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Contextualising Forest School

Chapter objectives

- To set the historical context for the development of Forest School in the UK.
- To describe how Forest School started in the UK.
- To contrast the UK setting with an example from Denmark.
- To describe the early development of the Forest School idea in the UK.
- To look towards the future development of Forest School in the UK.



Introduction

This book is for everyone who has heard or seen the expression Forest School and thought ‘What is that?’ It is also for practitioners who have been on, or are going on, Forest School training courses and want some contextualisation. In addition, it is an attempt to satisfy the curiosity of students and others who are on teaching and child-care courses and have heard about Forest School, and who wish to explore an innovative and exciting way of working outdoors. It is for

all who are interested in or are engaged with Forest School, including workers in nurseries and schools, workers in wildlife trusts and ranger services, and students studying for qualifications in these diverse areas. It is more than just an overview, but it is not intended to replace the training process; hands-on experience in the outdoor environment is the only way to acquire a deeper understanding of what it means to be at Forest School.

I have focused on Forest School with children in the Foundation Stage (0–5 years) principally because that is where most of my experience has been, but also because I believe that Forest School can provide a particularly appropriate experience for children in their early years. I have also described some of the interesting work that other Forest School practitioners are carrying out with other groups in *Forest School for All* (Knight, 2011a). Where possible I have used real examples of how Forest School is being put into practice.

Forest School is a way of facilitating learning outdoors, the ethos of which I shall explore in Chapter 2. It is about being in a special place for a minimum of half a day per week and for at least 10 weeks. It resonates with those of us who spent our childhoods either in woods and fields or around an area of streets, messing about with mud and sticks and learning without noticing. Our experiences, too, were about our environment, how to keep ourselves safe, and who we were in relation to the gang of children with us. But before I consider what Forest School is, it is worth taking some time to consider why and how the Forest School movement may have started up in this country. To do that, we need to go back in time and set the scene. This will help us to see where the attitudes and priorities of the Forest School leaders of today have come from.

Historical roots in the UK

Before the urbanisation of the nineteenth century it was not necessary to create formal links between education and the outdoor environment. Children spent large amounts of time outdoors as a part of normal life, and the skills and knowledge acquired there were life skills often related to the food economy or, for the privileged minority, leisure skills (Heywood, 2001: 123, 158). Education was a brief interlude for most, and a source of personal development for the rare few. But when industrialisation caused workers and their families to become crowded into urban tenements which soon became

slums, access to the countryside, to fresh air and to healthy exercise became the privilege of the middle and upper classes. Even among these middle- and upper-class families, the move to spend more time in the more crowded cities and large towns curtailed the opportunities for their children to be outdoors. It was this separation of the people from their natural environment, which started in the industrialisation of the nineteenth century, that drew the attention of educationalists and health professionals.

Pioneers such as Froebel and Pestalozzi had pointed out the importance of play in children's development (Pugh, 1996: 93), something that was difficult to achieve in overcrowded slums. In addition, Margaret McMillan and her sister Rachel (Cunningham, 2006: 184; Heywood, 2001: 28) saw what the effects were of a lack of fresh air and freedom of movement, not to mention the poorer diet, on the development of young children and they founded their outdoor nurseries in response. These were largely targeted at children from the poorer sectors of society, recognising the need for access to quality time to play and the need to be in the fresh air for the development of healthy minds and bodies.

At the other end of the social scale there also dawned a recognition that children were not as engaged with their environment as they once had been. In Cambridge, Susan Isaacs's school offered a nursery experience based on the outdoor environment to more privileged children. The Baden-Powell movement at the start of the twentieth century aimed to re-engage initially boys, and two years later girls too, with the outdoor environment; it also required a commitment to contribute to the welfare of others through a wide range of activities from fire-watching in the two world wars to washing cars for charity in the 1960s. Gordonstoun School was founded in 1934 by Dr Kurt Hahn, with the idea of using spartan training methods to develop emotional intelligence and social awareness. In 1941 Hahn launched the Outward Bound movement to address the moral decline of adolescence. So the links between outdoor experiences and healthy minds were recognised at an early date, if sometimes in idiosyncratic ways.

It is my perception that these were often a response to crises in society caused by industrialisation. In our period of history the current crises of obesity, behaviour problems and poor social skills are triggering new responses, and among them is Forest School. It would seem easier to effect change when a crisis can be demonstrated, rather than evolving slowly to avoid crises.

