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## Forest Schools in Great Britain: an initial exploration

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**ABSTRACT** Closely associated with the Danish early years programme, the Forest School concept was brought to England by staff of Bridgwater College, Somerset, following an exchange visit to Denmark in 1993. Drawing on interviews with three Forest School workers and data posted on the Bridgwater College Forest School website, the article outlines and then evaluates the key aims, approach and ethos of Forest School, focusing specifically on its relevance to young children (aged three to five years). It is suggested that while the significance of self-esteem and learning styles may be over-emphasised and, in some cases, opportunities for environmental education under-emphasised, Forest School fits well both with traditional views of 'good' early childhood education and more recent curriculum frameworks in England and Wales, whilst also addressing current cultural concerns about children's increasingly sedentary and managed lifestyles.

### Introduction

In Britain there has, over the past decade, been a growing interest in Forest Schools. Originating in Scandinavia, Forest Schools are closely associated with the Danish early years programme. Inspired by the ideas of Froebel, nursery schools in Denmark have traditionally favoured play, movement and fresh air (Stigsgaard, 1978, cited in Williams-Sieghfredson, 2005), while a sense of connection with nature and the environment has been linked to the Danish notion of an 'ideal' childhood (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2001). Indeed, the development of young children's understanding about the natural environment is seen as being an important aim of all day-care facilities (OECD, 2000). Williams-Sieghfredson (2005) notes that most nurseries in Denmark incorporate some form of nature education, although there is great variation in how this is achieved. Designated forest or nature nurseries are located in their own woodlands; other nurseries have 'wood groups' – groups of children who are taken by bus to spend time every week in a woodland area – while some simply use whatever outdoor space is available.

The Forest School concept was brought to Britain in 1993 following an exchange visit to Denmark by staff from Bridgwater College, Somerset. On their return, Bridgwater College set up the first Forest School, an adaptation of the Danish model. Since that time, numerous Forest School leaders have been trained at Bridgwater College and, to date, around 50 Forest School projects have been set up across Britain (Archimedes Training, n.d.). This article identifies and evaluates the aims, approach and ethos of the Forest School concept as it has been established in Britain. While Forest School is seen as being appropriate for 'all ages and all client groups' (Bridgwater College Forest School, n.d.), the article focuses specifically on its relevance to young children aged three to five years.

## Background

### *The Decline in Outdoor Play*

A growing interest in Forest School may be linked to a concern that children's outdoor play is in decline. Parents, it is suggested, are reluctant to let their children play outside as they once did for fear of strangers, traffic or violence (see, for example, Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Herrington & Studtmann, 1998; Clements, 2004) and, as a result, it is also suggested, children's play increasingly revolves around organised recreational activities or is home-centred and focused on computers, video games and television (Valentine & McKendrick, 1997; Clements, 2004). This, it is maintained, is having a negative impact on children's social and emotional competence (Tranter & Pawson, 2001; Stephenson, 2003) while also contributing to an epidemic of child obesity (Ebbeling et al, 2002).

In Britain, this general decline in outdoor play has, until recent years, been paralleled by a diminishing emphasis on outdoor play within the school setting – particularly in nursery classes attached to primary schools (see Bilton, 2002). Bilton (2002) notes that the nursery tradition, emerging in response to what were seen as the harsh and inappropriate conditions of elementary school education, placed value on play in the outdoor environment. In the early part of the twentieth century McMillan's open-air nursery school, for example, was centred on a carefully designed garden in which children were encouraged to make use of the wide range of resources and equipment including authentic tools: this was a 'natural, real-life environment' (Bilton, 2002, p. 27) where fresh air, space and the room to move around were seen as vitally important. Bilton (2002) maintains that a range of external influences – for example, declining birth rates resulting in empty classes in primary schools being used for nursery age children – meant that the importance of the garden to nursery education declined: real learning was what happened inside classrooms, while the outdoor environment, often a tarmac yard, was used only for physical education and to provide children with an opportunity to let off steam (Bilton, 2002). It is only since the beginning of the twenty-first century, then, that teachers of young children have been specifically encouraged to make use of the learning opportunities provided by both indoor *and* outdoor contexts (see Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2007; Welsh Assembly Government, 2007). What, then, has the outdoor environment to offer?

