



Section 1

Nursery and Primary School Based Forest School

Introduction

This first section looks at how Forest School has developed in mainstream early years and primary settings, as an important part of the curriculum for all children. Practitioners demonstrate why Forest School is not just about remediation and healing, but also about normal growth and development.



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Breaking Through Concrete – The Emergence of Forest School in London

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Chapter Objectives

In this chapter, I aim to:

- illustrate the challenges facing London and the importance of offering Forest School in the capital city
- describe an urban Forest School in south-west London
- identify areas across London embracing Forest School
- consider ways in which Forest School can be implemented and sustained in London.



This chapter explores how Forest School pedagogy has been adapted to London. With some 1.72 million children living in London (McNeish et al., 2007: 1) and only 4.6% of the capital covered in woodland (Greater London Authority, 2002: 8), it is important to find ways to extend this way of learning outdoors into other natural spaces so that everyone can benefit.

Setting up a sustainable Forest School in an urban space such as London is challenging. London has characteristics that distinguish it

from the rest of England. The exact number of Forest Schools in London is unknown. At least 15 out of 32 boroughs in London contain educational settings who have undergone accredited Forest School training and are offering Forest School as part of their educational provision.

Why are Forest Schools Important in London?

Concern that children's experiences and activity with nature are decreasing, particularly in urban areas (Thomas and Thompson, 2004; Prezza et al., 2005; Tovey, 2007; Louv, 2010), has been expressed in parliamentary debate about education. The State of London's Children Report 2007 was commissioned by the Greater London Authority by a team of researchers at DMSS Research and Consultancy and at the Institute of Education. This report notes that London has several distinct characteristics which distinguish it from other parts of the country. These include:

- extremes of wealth and deprivation (with particularly high levels of child poverty in inner London)
- highest levels of crowded housing in England
- highest obesity rates in England
- high proportions of pupils with a minority heritage (i.e. black, Asian)
- highest pupil mobility in England (children moving frequently but not by choice)
- lower attainment levels at Key Stage 1 (KS1)
- greatest risk of social exclusion.

Thomas and Thompson (2004) and Tovey (2007) mention that the risks of social exclusion of children living in inner-city areas are higher than those living in suburban or rural areas. According to Thomas and Thompson (2004), these children have far less access to 'high quality natural environments' in their communities (Thomas and Thompson, 2004: 11). Natural outdoor spaces, such as woodland, offer a high-quality provision that is difficult to match in a classroom but finding these places in some areas of London is challenging.

UK-based research commissioned by the Forestry Commission and Forest Research suggests that Forest School should take place in a woodland environment. However, research from abroad mentions the benefits of outdoor play and education in natural, wild and open spaces but does not specify that one environment is better than another. The Mayor's Biodiversity Strategy notes that '[t]he seven boroughs along the Thames from Hammersmith and Fulham to Barking and Dagenham, have less than 20 hectares of woodland between them ...' (Greater London Authority, 2002: 8). The lack of woodland in London denies many residents easy access, so if Forest Schools are limited to woodland, many children living in London and other urban areas will be excluded from participating.

There is cause for optimism; according to London Play's website, 'London has more public green space than most other capital cities in the world, which should be prime play space for children and young people'. In London, there are several 'Sites of Special Scientific Interest' (SSSI), urban wetlands, chalk grasslands and ancient woodlands; London Wildlife Trust manages 57 nature reserves across Greater London. However, in 2009, Natural England highlighted that '... a third of adults, predominantly young adults, low income groups, minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities, and older people and women do not connect with the natural world at all' (Natural England, 2009b: 1). The problem is exacerbated by patterns of behaviour in family units. Palmer (2007: 76) notes: 'Sadly the parents seldom do much to widen their young children's horizons ... in inner cities, many children never visit the great city parks a bus ride away from home'.

In 2009, Natural England commissioned England Marketing to conduct a 'Childhood and Nature' Survey (Natural England, 2009a), exploring the contact the children of today have with nature compared to what their parents had. Results showed a worrying trend away from outdoor play, particularly in natural spaces. According to the findings, 'less than 10% [of children] play in such places compared to 40% of adults when they were young'; however, 81% of children 'would like more freedom to play outside' and most parents would like them to be able to but concerns over safety restrict this. Nearly half of the children surveyed stated that they were not allowed to play outside unsupervised and nearly a quarter were worried about being out alone (Natural England, 2009a: 5).

