

ARR3: Exploring the role of forest schools in secondary schools: a case study

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Introduction

There has been recent interest and research into the benefits of Forest School for younger children (Houghton and Redfern, 2013). However, this research is intended to identify whether the Forest School approach can be of benefit to secondary aged students, and if so, what the benefits are to the students and their teachers. The research suggests secondary pupils can benefit from the experience of Forest School; pupils seemed to be happier and worried less in school after participating in the sessions.



Figure 1: Collage created by pupil to represent feelings about Forest School

Research setting

This is a small action research project carried out within a secondary school setting. The school provides mainstream, mixed-sex education to students aged between 11 and 18 years. A class of twelve male Year 7 students attended six Forest School sessions between October 2015 and January 2016. The class worked together for English and Humanities lessons each week with additional emphasis on developing literacy skills within a nurturing environment. For the majority of the Forest School sessions the group were supported by a teacher and teaching assistant. Forest School sessions were led by a Forest School trained practitioner who liaised closely with the class teacher prior to Forest School sessions. Sessions took place roughly alternate weeks with an extended gap over the Christmas period.

Research Question

Can Forest School support the development of skills in the secondary classroom?

The core questions that shaped this research were:

- What role does Forest School play in encouraging Y7 students to engage in learning?
- How can Forest School help students in the classroom?

Research interest and questions

Based on professional instincts, developed during several years working as a teacher in a range of educational settings, including a Short Stay School and working as a teacher of children without an educational placement, it appeared that many children lose confidence in themselves as learners. This can lead to a lack of engagement in the formal and traditional school system. Experience suggests that children who have negative experience of education and who develop negative views of themselves as learners can participate in inappropriate risk-taking behaviours.

Playing outside allows children to learn about risk assessment and risk taking. Children that are exposed to appropriate levels of risk at a young age are less likely to make bad judgments in the future. (Kent County Council, 2007-2013, p3)

In addition, experience of working in a mainstream school setting with a broad intake of ability led to the belief that students with additional literacy needs may benefit from attending Forest School as a means of developing confidence in their ability as learners and that this would therefore have a positive impact on their work inside the classroom.

Existing research

A growing amount of research suggests that outdoor play is essential for the development and well-being of young people and that numerous personal and interpersonal skills are developed through outdoor play. Young people need to have opportunities to learn to take appropriate risks and to develop confidence, resilience and independence when playing outdoors. These skills can help equip young people for a positive future.

...children also need opportunities to play out in an unstructured way, without too much adult supervision. This is how they learn independence, self-control and social skills, essential if they are eventually to be self-regulating teenagers and adults. (Palmer, 2007, p.54)







Forest School is one of the ways in which outdoor play can be included within the curriculum. When introducing Forest School there are several features that need to be considered, these include providing a different setting to the usual one; it should be a wild place. The environment needs to allow young people to take manageable risks and sessions should take place regardless of the weather. Learning is led by the young people and sessions have a definite start and finish. Young people have regular sessions over an extended period of time. Forest School sessions need to be led by a Forest School trained practitioner.

Forest School supports many areas of the curriculum such as Art, English, Geography and Physical Education. For some young people, the school environment is a difficult place to succeed.

Forest School is particularly suited to those who may struggle with the school environment and provides them with a setting where they can excel at practical tasks while learning. (Kent County Council, 2007-2013, p7)

Forest School provides a different setting and opportunities for practical tasks to be completed successfully, leading to increased self-confidence and self-esteem. A different setting can also give staff working with the students a greater understanding of young people: this could lead to a greater awareness of the young person's needs and identification of alternative ways to support them within an educational setting.

