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A Brief History of Forest School in the UK – PART 2

By Jon Cree and Mel McCree

In Part 1 (Horizons 60, 2012)⁵, we set the scene for the introduction of Forest School (FS) to the UK, discussing the cultural soil in which the modern day FS seed was sown. Part 2 looks at how FS has grown since 1993. We concentrate on the challenges that FS has faced and how that affects FS's future.

A social movement

With a rich heritage of UK outdoor play and learning, FS emerged as a natural evolution⁵. Given its aims and rapid grassroots growth¹² FS is a social movement. We can learn from the patterns of other social movements, often evolving in response to discontent with the social and political situation. Some movements have dramatically changed society, and many have failed³. FS is nested within wider social movements surrounding 'free range childhoods'; natural play, environmentalism, land rights, woodland culture, and learner-centred education.

Blumer¹ identified four stages of social movements – 'social ferment', 'popular excitement'/'coalescence', 'formalisation' and 'institutionalisation'. The formalisation stage of a social movement is defined as when 'strategies and leadership emerges and a movement starts making demands'. We think FS has just moved into this 3rd stage of 'formalisation'. This article is timed with the first year anniversary of the Forest School Association (FSA), a turning point in forming an autonomous, collective voice and principles of practice. After 18 months of national consultation with FS practitioners, the FSA was formed as an independent body representing FS in the UK. The FSA board elected in July 2012 represents the main sectors currently involved in FS including; play, early years, primary, secondary, special needs, outdoor learning*, county wildlife trusts, funding agencies, training providers, forestry and the independent sector. The FSA website gives a detailed account of the history of FS and the establishment of the FSA (8). During this process an updated definition, principles and criteria for practice were agreed and published in 2012 (see Figure 1). * Institute for Outdoor Learning (IOL) and Council for Learning Outside the Classroom (CLOT)



FIGURE 1

Definition: Forest School is an inspirational process, that offers ALL learners regular opportunities to achieve, develop confidence and self-esteem, through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland or natural environment with trees. Forest School is a specialised learning approach that sits within, and compliments, the wider context of outdoor and woodland education.

The 6 principles:

1. Forest School is a long-term process with frequent and regular sessions in a woodland or natural wooded environment, rather than a one-off visit. Planning, adaption, observations and reviewing are integral elements of Forest School.
2. Forest School takes place in a woodland or natural wooded environment to support the development of a relationship between the learner and the natural world.
3. Forest School aims to promote the holistic development of all those involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners.
4. Forest School offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.
5. Forest School is run by qualified Forest School Practitioners who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice.
6. Forest School uses a range of learner-centred processes to create a community for development and learning.

Amongst other things, the FSA is concerned with clarifying standards, professional identity and the potential of entitlement to FS for all children. It's great to have clearer principles and aims to work with, but how did FS get here?

Changing children's landscapes

Justifications for children's practice are often related to eco-social ills that need fixing. In the 1990s, concerns increased within the play, education and environmental sectors over how children were divorced from the natural world, becoming heightened further in the early 21st century, arguments that also raged in early 20th century⁵. Free range roaming' and children's mobility severely declined. In 1971, 86% children travelled to school alone, by 2010, it had dropped to 25%¹⁹. Further concerns were addressed over restricted exposure to risk, leading to risk aversion^{10,13} and a 'culture of fear' (7). Perceived over-regulation was debunked by the Health and Safety Executive myth-busting panel¹¹, who later endorsed the risk-benefit assessment process. FS is a useful framework to counteract the 'cotton wool' culture, whilst engendering a culture of caring for the natural world among learners.

There has been much polemic and journalistic debate, sometimes based on questionable constructs of the child and the natural world. FS was caught up in this tide and is still sometimes presented as a panacea to the environmental stresses of modernity on children. For example, the quasi-medical term 'Nature Deficit Disorder'

¹⁴ has popular appeal, yet needs challenging in terms of using a deficit model, locating the problem in the child and packaging nature as something that can be prescribed. Many will recognise the FS 'convert', extolling the virtues of FS. We need voices of reason, to recognise FS's limitations and the need to work collaboratively within the bigger picture of eco-social change.