### *The Potential Benefits of the Outdoor Environment*

As Maynard & Waters (2007) note, the outdoor environment can provide children with numerous developmental and educational advantages. When outdoors, children are able to find out about themselves and the world around them in a way that would generally not be tolerated in the classroom (Bilton, 2002; Ouvry, 2003). For example, children can build on a much bigger scale and experiment with materials and sound without fear of being admonished for making a mess or being too noisy. Further, as Ouvry (2003) points out, some experiences, such as discovering shadows, or finding mini-beasts, can only happen in the outdoor environment.

Importantly, the outdoor environment can provide children with the space to move around freely; Bilton (2002) notes that movement has long been described as the most natural and crucial mode of learning for young children. Movement is also important in relation to enhancing children's physical development – for example, their agility, stamina, coordination and strength. In addition, the opportunity to move enables children to develop control over their bodies (Cleave & Brown, 1991). This is significant given that, as Bee & Boyd (2004) point out, while young children can often run and jump with confidence, they may not yet have developed the fine motor control needed to use a pen or pencil to write or even sufficient control over their bodies to enable them to stay still and pay attention (Goddard Blythe, 2004).

The room to move also has significance for the development of young children's play. As well as providing important opportunities for physical play, in the outdoor environment children have the space to engage in more believable fantasy play (Ouvry, 2003). Maynard & Waters (2007) note that this may be particularly important for young boys who appear drawn to fantasy play involving superheroes (Paley, 1984) which involves a great deal of running and chasing.

A further benefit of physical activity in the outdoor environment is that it has the potential to satisfy our human need for excitement and challenge (Bilton, 2002). Stephenson (2003) maintains that young children actually seek out physical challenges in their play – in her study she found that this was ‘an integral part of their drive to extend their physical prowess and so their independence’ (2003, p. 38). Risk-taking, and learning how to deal with risk, is thus seen as a part of children’s natural development and as an important life-skill. How then does this relate to the aims, approach and ethos of Forest School?

### Research Methods

Although there are a number of reports (e.g. Murray, 2003; Davis & Waite, 2005) that have begun to describe and evaluate local projects, as yet there is little published research on Forest School. As a result, this article draws primarily on individual interviews undertaken with three Forest School staff: Lucy, Polly and Mel. The interviews formed part of a larger research project which set out to evaluate the impact of the Forest School experience on twenty-five early years children in South Wales (see Maynard, 2003).

In the semi-structured interviews (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007), Lucy, Polly and Mel were asked to outline their understandings of the Forest School aims, approach and ethos, to expand on some of the key issues and ideas, and to describe some the activities they intended to initiate as part of the Forest School programme. The interviews were audio-taped (approximately three hours), transcribed and analysed. As Lucy, Polly and Mel were all trained at Bridgwater College, information posted on their Forest School website (Bridgwater College Forest School, n.d.) was also analysed.

Data analysis involved three related flows of activity (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Dey (1993) defines these processes in simple terms as describing, classifying and connecting. Codes were used as an aid to analysis – these were seen as a way of structuring, interacting with and thinking about data (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996). First level codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were initially used to summarise segments of data – key areas of interest such as the stated aims, approach and ethos. At a later stage, what Miles & Huberman refer to as pattern codes – smaller analytical units such as ‘risk’ – helped to identify potential themes and causal links. Emergent patterns were, as Miles & Huberman suggest, ‘subjected to skepticism’ (1994, p. 246).

The two streams of analysis – data collected from the interviews and from the website – took place concurrently while an ongoing comparison attempted to identify commonalities and differences of emphasis. It was recognised, however, that as Lucy, Polly and Mel were trained at Bridgwater College, it was (too) easy to assume that their voices were simply ‘fleshing out’ the less detailed statements found on the website. This may not have been the case. Ultimately, it was concluded that while a comparison of key ideas relating to the aims and approach was possible, the meanings given to these, and understandings about the Forest School ethos, were essentially owned by Lucy, Polly and Mel; or rather, were my interpretation of their reality (Daly, 1997).