After the Second World War, the 1944 Education Act made access to education compulsory for most children up to the age of 14, rising to 15 in 1947. Eventually, 16 became the universal school leaving age, and what had hitherto been called PT (physical training) became PE (physical education). The PE syllabus included learning about a range of outdoor sports as well as participating in indoor gym sessions. Play-times were minimally supervised and provided opportunities for rushing about in the fresh air on playing fields as well as on hard surfaces. But in the last quarter of the twentieth century mainstream education in this country seemed to lose sight of the importance of regular outdoor opportunities, with a steady erosion of the time allocated to PE and the sale of playing fields to fund other developments. In addition, a seemingly endless succession of health and safety scares discouraged schools from participating in outdoor activities. This has not happened in other countries, and indeed in Scandinavia and other northern European countries Forest School-type activities have developed as a normal part of their early years provision.

In these other parts of Europe children do not start formal education as early as in the UK (Baldock et al., 2005: 31) and the 2008 interim report from the Primary Review team (Riggall and Sharp, 2008) indicated that they seem to reap benefits socially and emotionally without educational delays occurring. Many countries do, however, provide a range of services for most children below their chosen school starting age, and in Scandinavia these include opportunities that are very like our Forest School (Farstad, 2005: 14). I believe that it is time we reconsidered the needs of preschool children by examining why it is that those northern European countries consider it appropriate to give children time at a key age to develop socially and emotionally without the unnecessary pressure of academic achievement. That the brain of a 5-year-old is 90 per cent of its adult weight (Brierley, 1994: 27) is a strong indicator that the preschool years are important years for development. Maslow's hierarchy of needs illustrated many years ago (1954) that higher-order thinking is much easier when all other conditions have been met (Gross, 1996: 98), including social and emotional security. This book will lend evidence to the argument that Forest School can provide the opportunities for that secure social and emotional development.

From Scandinavia to Somerset

It was a trip to Denmark in 1993 by the early years department at Bridgwater College (see www.bridgwater.ac.uk/forestschool) that

started the development of Forest School in this country in the 1990s. What they saw in Denmark were groups of children playing outside in woodland:

The children set their own agenda, cook [on open fires], listen to storytelling, sing songs and explore at their own level. They are able to climb very high into the trees on rope ladders and swings, and sit and whittle sticks with knives, alone. (Trout, 2004: 16)

This way of working outside with young children was developed in Denmark in the 1950s, but it is not actually called Forest School. In Denmark there are skogsbørnehaven, naturbørnehaven and others. 'Børnehaven' is a translation of the German 'kindergarten', 'skog' means wood or forest, 'natur' is nature and the whole range of provision builds on a Scandinavian tradition of being close to nature. A similar approach is 'Skogsmulle' in Sweden, available to preschool children, and then 'Friluftsliv', which is a part of the national curriculum. Skogsmulle meets daily for three hours:

The children learn to walk, run, balance, climb, scramble and swing. They also learn about their environment and how to look after it through play, as well as how to respect each other's personal space. (Joyce, 2004: 4)

Norwegian Nature Kindergarten are similar, which is not surprising as 'Friluftsliv' was originally a Norwegian expression, and is entrenched in Norwegian culture. These Scandinavian traditions all adhere to the saying that 'There's no such thing as bad weather, only bad clothing' (Farstad, 2005: 14). As a kindergarten teacher in Norway in the 1970s, I can attest that the culture enshrines contact with and respect for the environment in all weathers. I have been outside at 15 °C with a class of 3- to 6-year-olds, all enjoying playing in the snow because they were dressed appropriately. The correct resources are crucial to the success of any project. We will return to this point in Chapter 7.

Bridgwater College staff and students returned inspired. They began to develop what we now know as Forest School, running Forest School sessions for their own college nursery children. At first they did not have access to a wood, and used the college playing field, but soon found a number of settings within a minibus ride of the college. Having developed a system for early years children, they then offered Forest School sessions to students with special needs at the college, and eventually it became part of the provision for other students in the college. There were benefits to the students' self-esteem, confidence and well-being, which are now being addressed in the Every Child Matters agenda (DfES, 2004), several years before that work was

published. How Forest School works with early years groups will be looked at in Chapter 6. This work contributed to Bridgwater College's designation as one of the first Early Centres of Excellence in 1997, and to winning the Queen's Anniversary Prizes Award in 2000.