Evolution

In response to these social concerns, and their representation in the mainstream context of education and care, the FS movement emerged from practitioners' needs and interests. The term 'Forest School' was invented by Bridgwater nursery nurses after a study trip to Denmark in 1993; this name is not used in Denmark²¹. How Bridgwater framed FS caught the imagination of a number of outdoor educators, in particular early years educators, frustrated by the way the national curriculum and environmental education had moved in the previous 10 years. The timing seemed to be right. Early years settings, schools and home education or family groups, health settings and the voluntary sector took quickly to FS, growing the demand. Independent providers around the country started practicing. Several local authorities and the Welsh, Scottish and English Forest Education Initiatives (FEI), run by the Forestry Commission, picked up on FS. The Forestry Commission saw that FS fulfilled some of its educational objectives, and supported research, FS training, local development of FS and production of FS resources, including the self evaluation quality assurance tool,

the FS QUIF. Although the involvement of the government's Forestry Commission has been both welcome and essential, FS has been a grassroots movement, growing within semi autonomous cluster groups supported by the FEI (now the Forest Education Network (FEN) in England), the formation of Forest School Wales (FSW) in 2001, county networks within some local authorities and wider networks organised through training providers and social networks. This rapid growth was backed up by early evidence-based evaluative research into the effectiveness of FS. These formed the rhizomes, or root structures, of the FS movement. Principles and criteria were first agreed upon in 2002. In 2008 a self-directed FS Special Interest Group (SIG) was set up within the Institute for Outdoor Learning (IOL), playing a key role in the establishment of the FSA in 2012. FS is now running all over the UK and within at least one setting in almost every county, with some counties having 100s of Forest Schools. There are now an estimated 10,000 trained practitioners and 36 known FS training providers.

A unique contribution

The emergence of FS coincided with the growth of many similar approaches to education and play. For example, Reggio Emilia's early years practice has an emphasis on the creative use of the outdoors, with the child being at the centre of the learning process, making the learning explicit through extensive observation and documentation. Natural play emphasises creative playing with the loose parts of the outdoor/natural world. 'Building Learning Power'⁴ emphasises positive dispositions for learning, enables young people to be more resilient, calm and creative in the face of uncertainty. What makes FS unique within the context of outdoor learning is its combination of long-term, regular learner-centered play-based processes. FS presents a unique combination of learning and development, promoting mindful stillness and discovery in nature through play and free choice, enhancing emotional wellbeing and resilience. The practical activities of FS, such as using tools and fires, creates many learning opportunities, regaining skills that have been lost to the technological culture and narrowed school curricula. Our experience is that trainees relish this unique combination of connecting with the natural world in a very practical and creative way.

Challenges

FS is subject to much interpretation and diversity in practice, in part due to it's grassroots beginnings. Concepts of what constitutes a FS experience are developing and altering as it is adopted by groups with other interests¹⁶. Herein lies a problem, in that establishing a collective idea of FS practice undergoes continuing debate. As settings choose FS for different reasons, there is a need for clarity of purpose and

aims, for example, whether it is perceived as an occasional optional addition or used to meet curriculum requirements²⁰. Further, FS is sometimes perceived as a label for all outdoor learning, which it is not.

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Challenges in training

The BTEC qualification was started at Bridgwater College in 1995, and in 2003 the Open College Network qualification was developed by trainers in Wales, which spread to England and Scotland⁹.

The increasing demand for FS training has led to a variety of provision. FS training with its thorough grounding in experiential practical skills and learner-centred outdoor pedagogy addresses a missing element in most teacher and outdoor practitioner training. However there are some challenges in how training is enacted.

- The potential to support the ongoing needs of trainees is limited and often the biggest challenges occur within trainees' workplaces, where FS pedagogy does not necessarily fit with the setting's system. There is a need for CPD courses or ongoing mentoring to help build confidence in newly qualified FS practitioners (20).
- FS training offers a special opportunity to personally investigate a relationship with the natural world, yet there is limited opportunity for this within a short training course. If FS is to further contribute to education, the environmental awareness and ecological education content of FS training seen as implicit within the principles, must be addressed. However, these aspects can be somewhat hit and miss depending on the training provider. Maybe there is a need to make this more explicit within the principles of FS?
- Lastly training provision is unregulated, monitored by a voluntary network of FS training providers. The consultations with network members leading up to the establishment of the FSA showed that many believed there was a need for some standardisation of training. They also felt that a national organisation should be formed to act as a governing body for the training, to ensure some benchmarks by which training could be judged, hence the FSA.