### Research Findings

#### *What Happens in Forest School?*

Mel explained that children normally attend Forest School for a half or whole day on a regular basis, regardless of weather conditions. She maintained that while some schools were involved in Forest School for only one or two terms, it was preferable for children to attend Forest School for a whole year, so enabling them to experience the outdoor environment in all seasons. In the initial visits to the woodlands, children were encouraged to explore and play in the natural environment – climbing trees and splashing in mud puddles – and to take part in games such as ‘1, 2, 3, where are you?’ (a form of hide and seek) and activities such as hunting for mini-beasts, using mirrors (to see the world in a different way), collecting sticks of different lengths (to make a giant bird’s nest or a den) and sharing and acting out stories. Mel stated that later in the programme, when they were satisfied that children understood basic safety rules, they were introduced to adult-size tools such as bow-saws and loppers and helped to lay and light a fire which was used to toast marshmallows or popcorn. Mel emphasised that safety issues were taken seriously and these kinds of activities were

only made possible by the high adult-child ratio: around one adult for every four children. At the end of the Forest School programme, she added, parents were invited to spend a 'celebration day' in the woodland with their children to see what had been achieved.

#### *The Aims*

According to Lucy, Polly and Mel, the primary aim of Forest School was to develop children's self-esteem, self-confidence and independence skills. Lucy commented that self-esteem, in particular, was seen as crucial to children's future learning as well as to their happiness and sense of well-being; Polly described it as the 'central core for facilitating all kinds of social and personal development as well as learning'. The Bridgwater College website similarly notes that unlike other forms of outdoor education, Forest School aims to nurture and support the development of participants' self-esteem and that the Forest School philosophy is to 'encourage and inspire individuals ... from three years upwards ... to grow in confidence and independence so that they have a sense of self-worth' (Bridgwater College Forest School, n.d.)

Lucy stated that a second, related aim of their Forest School programme was to encourage young children to appreciate, care for and respect the natural environment: Lucy referred to 'learning about living things ... learning to respect living things'. Polly and Mel made clear that the inclusion of environmental education was related to their own interest in this issue and was not central to the Forest School philosophy. This aim was not apparent on the Bridgwater College Forest School website, although it has been noted on websites of other Forest School projects (Maynard, 2007).

#### *The Approach*

The importance of giving children time to play freely in the natural, outdoor environment was mentioned by all three Forest School workers – Mel commented that this was 'something that today's children don't have the chance to do'. Given the primary aim of Forest School, however, they particularly emphasised the need for children to be provided with small, achievable and progressively more challenging tasks at which they are likely to succeed: this strategy was also noted on the Bridgwater College Forest School website. Mel explained:

Raising children's self-esteem by giving them small achievable tasks ... these are the big words. We believe that if children feel good about themselves then they will become more confident and so you can give them little challenges knowing they will achieve ... and begin to feel that they can push themselves.

This strategy, then, appeared to be linked to the idea of what Lucy described as 'taking appropriate risks' in the outdoor setting. Lucy commented that this was significant given that, through fears for their safety, children today are often denied the opportunity to take part in any activities that could be perceived as 'risky'. Lucy, Polly and Mel all indicated that in their view risk-taking in the outdoor environment had an impact on children's willingness to take risks in their learning within classrooms and throughout life, while also helping them to gain a sense of responsibility for their own actions and towards others.

An emphasis on practical activity was mentioned by Polly and Mel. This was linked, in part, to the need for adults to identify children's dominant schema – something Mel described as 'challenging' – but also to the potential for motivating kinaesthetic learners who, they believed, often struggled with classroom learning. Polly commented, for example, that 'in schools it's mainly visual and auditory ... in the woods we do many more kinaesthetic activities ... it suits those children not really catered for in schools ... gives them a chance to be good at something'.

The Bridgwater College Forest School website similarly refers to the insight gained into both schema and learning styles: indeed, it is claimed that 'the principal purpose' of Forest School 'is to tailor an educational curriculum to a participant's preferred learning style (rather than vice versa)' (Bridgwater College Forest School, n.d.).