If you visit Bridgwater College Forest School what you will see and hear about is the transformation of an idea from one culture to another. If you go to visit a Forest School in Scandinavia you will not see a Forest School as we have developed them in the UK, because of the cultural differences from which the two systems have sprung. The concept of early childhood education in Scandinavia is rooted firmly in the philosophies of Froebel with free play, creativity, socialisation and emotional stability at its centre. The cultural norm is of regular access to the environment for the majority of the population, so attitudes to the practicalities of risk-taking, campfires, knives, clothing, and so on are very different from those of the majority of the population in the UK. These factors enable Forest Schools to be more informally integrated into the general early years provision than most UK Forest Schools are currently able to be.



Case study: a visit to Denmark

I interviewed a colleague on her return from a visit in 2007 to three different early years settings in Denmark. The first was a børnehaven (nursery), taking the usual Danish age range of children, from 10 months to 6 years.

While not wishing to dwell on the indoor provision, it is worth noting that there were fewer restrictions from health and safety requirements than are common in most UK nurseries. For example, children of all ages were welcomed into the kitchen area, where they participated in the preparation of snacks and meals, and helped themselves from fruit bowls constantly available. Burning tealights illuminated and cheered the sitting areas, easily within range of the children. There was a woodworking area with sharp and appropriate tools. These are part of the cultural differences that affect attitudes to risk indoors and out.

Outdoors, the baby 'room' was an open barn. Substantial cots with thick insulation provided warm places to rest and sleep in the fresh air. Babies dressed in all-in-one snuggle suits could crawl and toddle freely in the barn and outdoors. They had access to the older children and to their play areas.

The large garden included a firepit for campfires, a large outdoor sandpit (uncovered), trampolines, pets, and areas for car play, domestic play and a sensory area. The divisions were mainly of logs set upright in the ground at varied and interesting heights. A part of the garden had a grassy mound, giving a difference in height, and another had a willow-withy tunnel. The climbing frames were sturdy and adventurous, offering real opportunities to test and develop physical skills. Crates were available as building materials, and frames for weaving. Bird boxes and feeders were located in a quieter corner!

Many of these features are available in our best settings, but it was notable that none of the play resources were made of plastic, and that there were baskets of natural materials available to experience. Also notable was the child-led nature of the play, including on this occasion the collection of berries to mix into mud pies. Adults observed, provided, interacted, but did not dictate. This nursery did not purport to be engaged particularly in the ideals that we associate with Forest School, it merely demonstrated good practice for all early years provision in Denmark.

The second nursery visited was a naturbørnehaven, in other words it offered provision consciously related to the environment. The children were the same age range as above. The resources were also similar, but in addition there was a vegetable garden that everyone participated in tending, and their pets included a goat. The nursery was situated adjacent to woods, and there were daily walks into the wilder areas. In preparation there was a barn containing collecting baskets and places to store wet and warm weather gear. The staff took with them a trolley equipped with magnifiers, identification charts, rope, and so on.

The route through the wood was waymarked, as was the area used in the wood, so that children could find their own way about. In the area of the forest used by the children there was a rope walk, with balancing ropes about half a metre off the ground, and steadying ropes at different heights. There were trees to climb, and children were encouraged to climb as high as they felt safe to do so – quite high in some cases! There were trees to saw, and (it being autumn) a good selection of mushrooms to observe and collect.

The play was again child-led, with the adults as facilitators, providing stimulating additions such as magnifiers, helping children to identify finds and offering support where needed. Children and adults took photographs for recording purposes, and these, together with recording books, create records similar to those used in Reggio Emilia nurseries and the nurseries in New Zealand following the Te Whariki curriculum. (These traditions are explored further in Chapter 5.)

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The last nursery, a more extreme naturbørnehaven, was on an island, and the children spent all their time outdoors, with beach, water meadows and forest to choose from. When my colleague and her party visited, the children were building dens to create shelter from the light rain falling. Their firepit burned brightly, creating a focal point and a source of warm drinks. The indoor provision was mostly for displaying and identifying finds and creations. This nursery did not take babies, and there were more boys than girls taking up this opportunity. What it provided was a real adventure for the children who chose to attend, emphasising the importance of choice, and the need for some children to go further and wilder than even the environmentally aware previous examples.

These three examples show how engagement with the environment is a natural and normal part of growing up in all these preschool settings, whether it is a part of their stated agenda or not. The Early Years Foundation Stage curriculum now requires all settings to recognise the importance of outdoor learning for children. This is an ideal opportunity for practitioners to embrace the ideas that come from these other traditions, whether or not they feel ready to engage fully with Forest School.

