omissions that result in personal injury (Thomas, 1999 cited in Rickinson *et al.*, 2004). Gill (2007 cited in Elliott, 2015) noted that there can be a reluctance when allowing children to take risks in their learning. Due to the concerns around risk and health and safety implications, childcare workers overwhelming priority is to return children to parents unscathed. This in turn reduces opportunities for children to explore, experiment and step outside of their comfort zone as there is close supervision of activities which is often directed and heavily controlled. According to

Furedi (2008 cited in Van den Berge, 2013, p392) parents cannot escape the predominant culture of 'paranoid parenting'. This paranoia may lead to over-parenting and parent-blaming. He makes a number of conclusions, highlighting the need for parents to regain their self confidence and to try and understand some of the pressure placed upon them, so that they can protect themselves from it. They may still have fears but will hopefully gain a more balanced perspective.

The government have recently produced a document 'Health and safety: advice on legal duties and powers for local authorities, school leaders, school staff and governing bodies (2014). Some of the aims of this document were to reassure schools as to the requirements for ensuring appropriate health and safety measures for on and off site activities, and to address some of the fears and myths that exist in schools in regards to risk. It highlights that schools need not carry out a risk assessment every time they undertake an activity that usually forms part of the school day, for example, taking pupils to a local venue which it frequently visits, such as a swimming pool, park, or place of worship. The statement from the Health and Safety Executive (HSE) wants to 'encourage all schools and local authorities to remove wasteful bureaucracy – so that they focus only on real risks and not on paperwork' (p5). It further underlined the fact that criminal cases relating to school accidents are very rare. The emphasis of the guidance is on striking the right balance between protecting children and young people from risk whilst allowing them to learn and develop a range of skills and qualities from the experience of different opportunities outside the classroom. This relies upon appropriate training and communication from the head of a school and their senior management team,

as well as learning outside of the classroom being an integral part of a broad, balanced and creative curriculum.

Another major challenge, and what that is particularly pertinent to the researcher and the researcher's institution, is teachers' confidence and expertise and learning outdoors. It was underlined that teachers with greater expertise in the outdoors were able to provide pupils with appropriate challenge and support, compared with those who were less experienced who tended to opt for less challenge and well within the capacity of the child (Clay, 1999 cited in Rickinson *et al.*, 2004). In addition Maynard and Waters (2007) found that there was reluctance amongst practitioners to access the outdoor environment in inclement weather. Alternatively Farstad (2005 cited in Elliott, 2015) emphasises the point that 'there is no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing'. It is an area that must be developed across all ITE provision as well as part of teachers' ongoing professional development. This is supported by issues raised by Simmons (1998) in her research on Chicago teachers' willingness to use outdoor natural settings. Her research study found that 'teachers did not believe that they were particularly well trained to teach in natural areas...they seemed to believe that their classes were too large to manage and they lacked the necessary background to teach in such places'. They may have also been a negative attitude towards the weather and the potential risk of getting cold and dirty (1998, p31 cited in Rickinson *et al.*, 2004, p43).

As noted by Titman (1999 cited in Rickinson *et al.*, 2004) the schools that made the best use of the schools site as well as opportunities off site for outdoor learning, were those with a head teacher who was actively involved in and committed to the ethos. There was status and profile given to regular opportunities for learning

outside of the classroom and they were more likely to facilitate use through the management structures e.g. allocating a special post for the purposes of outdoor learning.

Waite (2010 cited in Cumming and Nash, 2015) argues that schools are increasingly focused on national testing and performance outcomes which only continue to increase a results driven ethos as opposed to the one mentioned above, and therefore time devoted to outdoor programmes can be lost. This is discussed in more detail within chapter 4 (Discussion of findings) of this research project as it is a theme identified from the data collected.

Increasing demand for Forest School

A number of challenges and obstacles have been discussed above and a conclusion can be made that as a result there are fewer opportunities for children and young people to explore the outdoors. Because of this and based on some of the reasons outlined, then new approaches such as Forest School are needed to address this.

As mentioned earlier, previous research and recommendations highlight the value of outdoor play in relation to the integration of cognitive, emotional and social behaviours (Maynard, 2007; O'Brien and Murray, 2007; O'Brien, 2009). Due to some of the changes in modern life, for example concerns regarding activity levels and obesity, mental health issues and concerns about climate change and negative impacts on our environment, it might be argued that children need to have increased opportunities to explore the natural world around them, and hopefully develop an active interest in sustaining our natural resources (O'Brien, 2009).