*The Ethos*

From the interview data it became apparent that Lucy, Polly and Mel all shared a view of children as naturally curious and capable: an emphasis was placed on what children can do rather than what they can not do. Polly commented, for example, that:

We trust children ... we trust children will have curiosity for the world if they're allowed to explore it in their own way ... if they are allowed to decide for themselves *how* they want to learn and *what* they want to learn.

As a result, she maintained, when children were attempting to solve problems – physical, cognitive or social – they were given the space and time to think through, or to try out, their ideas and responses without immediate adult intervention or ‘interference’. Mel similarly noted ‘it’s important that you don’t jump in too soon’. Further, Lucy emphasised the importance of praising real effort and achievement and, in particular, for adults to be respectful: Lucy commented, for example, on the need for adults ‘sometimes to think a little harder about the way they talked to children’.

**Discussion: an evaluation**

As noted above, the main aims of Forest School relate to children’s personal, social and emotional well-being: specifically, the enhancement of self-esteem, self-confidence and independence. Are these aims appropriate and achievable?

*The Aims: self-esteem*

Self-esteem is generally taken to be the overall global value we place on ourselves – our feelings of self-worth – and these judgements are seen as being dependent on our early experiences (Dowling, 2005). Emler (2001) maintains that it is parents who have the greatest influence on a child’s level of self-esteem: this is partly genetic and partly related to the degree of acceptance and affection shown. Dowling (2005) suggests that ‘significant others’ – those who have a close, emotional bond with the young child – can also have an impact and states: ‘One of the most important gifts we can offer young children is a positive view of themselves’ (pp. 4-5).

Why is self-esteem seen as being of importance? Baumeister et al (2003) note that those with high self-esteem tend to be more resilient, more persistent in the face of difficulty and, according to Emler (2001), to develop closer relationships. There is also a positive correlation found between high self-esteem and happiness (Baumeister et al, 2003; Emler, 2001). Thus self-esteem appears to relate in some way to an individual’s personal and social well-being and also to what have been termed positive ‘learning dispositions’ – those ‘attitudes, values and habits towards learning’ such as courage, curiosity, confidence, playfulness, self-control and responsibility which, if it is maintained, enable children to be ‘ready, willing and able to engage profitably with learning’ (Claxton & Carr, 2004, p. 87).

However, the commonsense assumption that high self-esteem is always ‘a good thing’ has been challenged. Baumeister et al (2003), for example, make clear that the negative side of high self-esteem can be arrogance and narcissism and question the assumption that raising self-esteem will impact positively on children’s academic attainment. They maintain that rather than being the *cause* of academic attainment, high self-esteem is likely to be the *result* of experiencing success.

Given the correlation with a number of positive outcomes, however, enhancing children’s self-esteem may still be seen as a worthwhile aim. Baumeister et al (2003) suggest that, this being the case, rather than heaping indiscriminate praise on children, attempts to boost self-esteem should be focused on promoting real achievement and ethical behaviour. This appears to relate well to the Forest School approach and ethos although, given the limited duration of some Forest School programmes, the impact on children’s self-esteem is likely to be limited.

### *Self-confidence*

Forest School also aims to enhance children's self-confidence. While self-esteem relates to our feelings of self-worth, self-confidence is our judgement of whether or not we can do something (Hollenbeck & Hall, 2004) – in other words, it is what Bandura (1997) has termed self-efficacy. Self-confidence (or self-efficacy) is of fundamental importance as, according to Bandura (1997), individuals who have a strong belief in their capabilities approach difficult tasks as challenges rather than threats; are more likely to become interested and engrossed in these tasks; set themselves challenging goals; try harder, persist for longer and think strategically when facing difficulties; and are more resilient in recovering from any failure – all important learning dispositions. Bandura (2004) notes that the most effective way of developing a strong sense of efficacy is through mastery experiences. Put simply, individuals need to experience success, but importantly, success in overcoming difficulties through continued effort and perseverance. This is an approach that fits neatly with the Forest School idea of providing small, achievable and progressively more challenging tasks.