The expansion of the Bridgwater idea

As might be expected, the Forest School idea has become popular with early years practitioners. Bridgwater College in Somerset developed a suite of courses to transmit the ethos, using Edexcel as their examination board. The Level 3 course soon became established as the standard qualification for practitioners wishing to run Forest School sessions.

There was an early replication of the idea at the Burnworthy Outdoor Education Centre, also in Somerset, where one of the original lecturers from that first trip ran his own Forest School and Outdoor Education Centre. From working with the early years groups, the work at his centre expanded to include work with school refusers, excluded children, women's refuge groups and others. This centre revised and updated the original course, using the Open College Network (OCN) examination board, which has now been passed on to most of the training providers mentioned in the Appendix.

One of the next organisations to recognise the potential importance of Forest School was the Forestry Commission. In 2002 they stated

'access to green space is not just about "the environment". For young children there is perceived to be great benefit in teaching most subjects in a natural environment' (O'Brien and Tabbush, 2002). In 2003 they published regional strategies called *Woodland for Life*, the vision being 'that trees and woodland are widely recognised as bringing high quality sustainable benefits to all who live and work in . . . [the region's name]' (Render, 2003: 2). On page 47 of this document, the importance of Forest School is recognised (Render, 2003: 47), and the Commission are committed to supporting Forest Schools in the whole of the UK. This was initially done under the umbrella of the Forest Education Initiative (FEI), which deals with the Commission's educational work.

Nowhere has the early support of the Forestry Commission been more marked than in Wales where, together with support from the Welsh Assembly, they funded several successful projects. Forest School leaders in Wales have a strong and supportive network and are developing valuable schemes across the principality. They have further revised the OCN courses for their own use, and for the use of some English groups affiliated to them. One example of the progress they have supported can be seen in the work carried out jointly by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) and the research arm of the Forestry Commission, the Social and Economic Research Group of Forest Research. In 2004 they published the results of a study of three Welsh pilot Forest Schools, *Forest School Evaluation Project: A Study in Wales* (Murray, 2004). This was a first attempt at collecting some information about the effects of Forest School on children in the Foundation Stage. I will return to the subject of measuring, recording and assessing in Chapter 9.

This study was then replicated with a small group of Forest Schools, mostly in the West Country, and published in 2005 as *Such Enthusiasm – a Joy to See; An Evaluation of Forest School in England* (Murray and O'Brien, 2005). In 2006 the findings were put together in a report, *A Marvellous Opportunity for Children to Learn* (O'Brien and Murray, 2006) and the study was replicated in Scotland (Borradaile, 2006), with similar results. This work has been summarised in an academic paper (O'Brien and Murray, 2007), available at <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/infid-5z3jvz>.

The Forestry Commission supported developments in Scotland, where there are now several Forest School settings, including the two near Fort William used for the report above (Borradaile, 2006). Rangers

from the Forestry Commission trained as Forest School leaders and worked with the Forest Education Initiative (FEI) in Lothian. The FEI cluster groups in most Scottish counties, as in many areas in the UK, are re-forming as independent groups following changes in Government Woodland policy.

In 2003 the environmental charity, Green Light Trust, based in Suffolk, was given the task of launching Forest School across the east of England. I led the project, and am proud to see that Forest School in the east is well established, with projects and training taking place in Suffolk, Norfolk, Essex and beyond.

The Green Light Trust is also validated to run OCN courses. I have become convinced that Forest School offers a unique opportunity to children to experience the outdoors in a way that facilitates their holistic development and fosters their growth as confident and competent learners. It also encourages healthy habits and lifestyles (Bond, 2005), a theme I shall return to in subsequent chapters. I have growing concerns that many children were and are being hustled through the most important phase of their education, namely the years from birth to 7, and with an inappropriate emphasis on formal education and conformity to classroom behaviours (see Brierley, 1994: 72). I am not alone in this; other thinkers and writers in early years education internationally are questioning our approach to educating the under 7s (Yelland, 2005). In April 2007 I was a contributor (Bond, 2007) to an international conference called 'Reclaiming Relational Pedagogy in the Early Years' organised by Anglia Ruskin University in Chelmsford. I was thrilled by both the international consensus that young children need time, space and play to develop their fullest potential, and by the reception I received to my proposal that Forest School provided all those opportunities.