Research Process

 <p>Step 1</p>	<p>QUESTIONNAIRE</p> <p>Students were asked to complete a questionnaire before and after their Forest School experience. The aims of this were to gain general information about the attitudes of students towards themselves as learners and towards literacy based subjects in school. Students were also asked about their interests outside of school.</p>
 <p>Step 2</p>	<p>OBSERVATIONS</p> <p>During the Forest School sessions the teacher made notes of points of interest observed in individual students. The teaching assistant also identified issues that were then recorded by the teacher.</p>
 <p>Step 3</p>	<p>FOREST SCHOOL JOURNAL AND DIAMOND 9</p> <p>Each student was given a journal to record information about Forest School sessions. Students were informed that their input within the journals would not require that they follow the usual school guidelines for presentation of work. Journals were used to record Forest School experiences and complete tasks set by the teacher.</p> <p>Pupils were asked to use diamond 9 activity to identify priorities for skill development</p>
 <p>Step 4</p>	<p>DATA ANALYSIS</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The results of the questionnaires were compared. 2. Observations and comments made by students during and about Forest School were recorded and later analysed. 3. The journals were used to record students’ views and thoughts on Forest School. This information was later analysed.
 <p>Step 5</p>	<p>MAIN FINDINGS</p> <p>A review of the data identified the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The vast majority of students enjoyed the Forest School experience and were able to identify how they believed it helped them within the wider school. 2. The vast majority of students had positive experiences at Forest School and this helped to define the students’ self-concept and wider life skills.
 <p>Step 6</p>	<p>DISSEMINATION OF FINDINGS</p> <p>The findings of this study will be shared with staff at the school and the Forest School teacher. The findings will also be shared at the ‘East Lancashire Schools Support Alliance Research and Development Conference’ in June 2016.</p>

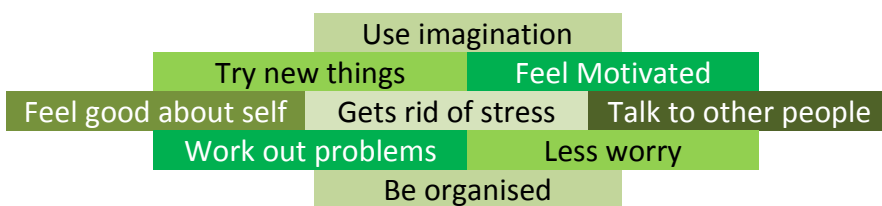


Figure 2: Diamond 9: identifying pupil priorities

Top Tip!

Make sure there are spare wellies, warm clothing and waterproofs available for students to use.

Observations

The teacher made notes during the Forest School sessions of students' comments and actions. Sam was tearful before the first session and did not want to go. He did not bring a change of clothes and agreed that he would stand with the teacher and observe for the first session, rather than join in. However, on arrival at Forest School, he got involved immediately and recorded in his journal that it was good. Following the fourth Forest School session, Sam said to the teacher *'I really do like this, can we do it again?'*

'It was awesome and I can't wait for next time...I've enjoyed learning things I've never learnt before...I will give Forest School a five star review because that's how good it is.'

Stuart's mum raised concerns before the session, and was worried about her son becoming distressed if he got his hands dirty; it was agreed he would wear ski gloves, however, he removed them so that he could feel a piece of bark. During the fourth session Stuart asked to remove his gloves so that he could light a fire. He described his experience as *'Awesome'*.

Another positive response was from Steven, who thanked the teacher for the lesson. In 17 years of teaching, it was the first time the teacher had been thanked by a student for a lesson. This was very positive feedback for the teacher and confirmed that the sessions were of value and benefit to the students.

Journals

Students used journals to record their Forest School experiences. They were informed that the usual school work guidelines did not apply, they could write in pencil, draw in pen, did not have to write the date, a title or underline headings. Students were also informed that although the teacher would monitor their work, the journals would not be marked. This decision was made to try and encourage students to feel free in their work and not be restrained by having to 'get it right'. On occasions the teacher gave clear directions about the nature of the task to be completed in the journals; on other occasions students were able to decide what they would record.

Comments recorded by students about their Forest School experience include: *'Forest School has helped me get more organised by bringing my Forest School clothes...Forest School is a place where you open your mind to the world of your imagination.'*