### *Independence*

As we have seen, the development of children's independence is a further aim of Forest School. Independence – children's sense of autonomy and self-determination (the ability to regulate and determine one's own actions) – is closely related to self-esteem and self-confidence. For example, a sense of independence, like self-esteem, is linked to a child's close relationship with, and sense of attachment to, parents and 'significant others'. Carlton & Winsler (1998) maintain that children who have secure relationships with their caregivers are more willing to explore the environment using the caregiver as a secure base. In addition, the establishment of autonomy leads to increased feelings of competence (or self-efficacy).

The idea of intrinsic motivation is also relevant here. Carlton & Winsler (1998) point out that young children have a general and innate need to master their environment (mastery motivation) and that this is intrinsically rewarding. But when children feel they are controlled by others or that choice is taken away from them, then mastery motivation – their natural curiosity – is reduced or eliminated. If children are to be effective learners, then, it is important to guard against what Carol Dweck has termed 'learned helplessness' (Dweck, 2000); Bronson (2000) notes that young children can develop such patterns of behaviour when they feel they have no control over the events surrounding them. She further comments that those exhibiting learned helplessness tend to avoid challenges, are less likely to persist in the face of difficulties and, according to Dweck & Elliott (1983, in Bronson, 2000), tend to attribute success to luck and failures to lack of ability: in other words, they demonstrate a lack of self-esteem and self-confidence. It can be assumed, therefore, that if children are to develop a sense of independence as thinkers and learners, they should be allowed to engage in activities over which they feel they have a sense of choice and personal control. This, also, is a central tenet of the Forest School approach.

### *Environmental Education*

I noted above that Lucy maintained that a further (if secondary) aim of their Forest School programme was to encourage children to appreciate, care for and respect the natural environment. She described activities undertaken in the woodland such as hunting for mini-beasts, learning about animal habitats and monitoring the rate of decomposition of various natural and manmade materials.

This aim may be particularly significant given the growing global concerns about environmental damage, although as Huckle (1993) demonstrates, environmental education and sustainability are complex and deeply political issues. It has been argued that positive experiences of natural environments can have an impact on the development of children's sensitivity and caring attitudes towards nature and increase their environmental knowledge (Chawla, 1988; Phenice & Griffore, 2003), although given that their access to natural environments is often severely restricted, the responsibility to provide such experiences now falls upon schools (Malone & Tranter, 2003). Davis (1998) indicates, however, that simply spending time in natural environments

is not sufficient and that even for young children – and reflecting the kinds of activities described by Lucy – we should include education ‘in’, ‘about’ and ‘for’ the environment.

*The Approach: risk-taking*

In addition to the provision of small achievable tasks (discussed above), an important element of the Forest School approach is that of risk-taking. While within the United Kingdom there may be a developing cultural feature of ‘protectionism’ (Harden, 2000; Backett-Milburn & Harden, 2004), this is not apparent in all European countries: the Danish kindergarten, for example, incorporates the use of the four elements – earth, air, fire and water, in many of the child’s activities – particularly when playing outdoors (OECD, 2001).

Stephenson (2003) notes that while it is important to identify acceptable and appropriate levels of risk, without physical challenge children may grow up lacking confidence in their own physical ability. She further speculates that a young child’s developing confidence in confronting physical challenges might be linked to more general feelings of competence and to a willingness to take risks in their thinking and learning. Indeed, Stephenson (2003) links opportunities for risk-taking not only with the growth of confidence but also with the enhancement of self-esteem and independence, claiming that without such opportunities, children today have ‘less experience in making decisions of their own, less opportunity to assess their personal frontiers, and less opportunity to gain confidence and self-esteem through coping independently’ (Stephenson, 2003, p. 42).