Following on from the survey, Natural England has set a target to get 'One Million Children Outdoors' over a three-year period. Their aim is



Figure 1.1 A leaf pit

to achieve this through different projects including farm visits, trips to nature reserves, green exercise programmes, walks and the development of Forest School education. Children are naturally curious about the world around them but it is how their curiosities are accepted or rejected that helps to shape their later experiences. Not all parents and educators recognise the value of exposing their children to natural environments. Research suggests, many reasons for this: fears for safety, lack of accessibility, cultural differences, but also adults' own early childhood experiences will influence how much exposure to natural spaces they give children (Natural England, 2009; Munoz, 2009).

Setting the Scene for an Urban Forest School



Case Study 1: Michael's visit to an unfamiliar environment

Michael is four years old. His mother has told the staff that he is a chatterbox at home; however, when he is at Nursery, he is quiet. At Nursery, Michael spends most of his time playing outdoors but prefers to be a silent observer in group activities. On his group's first Forest School session, the children explored the site, walking over

bumpy, grassy terrain with lots of leaf debris on the ground. Michael stopped while everyone else continued on ahead of him. He was quietly crying. When asked what had happened, he did not answer. He just looked down at his feet. When asked if his wellington boots were hurting his feet, he shook his head. He then pointed to the ground; it was the ground itself that was distressing him. He was asked if he wanted to hold an adult's hand and he nodded. The adult showed him how to lift up his feet to walk over the land. It became apparent that some children are so accustomed to walking on flat, manicured lawns, concrete and safety surfaces that the experience of walking on uneven natural terrain is foreign, very hazardous and, for some, can be truly frightening. Three months on, Michael still prefers to hold an adult's hand when walking on certain terrain; however, he has developed a stronger degree of comfort in being in a natural environment. He shows a greater ability to identify risks and, with encouragement, he is showing more independence in being able to manage them.

When considering setting up a Forest School, it is important to be sensitive to the needs and insecurities of children, parents and colleagues as some will be less comfortable in outdoor learning environments. The length of time it takes for a colleague to become comfortable in taking children to natural spaces will depend on their own experiences and exposure to outdoor spaces and the amount of training and support they receive. The length of time it takes a child to become comfortable and independent at Forest School will depend on their age, development, needs and the amount of exposure they have to natural spaces at school and at home. Practitioners need to be able to recognise when it is appropriate to push children beyond their comfort zone to broaden their experiences and further their learning and development. In our experience at Eastwood, it is often the children who express a dread of going out to Forest School who need and benefit from it the most.

In March 2010, Natural England and the Forest Education Initiative commissioned Eastwood Nursery School Centre for Children and Families to deliver a series of Forest School Education Taster Days across London. The aim of these events was to encourage play, learning and teaching in the natural environment and to promote Forest School. These events explore the benefits, challenges and practicalities of setting up a Forest School in an urban setting and highlighted learning opportunities through play and activities in natural spaces. They gave educational professionals opportunities to share ideas and



Figure 1.2 Mark making with handmade charcoal pencils

experiences, discuss possible sites in their local community (and beyond), expose challenges and barriers, and come up with possible solutions. It was an opportunity to network with other settings in the borough and to exchange contact details.

At Eastwood, 'Parents and Parks Days' and sponsored walks gently change perceptions and attitudes and influence positive changes to lifestyles where needed. Parents and their children are invited on day trips to local parks. Outings are kept as natural and family orientated as possible. Time is spent exploring, playing, relaxing, socialising and eating in the great outdoors. By considering how other cultures use natural spaces, exploring the sort of access provision people want and by making the outings accessible and enjoyable, we can cater to an ethnically diverse population. Parents and younger siblings are invited to participate in Forest School sessions through their key person and family workers. Families are encouraged to share folklore, music, dance, language, crafts, food, knowledge, skills and experience which encompass natural elements. This has led to a strong participation in children's learning from mothers and fathers.