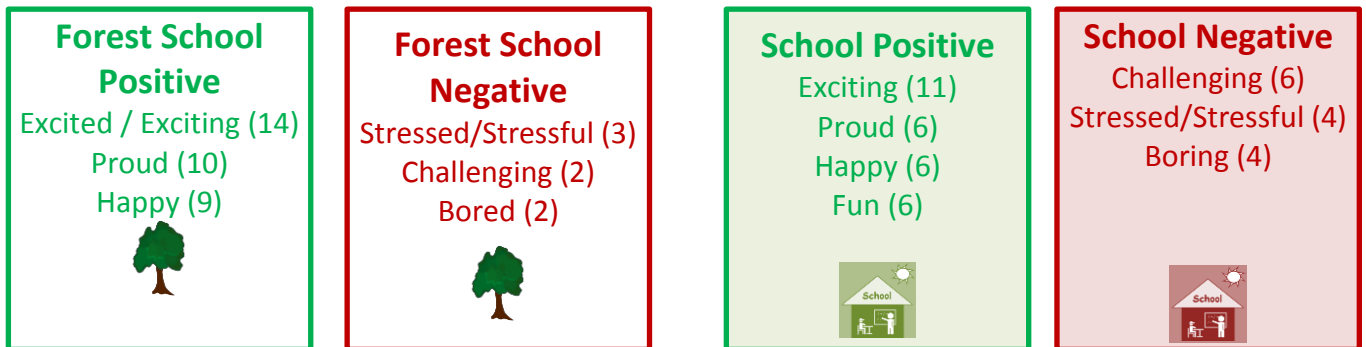


An illustration from student's Forest School journal showing an activity

Another student highlighted the positive benefits *'It was awesome and I can't wait for next time...I've enjoyed learning things I've never learnt before...I will give Forest School a five star review because that's how good it is.'*

Following a Forest School session another referred to skills developed: *'We worked as a team...Today we did fire-lighting, it was super fun...It also helps people work as a team and make friends.'*

Descriptions of School and Forest School



Forest School:
13 positive and 7 negative words

Usual School:
10 positive and 14 negative words.

FOREST SCHOOL A POSITIVE EXPERIENCE

The charts above show the most popular words, and frequency of both positive and negative words used when describing Forest School and usual school. These results suggest that students had positive experiences when working in both the Forest School and in their usual school lessons.

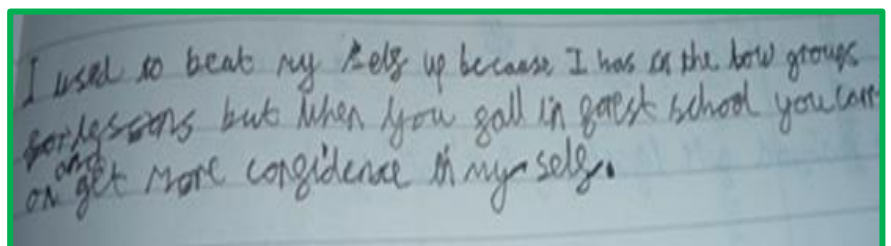
It appears that there were more positive experiences and feelings about Forest School. Students also used fewer negative words when describing Forest School, suggesting their experience at Forest School was positive when compared to their usual school.

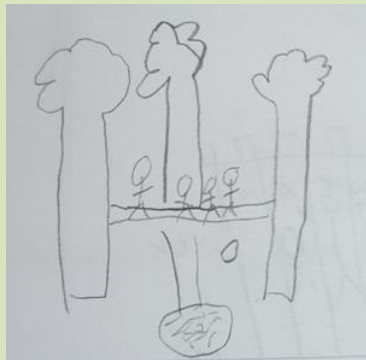
Based on the teacher’s knowledge of the group and general discussion in the classroom, the word ‘challenging’ was perceived to be a negative word.

Whereas, the word ‘exciting’ was used most frequently when describing both Forest School and the students’ usual school; this may suggest that students had a positive attitude towards school and their learning.

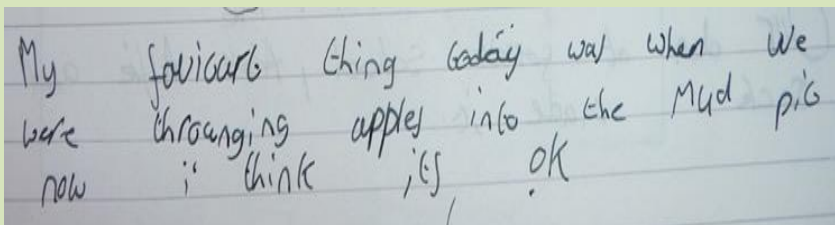
The use of the words ‘challenging’ and ‘stressful’ may suggest that some students felt some anxiety about their learning and school.

Pupils reported in their journal how the Forest School experience was changing how they felt about themselves and as this extract suggests it may also be having an impact on their sense of self-worth.





Picture and extract from pupil journal.



Questionnaires

The questionnaire completed by students before and after engaging in Forest School suggests that they felt happier and worried less in school after participating in the sessions. Far fewer students felt worried about issues associated with school after they had taken part in Forest School sessions.