*Play in the Natural Environment*

A further element of the Forest School approach is that of allowing children time to play outside in natural environments. Fjørtoft & Sageie (2000) point out that the natural landscape has particular qualities that meet children’s needs for diverse, stimulating and challenging play environments. In their study, children interpreted the affordances of various environmental features (for example, shrub land, trees, slopes) in different seasons and these affected the functions of children’s play. For example, woodlands and cliffs were used for climbing, areas of shrub land were used for building dens and shelters, slopes were used for sliding, while open spaces were used for running and catching games. Fjørtoft (2001) notes that Scandinavian research indicates that playing in a natural environment appears to have numerous benefits: for example, children become more creative in their play, there are lower absences related to sickness, and there are improvements in children’s motor fitness. Fjørtoft (2001) emphasises that it is the actual (natural) environment that is beneficial: for example, children who played in the forest tended to demonstrate better motor skills than children who played in a traditional playground.

While play in the natural outdoor environment has numerous physical and health-related benefits, the effectiveness and appropriateness of ‘free play’ within educational establishments in Britain has been disputed: some writers have maintained that there is little empirical evidence to support the idea that young children will learn a great deal through play without adult support or intervention (see Wood & Attfield, 2005). However, a close consideration of the activities described by Lucy, Polly and Mel reveals that they include a range of different types of play experiences as well as many structured activities and tasks. Drawing on Bergen’s framework (in Ceglowski, 1997), it is apparent that as well as ‘open-ended free play’ which could incorporate both physical and fantasy play (e.g. climbing trees, swinging from ropes, making mud pies), there are activities which could be categorised as ‘guided play’ (e.g. hunting for mini-beasts), as well as those that could be described as ‘directed play’ (hide and seek). Indeed, Lucy and Mel indicated that on occasions they did instruct the children on how to use tools, for example, or to identify types of trees, and given the importance of safety there were rules to which the children had to adhere – this was particularly apparent in relation to crossing physical boundaries that marked the Forest School site or the fire circle. Further, as Forest School activities appear to span different areas of learning including language, literacy and communication skills (e.g. stories and rhymes about the forest), mathematical development (e.g. finding sticks as long as your arm and thicker than your thumb) and creative development (e.g. mixing colour palettes), it may be that one of the main benefits of

this approach for young children working within a statutory curriculum framework is that learning is embedded in meaningful and often real life activity.

#### *A Practical Approach?*

Polly and Mel referred to the practical approach to learning adopted in the outdoor environment. As many writers have noted (e.g. Ball, 1994; Bruce 1997), 'hands on' experiential learning has traditionally been seen as an important aspect of early childhood education while, according to Davis (1998), the early years pioneers (for example, Froebel, Montessori and Dewey) recognised that 'children's learning and development were greatly enhanced through direct experiences of nature and natural materials' (Davis, 1998, p. 119). Nor is the idea of using authentic tools new: as noted above, these were provided in McMillan's open-air nursery school. Indeed, the approaches adopted by the early years pioneers (and by Forest School) have been supported by more recent 'brain research': Rushton & Larkin (2001) note that as the pioneers proposed, children learn best when in a rich, stimulating environment; they construct meaning from real-life applications (authentic activity); and the probability of learning is greater when all the senses are used simultaneously.

#### *Learning Styles and Schema*

The emphasis within Forest School on practical activity appeared to be linked to the idea of kinaesthetic learning and thus to preferred learning styles: the idea that while all senses are involved in learning, most individuals will have a dominant learning style – visual, auditory or kinaesthetic (VAK). Rodd (2002) notes in her research that while learning styles were found to emerge in sequence – kinaesthetic, visual and then auditory – young children tended to be provided with relatively few opportunities to learn kinaesthetically. However, as Rodd (2002) points out, not all children were found to have a preferred learning style, nor did kinaesthetic learners always experience difficulties in the classroom: she found that many children who showed a preference for kinaesthetic learning were highly successful, while some 'strugglers' showed a strong preference for auditory learning.

The VAK approach is just one of numerous ways in which learning styles have been defined although, given that classifying children on the basis of their preference for looking, listening or doing appears to be relatively straightforward, it is likely to appeal to busy practitioners. As a result, there is a danger that children may be labelled as certain types of learners and the experiences made available to them restricted (Coffield et al, 2004). Rather than focusing specifically on kinaesthetic learning or attempting to 'tailor an educational curriculum to a participant's preferred learning style' (Bridgwater College Forest School, n.d.), it might be more appropriate, therefore, to provide children with a range of activities which incorporate and balance visual, auditory and kinaesthetic approaches.