Many county councils are now recognising the value of Forest School. For example, Oxfordshire County Council have supported developments from their environmental base at Hill End. Many good ideas have come from the environmental centre at Bishops Wood in Worcestershire, supported by the local education authority (LEA) there (forestschool@worcestershire.gov.uk). Other active county councils include Essex and Norfolk, whose environmental advisers are publishing materials on their websites (see www.schools.norfolk.gov.uk and link to their environmental and outdoor learning team) and wildlife trusts around the country are getting involved in providing opportunities – for an example see www.suffolkwildlife.co.uk and follow the link

through education to Forest School. There is a list of training providers in the Appendix, many of whom have websites offering support, advice and links. With the help and support of the Institute for Outdoor Education, 2012 saw the launch of the Forest School Association (FSA), a national governing body for Forest School trainers and practitioners, whose details are also in the Appendix.



Case study: the Bishops Wood Centre

In November 2007 I visited the Bishops Wood Centre to find out about the work that Jenny Doyle had been doing to develop Forest School in Worcestershire. Bishops Wood is an environmental centre run by a partnership of Worcestershire County Council, Worcester College of Technology and the National Grid, and offers courses and support to a much wider range of groups than those engaged in Forest School. However, the work done here to promote the development of Forest School has given it and its Forest School Coordinator, Jenny Doyle, a pre-eminence nationally, creating a good place to visit to gain ideas and inspiration.

Jenny, an experienced nursery nurse, was appointed early in 2000 as Forest School Coordinator, and subsequently moved on to Hill End in Oxford to continue spreading good Forest School practice until she retired in 2012. After completing her own Forest School training she set out to inspire and support all the early years settings in Worcestershire. With 80 acres to work with, Bishop's Wood offers sessions to local nurseries, supported by two Forest School leaders. They provide the children with sets of waterproofs and wellies, and a minibus to collect and deliver the children. Bishop's Wood also runs the OCN Forest School training courses on site, and Worcestershire has trained over 200 leaders in the county. It is not surprising that the centre is an Early Years Development and Childcare Partnership (EYDCP) Early Excellence Centre.

The centre encourages settings who cannot get to Bishop's Wood to run sessions similar to Forest School in their own grounds or in the grounds of adjacent and bigger schools and settings. Part of this support is the provision of a start-up kit for her Level 3 graduates – she has 450 sets of waterproofs, health and safety rucksacks, toolbags, and 'forest baskets' comprising hampers containing mallets, stakes, rope, a camouflage tarpaulin and some collecting buckets. The latter is to encourage leaders to allow for child-led exploration and activity, not to over-organise and dominate the play with an adult agenda.

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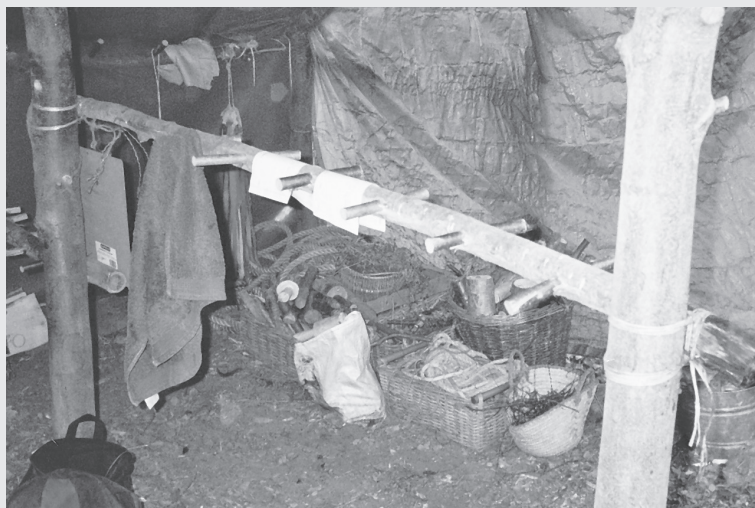
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Figure 1.1 Bishops Wood Forest School, showing one way of storing materials for children to access easily

Apart from the changes that can be seen in the quality of outdoor provision in settings across the county, other benefits have included the involvement of male carers and parents, a group hitherto difficult to engage with the early years settings. In the inner-city areas the Bangladeshi communities have taken to Forest School because of its similarities to the outdoor engagement in their home country, and this has fostered language development opportunities for adults as well as the children. Two men have changed careers and come into early years work. Early years staff from different settings in Worcestershire have seen huge changes in their children, with very quiet children finding their voices as well as energetic children learning self-control.