Evidence suggests that there is a need to look closely at current educational environments and how they might be contributing in the decline in natural outdoor play experiences. In London, many educational



Figure 1.3 Using tools

outdoor play environments are limiting. A lack of greenery, synthetic surfaces, stagnant man-made play equipment and manufactured ‘natural’ areas set in prescribed areas, lead to the environments becoming unchallenging and uninspiring to children and adults alike. With ‘wrap-around care’ being offered in a lot of schools, some children are becoming accustomed to only spending time in these types of environments. According to The State of London’s Children Report, ‘Many children in London do not have easy access to parks or other open spaces’ (McNeish et al., 2007: 20). Children need a balance of experiences in created and natural environments. This will enable them to be autonomous, and to enjoy and gain respect and appreciation for the affordances various environments offer. Defries (2009) states that at the Nursery World Outdoor Play and Learning Conference in London, 170 delegates noted that ‘... practitioners’ lack of understanding of outdoor play emerged as the biggest barrier’ to developing better outdoor learning provision.

Organisations and initiatives such as Forest Education Initiative (FEI), Groundwork, the Woodland Trust (Nature Detectives), BBC Breathing Places, Growing Schools, Natural England and London Play are all working to improve outdoor play and education provision outdoors for children and young people, provide information and educational support, and promote events through their websites. The United Nations marked 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity (IYB), to help children understand and appreciate the rich biodiversity on earth and the connectedness between ecosystems through first-hand



Figure 1.4 An urban fox: exploring the difficult concept of death

experiences in natural environments. Children who have played in natural spaces are far more likely to develop a deep desire to protect the natural living systems which provide us with fuel, food, health, richness and other essential services. Forest School is an effective way to develop children's pro-environmental values and behaviours. Up-close and personal encounters with the natural world will better equip practitioners and children to find ways to scaffold these experiences and create opportunities for discussion and sustained shared thinking, building pupils' awareness of the environment and desire for sustainability.



Case Study 2: An urban Forest School in south-west London

Eastwood Nursery School Centre for Children and Families is the largest Children's Centre in the London Borough of Wandsworth. It is located near the Alton Estate, which is the second largest housing estate in Europe, in an area which falls within the bottom 10% for child and income deprivation in England. For many of the families, living accommodation is cramped and few families have access to a private garden. Families using the Centre are from 14 different ethnic groups and collectively boast 15 different home languages. The Centre has additional places allocated for vulnerable 2-year-olds and children on the Autistic Spectrum.

Unlike most London boroughs, Wandsworth boasts five miles of Thames river frontage and 1600 acres of parks and common land, but these spaces are not being sufficiently utilised by the majority of schools and families in the borough. Families may not realise the splendour which lies within Richmond Park, the local heath, common land or Froebel College, yet most live within walking distance. Through consultation, they mention that part of this stems from their own insecurities or lack of experience in accessing natural spaces, but also limited information, lack of service promotion (particularly in different languages), a lack of ethnically diverse activities and insufficient public access by transport also play significant roles.

Eastwood Nursery first set up a Forest School for children and families in February 2006, on Barnes Common. In September 2006, staff at Redford House Nursery (part of Roehampton University) invited Eastwood to join them on Forest School-inspired outings around Froebel College. Linking with another nursery meant new opportunities for children and adults to work collectively and to inspire and learn from each other.

Although the site is not technically woodland, it is a 'forest' to the children, with each visit bringing new surprises. The site is located at the centre of the community and is accessible to all the families. Over the last four years, the provision has evolved and today children from 10 months to 5 years attend Forest School sessions which take place every day. Forest School practice and provision is flexible to meet the needs and organisation and operational variances across the Children's Centre. Most of the children really enjoy going to Forest School. However, for some of the children, it has taken several sessions for them to become comfortable with the idea of leaving the familiar nursery school environment.

In October 2007, Eastwood Nursery School organised BTEC Level 3 Advanced Forest School Leader training through Bridgwater College and invited other educational settings to participate. At the end of the training, the participants exchanged contact details so that they could support each other. In March 2008, Eastwood approached the Forest Education Initiative (FEI) and a cluster group was established. Since then, further training courses have been organised by Eastwood involving other educational settings. There are now eight trained leaders at the Centre. Having been featured in numerous educational publications, Eastwood is leading urban Forest School practice in south-west London. An urban Forest School website (www.urbanforestschool.co.uk) has been created by the Children's Centre and it has worked with organisations and boroughs across London offering advice, and delivering In-service Training Events (INSETS), presentations and consultancy services to support the development of Forest School education across the capital.