The idea of preferred learning styles appeared also to be linked to the identification of young children's predominant schema (pattern of repeatable behaviour). Athey (1990) defines a number of schemata that may be noticed in young children's mark-making, play, thinking and language – for example, enveloping and containing, going round a boundary, dynamic back and forth. Nutbrown (1999) argues that once a particular schema has been identified, the child can be provided with a range of experiences that extend thinking along that path. As Mel indicated, observing and identifying children's dominant schema may be challenging, even when, as in Forest School, there is a high adult-to-child ratio. Further, as Roberts (2002) points out (mirroring the findings on learning styles), some children demonstrate one schema strongly, while others show several at once or do not appear particularly schematic. Roberts (2002) maintains, however, that trying to identify predominant schema may be valuable in that it encourages close observation of children and so demonstrates that we are recognising and valuing their interests and needs.

*The Ethos: adult-child relationships*

For Lucy, Polly and Mel, it was the way in which they thought about the child, and the consequent adult-child relationships that were established, that appeared to be one of the most important aspects of Forest School. In many ways their views – for example, the importance placed on treating children with respect and viewing them as naturally competent and curious – resonate with Reggio Emilia's construction of the 'rich child' who is seen as having his or her own theories and questions and 'the democratic right to be listened to and to be recognised in the community' (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p. 13). It is likely, then, that through encouraging children to collaborate, to negotiate and to make decisions about the experiences they pursue, and through encouraging them to work through conflicts, Forest School not only encourages children's independence and enhances their confidence but also contributes to the development of an enlightened citizenry (Kessler, 1991).

### Conclusion

In undertaking this evaluation it was noted that while there were commonalities between the views articulated by Lucy, Polly and Mel (in relation to the aims and approach of Forest School) and the information posted on the Bridgwater College Forest School website, there were also slight differences of emphasis. This may be the case in relation to the numerous projects being established across Britain: the interests of the Forest School staff and those of the local client group or funders will undoubtedly have an impact on the way in which the core principles are interpreted and implemented. For example, many Forest Schools are now registered with the 'Forest Education Initiative', a body which is concerned to promote environmental education within woodland settings (Forest Education Initiative, n.d.). Rather than referring to *the* Forest School concept, therefore, it may be more appropriate to refer to the development of a broader network of Forest Schools.

This evaluation raised a few concerns. It is suggested that there is a need for caution when making claims about the impact of – and on – children's self-esteem; that too great an emphasis may be being placed on preferred learning styles; and that some Forest School projects may overlook important opportunities for environment education. That said, allowing children the freedom to explore, move around and play in a rich, stimulating and flexible natural environment; emphasising a practical, hands-on approach to learning; providing children with progressively more challenging tasks at which they are likely to succeed; encouraging them to take appropriate risks; and demonstrating that they are viewed as strong and capable, are all likely to have a positive impact on children's self-confidence and sense of independence and, to a lesser extent, on their self-esteem. Involvement in Forest School may also be beneficial for children's health and physical development, strengthen positive dispositions towards learning and aid the development of democratic and life skills.

Thus the aims, approach and ethos of Forest School, as described by Lucy, Polly and Mel, fit well with the ideas of the early years pioneers: what traditionally has been seen as 'good' early childhood education. Importantly, Forest School appears to be a reworking of this old idea(l) in a form that addresses many current cultural (and global) concerns – for example, the over-management of children's play, and their increasingly sedentary lifestyles. Forest School also fits well with the recent curriculum frameworks for both the English Foundation Stage (DfES, 2007) and the proposed Foundation Phase for Wales (Welsh Assembly Government, 2007) which, while still essentially structured around a series of content-focused goals, place a particular emphasis on the centrality of learning through play in stimulating indoor and outdoor contexts, on children's personal, social and emotional development and well-being, and on the development of positive dispositions towards learning. Indeed, it could be argued that Forest School provides early childhood practitioners with an innovative example of how these goals might be achieved in appropriate and meaningful ways.

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