- Further issues with training include the ever-present competitive interests, that can sometimes reduce an open sharing of good practice, caused by fear of losing intellectual rights, work and jobs. Concerns with the commercialisation of education in general are well articulated by Mayo and Nairn¹⁸.

These have proved to be considerable challenges. How do we benchmark the training and ensure there are some baseline standards, and at the same time, encourage the diversity and creativity that is the very nature of FS?

Moving FS forward

With FS being a diverse yet joined movement, maintaining the relationships and workings between all UK FS practitioners and organisations is imperative, even though they may face different structural challenges. The English Department for Education is currently considering a new curriculum that may not include any topic of environmental care until children are 11 years old. There are challenges everywhere, such as the slimming of local children's services and the swallowing of the Forestry Commission into a larger body in Wales. There is a divergence of policy between England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. The Scottish parliament now trumps Westminster for the commendable integration of outdoor and sustainability education into its curriculum for excellence⁸. As education becomes more fragmented in England, it will be harder to influence government policy through local government. Yet, FS can act on the so-called 'Big Society' to support local self-reliant groups. Local FS networking varies greatly from one region and county to the next. For example there is a strong presence of FS networks in the West Midlands and Scotland, whereas they are still in their infancy in North West England.

The movement now has its own voice in the FSA, independent of any commercial or government interests. There are many issues surrounding the governance of FS nationally, which are up to everyone involved in FS to address. How do we carry a movement and keep the grassroots nature so the whole movement owns the structure? One of the key challenges for the FSA is how to promote more networking and help groups maintain their own identity while fulfilling FS principles. We need to communicate effectively and work together, to have an active political voice and keep up the good work that has been done, to represent all FS and its development through quality training and local support, building on the good work of FEI cluster groups.

The FSA is still emerging and relies heavily on the suggestions and work of committed FS folk, operating non-hierarchically. It is up to the whole of the FS community to make it work, and to accept that this will



take time. So there are characteristics of Bulmer's formalisation¹ but a strategy for UK wide Forest School development is still emerging. Expectations are high and yet dismissive from some quarters. As with all grassroots movements, any form of institutionalisation can smack of a controlling authority and one to rebel against, and these two views are indeed key challenges in themselves. The new local FSA groups are helping to counteract this, demonstrating active participation, and each group, whilst maintaining the FS ethos, will be geographically and organisationally different, with their own identity.

So here we are, with FS as a movement in a critical phase of development. We have raised some of the issues that relate to the development and future of FS and hope this prompts further active debate. FS has potential to influence government policy and practice. Let's hope that by the time we get to the 'institutionalisation' phase, we have established quality FS within the mainstream and helped the culture change in the UK, viewing woodlands as sustainable living and learning spaces. ■





For the full references for this article, a fuller account of the evolution of FS please see FSA webpage - <http://www.forestschoollassociation.org/history-of-forest-school>.

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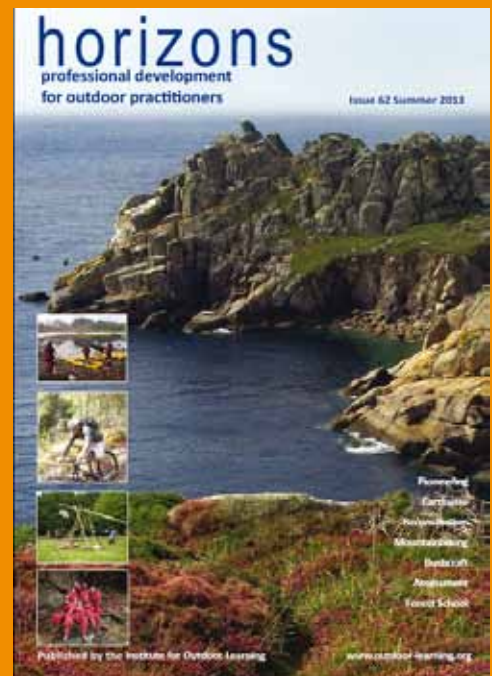
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