Areas across London Embracing Forest School

Urban Forest Schools have been springing up in several boroughs across woodland, parkland, National Trust sites, heaths, common land, churchyards, nature reserves, environmental centres, adventure playgrounds, behind prisons and cemeteries, on playing fields and in spaces near or within school grounds, etc. Woodland in London is limited but there are six flagship sites of capital woodlands:

- Birch and Rowdown Woods (Croydon)
- Claybury Wood (Redbridge)
- Coldfall Wood (Haringey)
- Merton Park (Morden)
- Peabody Hill (Lambeth)
- Scadbury Park (Bromley).

Site selection in urban environments can be challenging, with imposed restrictions and issues of accessibility and risk. The degree of access and restrictions depend on the attitudes of land managers and land management organisations. Restrictions include no fires, no coppicing, no onsite storage space and no toilets. The risks encountered by some urban Forest Schools include traffic, dog fouling, rubbish, used syringes and condoms. Practitioners report that the benefits outweigh the risks. As children gain more experience of public spaces and are exposed to the risk and dangers within them, they develop the necessary coping mechanisms to keep themselves safe. Careful site selection, risk assessments, appropriate boundaries and high ratios ensure that both the adults and children feel more confident in activities which involve risk and will create a more enabling environment for everyone. Settings offering Forest School report that practitioners are utilising and adapting natural spaces within their community to promote Forest School pedagogy to diverse groups, often using sites with more risks and restrictions. Urban Forest School leaders are re-connecting children and families to local natural spaces and reporting positive outcomes, just like their rural counterparts using woodland. It might be logical to think that Forest Schools should take place only in forests; after all, it is called 'Forest School'. However, it is important to consider that placing such limitations

on an ethos and making it so exclusive would not be fostering inclusive practice nor would it be providing equal opportunities. Looking back to where Forest School was first introduced in the UK, at Bridgwater College, Forest School sessions initially took place on a school playing field, not deep inside woodland.

There are educational settings running Forest School sessions in a variety of natural environments in these London boroughs:

- Wandsworth (Roehampton and Tooting)
- Greenwich
- Hillingdon
- Westminster
- Tower Hamlets (Canary Wharf)
- Hackney
- Haringey
- Lambeth
- Hounslow (Isleworth)
- Richmond
- Essex (Epping Forest)
- Newham
- Westminster
- Kent (Dartford: The Temple Hill Trust)
- Hammersmith and Fulham.

Eastwood is also supporting and advising professionals working in Children's Services in Camden, Kingston upon Thames, Kensington and Chelsea in developing urban Forest Schools. Greenwich, Lambeth and Hounslow are three London boroughs whose Children's Services departments have embraced Forest School pedagogy and are implementing practice across a range of educational settings.



Case Study 3: Greenwich

Greenwich is in south-east London. It edges the longest stretch of Thames riverbank of the London boroughs, and the Greenwich Council website (2010) states: 'with over 50 parks, Greenwich definitely lives up to the green in its name'. Local nature reserves have public access via visits pre-arranged with the Park Ranger Service.

The Greenwich Forest School initiative was first developed in 2005 by Greenwich Early Years Advisers (led by Liz Buck) in partnership with the Wide Horizons Environmental Curriculum Service (Lucy Nettleton) and the Forest School Learning Initiative. The start-up funding for Forest School came from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. The aim was to engage and inspire all children through good-quality outdoor provision and motivate particular groups for whom the traditional classroom is a challenge. The programme needed to be sustainable which meant investing in a skilled workforce and this led to the development of an accredited scheme to train Forest School leaders. To date, 94 Forest School leaders have been trained and accredited. Forest Schools have been set up within the grounds of 68 educational settings, local parks and woodlands; and the number is increasing each year. Where possible, woodland sharing is encouraged so that children attending settings without their own site have access to Forest School learning. There is a lending scheme for waterproof clothing to enable all children to enjoy the facility.