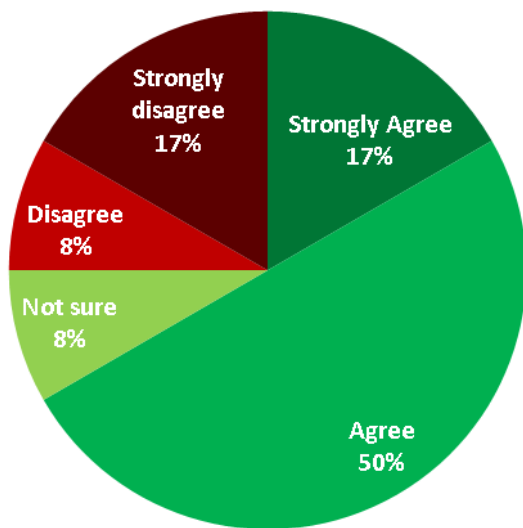


Figure 1: Before Forest School Intervention

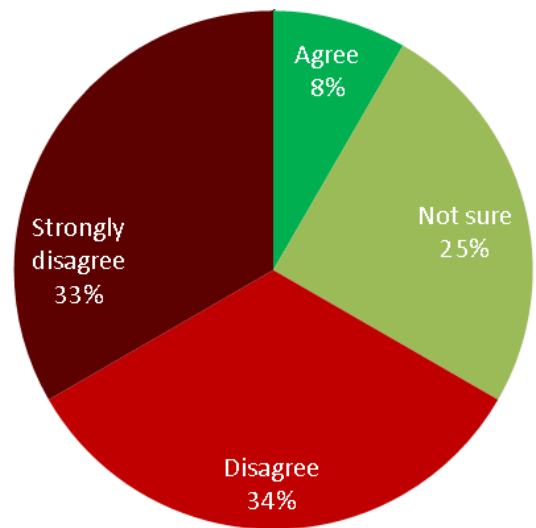
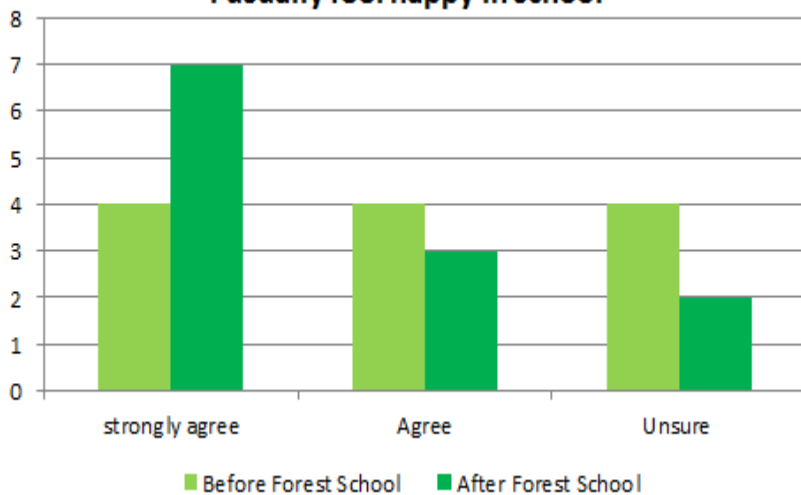


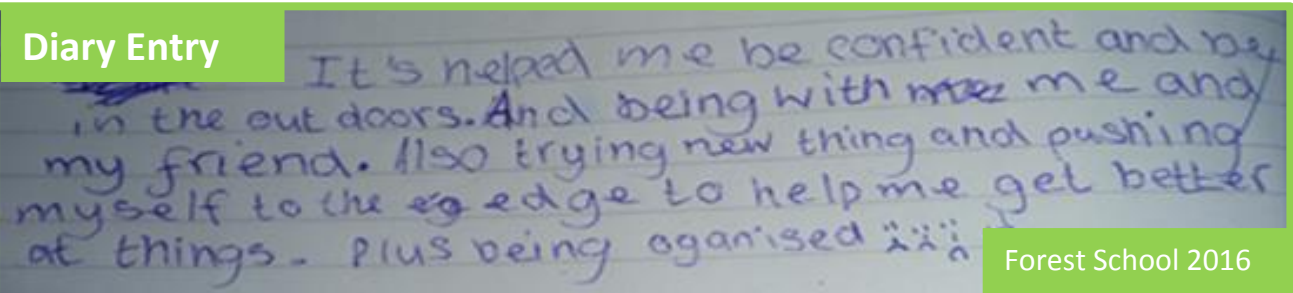
Figure 2: After Forest School Intervention