Forest School can positively contribute to a child's health by giving them time to actively explore a green space on a regular basis. There is further evidence that the

role of experiential learning in the outdoors has potentially great value and a number of short term and long term benefits (Moss, 2012 cited in Convery *et al.*, 2015). In O'Brien's study (2009) of 24 children from 7 Oxfordshire schools, she observed improvements in children's confidence and self-esteem, motivation, concentration, language and communication and physical skills. Fjortoft (2004 cited in Elliott, 2015) noted that there were physical benefits for children exploring and playing in a natural environment rather than a more traditional playground. This observation is further supported by the Forestry Commission who recognise the importance and benefits of teaching most subjects within a natural environment. The rise in popularity of Forest Schools has also been down to increased support from the Forest Education Initiative (FEI). The FEI 'aims to increase the knowledge and appreciation of woodlands, particularly with children, and to support and help establish Forest Schools throughout the UK' (Convery *et al.*, 2015, p2).

The above analysis provides some context of the need for further continuing professional development opportunities as part of the initial teacher training process.

Visits to Eskilstuna, Sweden: 2013 - 2017

As part of both the postgraduate and undergraduate ITE programmes, groups of primary trainees have visited the country for professional development opportunities, linked to the Masters Specialism module, Forest School Pedagogy, as well as the Forest Schools and Early Years modules. The following summary highlights the intended and achieved outcomes along with the benefits and issues related to this visit. It is intended to provide information to consider for developing a possible

framework for future work in relation to the strategic plan of Newman University and possible CPD opportunities that may be developed.

Context of the Field Visits

The field visits facilitated opportunities for Newman University students to engage with Forest/Nature schools in Sweden, as well as cross-curricular opportunities in relation to outdoor learning. Over the last four years as part of each visit, students visited the Nature School and Malardalen University in Eskilstuna across three days. Whilst visiting Malardalen University, the students met with Swedish ITE students and discussed some of the key issues when comparing teacher education both in Sweden and in the UK.

However the majority of the visit was spent at the Nature school in Eskilstuna. There were two main themes whilst at the Nature School, led by Ann-Sofie Tedenljung Marlene Ness and Magnus Svarfvar. The first was "Fire, techniques, heat", alongside craft making from natural materials. Students explored the use of different plants for coloring materials such as wool, spinning techniques, different ways of carding wool, making coasters and hooks, hangers and slings out of branches, burning clay in fire, making charcoal crayons, art and sculpture in the snow. On both days students were encouraged to cook outdoors which included bread making. Students learnt how to light fires and used these new skills as part of the cooking process.

The second theme on day two was pedagogy in the outdoor environment. The importance of "dry, warm and full" was highlighted to students when considering taking children outside for extended periods of time. The three Swedish practitioners modelled a range of strategies that explored different subject areas in an outdoor classroom. These included a 'walking' timeline linked to major historical events,

exploration of shape as well as activities that might develop social and communication skills. An ongoing theme, extremely relevant to society in all countries currently, is around conservation and sustainability. Students were given regular opportunities to discuss and reflect on current issues and the potential impact on the children they teach. Practical ideas were effectively modelled and discussed as to good classroom practice.

Intended Outcomes

- Professional development opportunities for Primary trainees through exploration of the Forest School ethos and the benefits of outdoor education:
 - Long term process in a local natural space, on a regular basis
 - Structure based on observations and joint work between learners and practitioners
 - Fostering a relationship with nature
 - Use of natural resources for inspiration
 - Develop physical, social, cognitive, linguistic, emotional and spiritual aspects of the learner
 - Use of tools and fire
 - Experience follows a risk-benefit process
 - Being a reflective practitioner
 - Learner-centred pedagogical approach
 - Play and choice an integral part of outdoor learning

- Further develop the already existing relationships and discuss collaborative opportunities that may exist between Newman University, Malardalen University and the Naturskolan:
 - o Further develop/consolidate existing relationship between Newman and Malardalen University. Future visits from Newman University students and reciprocal visits by Malardalen ITE students
 - o Continuing links and CPD opportunities with Nature School and staff in Eskilstuna
- Opportunities for collaborative writing and research

The Student Experience

Prior to the visit, students were provided with accurate information in preparation for the visit. Clear guidelines, medical needs, risk assessments and information pack which included the planned itinerary, was provided to all students. Care and attention to detail ensured reduction in the risks during the visits and there were no issues relating to health and safety.

Whilst in Sweden, briefings held at the start and end of each day not only supported reflection time but also allowed for discussion around any challenges or issues that had arisen during the visits. Furthermore, it supported the 'well-being' of the students with contact being maintained by all staff and adults in the group.

Having observed all students during the visit, it needs to be highlighted how open-minded, professional and willing the students were to take on board all the information and practical activities they participated in. They were a credit to both the university and to themselves and I am confident that the visit will have had a positive impact on them personally and professionally. They established positive

relationships within the group as well as with the Nature School staff, Malardalen University staff and students. Having spoken in some depth to all students, it was clear to see their understanding of the positive impact the outdoor environment might have on the development of a child.

It is important to note that many of the students who attended the visit to Sweden have on to set up their own outdoor learning and Forest School areas across schools in the West Midlands.