Other staff at the centre have used Forest School techniques with older groups. A Vocational Inclusion Programme starts with 10 weeks at a Forest School leading to the OCN Level 1 in Forest School. The first group to complete this has gone on to train in green woodwork and building skills using alternative technology. One student progressed on to a Level 2 course and won 'Student of the Year' at the local college. Links now exist with the Top Barn adult training centre, creating learning opportunities in animal husbandry.

A new development is an on-site Danish Garden. A recent visit to Denmark reinforced the idea that more could be done in settings, focusing on the needs of the under-3s, and to this end the centre has constructed an area containing examples of the outdoor items found in a Danish børnehaven. There is the firepit, a storytelling

area, and sensory objects hanging and in baskets for sorting. There are willow screens, water features, bird feeders and carvings. There are levels created by constructing a mound in the shape of a sleeping dragon, and a tunnel dugout. This area is for use for training early years practitioners, and for use with groups of children. This is an example of what can be done with creative use of LEA funding. It is to be hoped that over time there will be a greater integration of these ideas into early years practice so that the funding for them becomes the norm rather than the exception.

Looking forward

Individual settings are finding ways to develop their own Forest Schools. For example, I have introduced the idea to Nayland School in Suffolk, where they have a small wood on site (see Case Study on page 22). This is now an established part of their offering, with every child experiencing six weeks of Forest School a term throughout the Foundation Stage and Year 1. Their 2005 Ofsted report also recognised the value of Forest School, said to ‘make a magical contribution to children’s development’ (Goodchild, 2005: 5).

The idea is spreading, and is popular. Many universities are now including teaching about Forest School in their early years and teacher training courses, and the new FSA is providing National Occupational Standards to ensure that the standards are protected and maintained. Reference to the Forest School idea has made an appearance in government reports from both the Department of Health and the Department for Children, Schools and Families as a positive approach to the health and education of young children. As stated above, the Institute for Outdoor Education set up a Special Interest Group which in turn formed the Forest School Association in 2012 as a National Governing Body.

In Chapter 2 we will look at some of the different ways in which Forest School is being offered, and consider what makes a Forest School. With a movement that has spread so far and so fast with little written material to support it, there is a clear danger that the original idea will be lost through lack of understanding. By discussing that unique ethos we can debate whether all the manifestations claiming to be Forest Schools are the genuine article, and thus come to a clearer understanding of what Forest School is.

I mentioned earlier in the chapter my observation that historical changes had come as responses to crises in society caused by industrialisation. As I said, our current crises of obesity, behaviour problems and poor socialisation are triggering new responses, among them Forest School, which has been mentioned in recent government reports (Alexander and Hargreaves, 2007: 13). It is worth looking at these crises, in order to explore the reasons why there is a recognition of the value of Forest School, a story that is not so optimistic or cheerful. In Chapter 3 we will consider the state of children's mental and physical health in the UK, and how Forest School can offer one option as a part of the solution.



Discussion points

In this chapter I have described the roots of Forest School and its development in this country in recent years. You may wish to find a colleague or colleagues to discuss the following points:

- Forest School could be said to be a response to current crises in UK society. What other responses have there been? Do they, or could they, link into Forest School?
- Forest School is an adaptation of a tradition from Denmark. Are there any other international outdoor traditions we can learn from?
- Action research projects are beginning to build evidence of the short-term benefits of Forest School. What might this mean for early years settings?
- How would you feel about implementing some of the ideas associated with Forest School, such as lighting fires, with the children in your care?
- Some local education authorities are supporting the development of Forest School. What would you see as a possible national model?

Further reading

- Bridgwater College Forest School (2001) www.bridgwater.ac.uk/forestschool.
- Cunningham, H. (2006) *The Invention of Childhood*. London: BBC Books.
- Henderson, B. and Vikander, N. (eds) (2007) *Nature First: Outdoor Life the Friluftsliv Way*. Toronto: Natural Heritage Books.
- Maynard, T. (2007a) 'Forest Schools in Great Britain: an initial exploration', *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood*, 8(4): 320–31.
- O'Brien, L. and Murray, R. (2007) 'Forest School and its impacts on young children: case studies in Britain', *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening*, 6: 249–65. Available at: <http://www.forestry.gov.uk/fr/infd-5z3jvz>.