I usually feel happy in school



There is a shift in the numbers of students feeling happy in school, before Forest school eight pupils felt happy, and 4 were unsure. After Forest School, ten agreed or strongly agreed they felt happy and only two were unsure. The biggest increase was the number who strongly agreed they felt happy rose by 75%

Diary Entry





Forest School 2016

Teacher views

A QUESTION OF EXPERIENCE

The class teacher had very limited knowledge and experience of Forest School but did have a keen interest and enthusiasm. As sessions were led by the Forest School teacher, this was not an issue. Each session was for approximately one and a quarter hours. The majority of students were very enthusiastic about participating in Forest School; one student presented with anxiety initially and again after the Christmas break. One parent had expressed concern at how their child would manage getting dirty but this did not present as an issue once sessions began.

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

	<p>Students attended Forest School sessions when the weather was wet and cold. Although students were requested to bring appropriate footwear and clothes; they did not always do this. A number of students borrowed waterproofs, coats and wellies or boots to ensure they were dressed appropriately for the weather conditions.</p>
	<p>Finances dictated the number of sessions held and it was felt that sessions early in the school year would be valuable to this particular group of students; however, it would be of great value to attend sessions at different times of the year to enjoy and appreciate the changing seasons.</p>

AGE APPROPRIATE

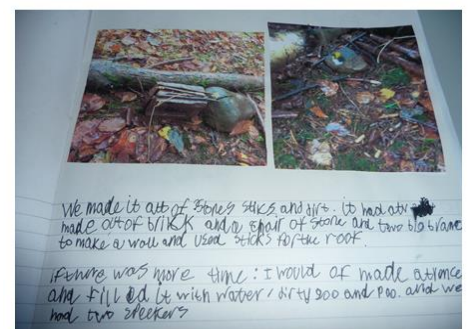
Towards the end of the sessions, students were awarded with a certificate for fire-lighting in a whole school assembly. Following this assembly one student expressed concern that Forest School was babyish, it is understood that this was after over-hearing a comment made by someone else in the school. On arrival at one Forest School session, some nursery children were leaving the grounds and this led another student to feel that Forest School is babyish.



The class discussed concerns that Forest School was babyish and the majority of students recognised that different activities could be done in the same place, making it appropriate for all ages depending on the activities done. A comparison was made to a park where facilities are provided for all ages but all ages do not access all of the facilities.

OVERALL BENEFITS

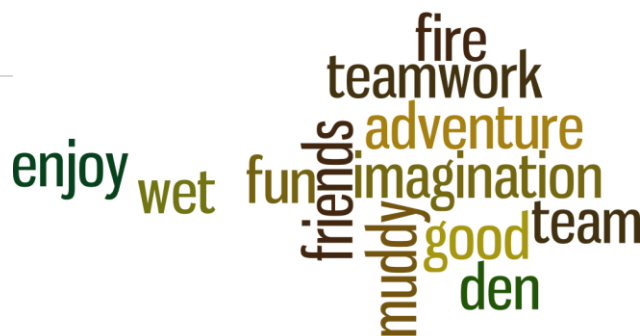
Although it is very difficult to make a direct link between achievements and attainment in the classroom with the experiences of Forest School, the vast majority of students enjoyed their experiences and it helped them to feel good about themselves. It is believed that this transferred to the classroom and supported students in developing a sense of satisfaction in themselves and their achievements.



Can Forest School support the development of skills in the secondary classroom?

From the evidence of this small scale study Forest School does appear to support secondary aged students' skill development in particular trying new things and working with others.

The majority of pupils engaged well in the activities and as discussed they were positive about the experience, and were able to recognise ways in which involvement in Forest School encouraged imagination, increased confidence and developed their organisational skills.



Future recommendations

If undertaking a similar project in the future it would be helpful to:

- Extend the number of Forest School sessions;
- Record attainment over a period of time and / or across the curriculum;
- Gather feedback from parents/carers to identify influence of Forest School at home.

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East Lancashire Inclusion Partnership <http://www.elip.org/>

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