Foundation Stage outcomes in Greenwich have improved year on year, reaching national averages or better in all six areas of learning in 2009. The attainment gap (for the lowest attaining 20%) has narrowed significantly. Liz reports that Forest School boosts children's confidence and helps their understanding of the natural world and conservation. She says that boys and some children with special educational needs respond particularly positively. Greenwich Children's Services remain committed to Forest School and to continuing its development across all settings in Greenwich. Trained Forest School Coordinators and Development Workers, not attached to settings, are available to model effective practice, help facilitate sessions and support trainee leaders.



Case Study 4: Lambeth

Thelma Miller is an Early Years Associate Advisor for Lambeth and has been leading the borough's exploration into Forest Schools since 2009. Lambeth is a densely populated inner London borough

but it is rich in parks and gardens. Lambeth has become interested in Forest Schools because many of its early years settings have limited outdoor space and, according to Thelma, boys in Lambeth '... continue to underachieve at the EYFSP stage'. Thelma had heard about Eastwood Nursery School's Forest School programme and decided to visit them to find out more. She then organised for the Forest School Coordinator to speak at a conference. The interest and excitement amongst the participants led to the training of 17 leaders and managers of settings, and a member of the Lambeth Childcare and Development Team and an Early Years Teaching and Learning Consultant came to be qualified as BTEC Level 3 Advanced Forest School Leaders through Bridgwater College in July 2009. Faced with the challenges and practicalities of completing the course work and making Forest School sessions happen in their settings, the group decided to keep in regular contact to support each other by sharing information, ideas and practice.

Forest School is developing in 17 Lambeth early years settings as part of the 'Making a Big Difference Buddying Programme'. The Lambeth Park Rangers Service has offered the assistance of a Park Ranger to support Forest School one afternoon a week on Streatham Common. Momentum is growing and by May 2010, Lambeth aims to have 12 settings offering Forest School as an established part of their practice. The 'Buddying' project is due to end in March 2011, however more level 1 and 3 training is planned for a further 12 settings to be involved and this will lead to new initiatives as settings will be able to collaborate to support and encourage each other.

Successfully Implementing and Sustaining Forest Schools in London

Currently, there is no consistency in the way Forest Schools are developing in London. There is a strong need for collaboration and multi-agency and inter-disciplinary work between Forest Schools in London to make it sustainable. Although the Forest School ethos has been well supported by the media, there are still a lot of professionals in education who have never heard of it or who are highly sceptical. Parents and practitioners across London report that Family Information Services in their boroughs have never heard of Forest School and are not able to tell them which educational settings are offering sessions as part of their provision. Some parents and practitioners wanting to develop Forest School in their educational setting or borough have been met with resistance from management, head

teachers and children's services. Educational professionals entering the workforce after graduating from various HE institutions across London have reported that the Forest School ethos was not mentioned in their training.

Rural county councils such as Norfolk, Oxfordshire, Shropshire and Worcestershire have web pages designated for outdoor and environmental education. Norfolk, Oxfordshire and Shropshire specifically have web pages for Forest School information and these areas also have established cluster groups. There has been a lot of effort invested into ensuring HE institutions in these areas do address Forest School practice as part of their programmes. Despite the emergent interest in the Forest School ethos, currently no London borough council websites have web pages committed to Forest School. Camden Council has a web page for 'Education and the Environment' which links users to a Nature Conservation Education Team but the next step is to develop web pages committed to urban Forest School pedagogy across London. Cities such as Birmingham have shown their commitment to Forest School by creating a city-wide website (<http://forestschooolsbirmingham.com/>), exposing practice and provision across the area.

The Forest Education Initiative (FEI) website lists the South West London Cluster Group and the Epping Forest Cluster Group. There is a strong need for more Forest School trained practitioners to set up networking groups across the capital. Cluster groups encourage a triangulation of perspectives, with knowledge, ideas, skills and experience to be shared by different professionals in different settings. These professionals share an interest in the natural world, outdoor play, education and conservation, enabling everyone to support each other, share practice and resources, network and problem solve. Forest School pedagogy might be relatively new to London but the momentum with which the enthusiasm and dedication shown by the practitioners is spreading across this metropolis has demonstrated that it is just a matter of time before they catch up to their more established rural counterparts.

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