



Exploring Forest School

Dr. Frances Harris
University of Hertfordshire
Outdoor Learning Experiences
(www.outdoorlearningexperiences.org)



Looking critically at forest school

- Widely praised
- What does it achieve?
- Who does it help?
- How does it help?

How do we measure the impact of Forest school?

Children and Nature:
Measuring success?

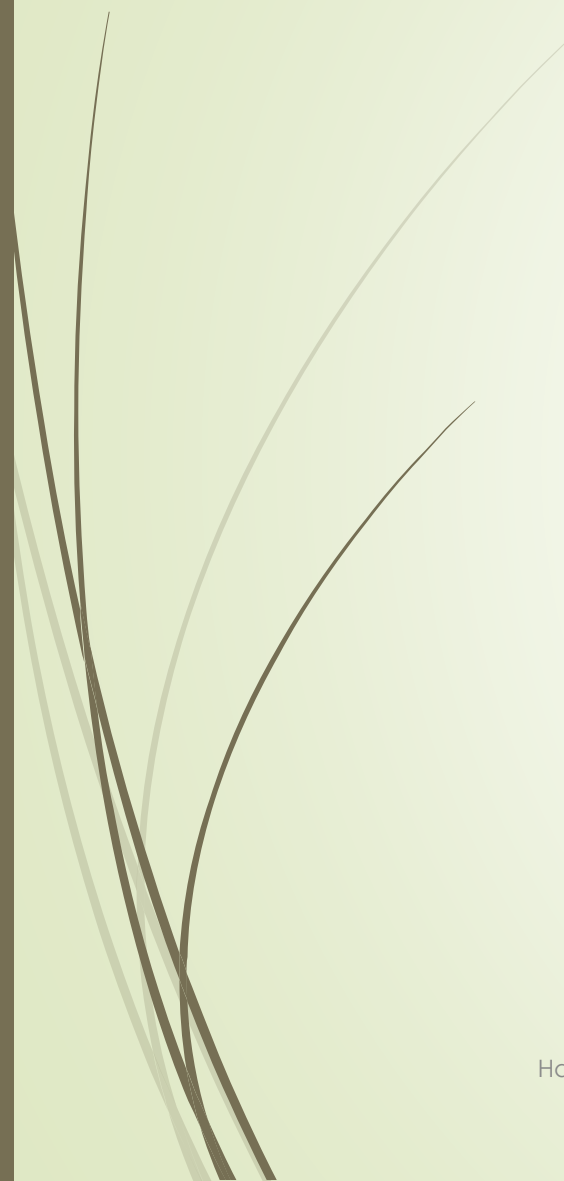
Frances Harris , Judith Hanna,
Valerie Gladwell, Liz O'Brien

Kingston University London

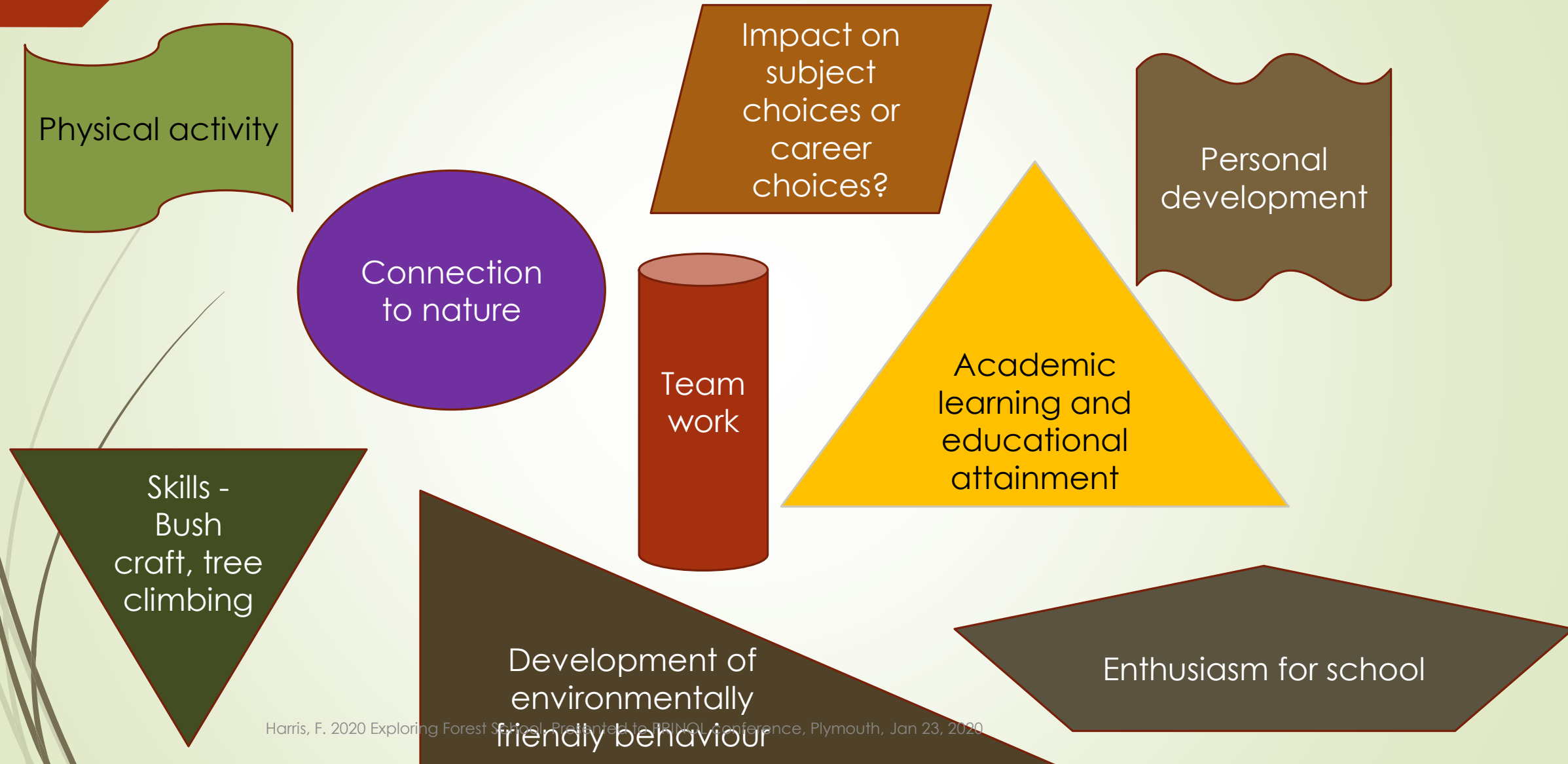


NATURAL
ENGLAND





What are we trying to measure?





What impact do we want to see?

- ▶ Short term impacts (1-2 days, 6 weeks....)
- ▶ Longer term impacts
 - ▶ Impacts over the school year(6 months – 1 year)
 - ▶ Until end of key stage?
 - ▶ Until change of school?
- ▶ Impacts over the life course.
 - ▶ Life choices
 - ▶ Environmental behaviour
 - ▶ Environmental careers
 - ▶ Impact on future generations – their children



Who is going to gather the evidence?

- ▶ Teachers
- ▶ Forest School leaders
- ▶ Teaching assistants
- ▶ Researchers



Longer term studies?

- Following cohorts through primary school
- Tracing pupils as they transition to secondary schools
- Impact on GCSE, A Level choices?
- Degrees and careers?
- Engaging in forest school-type activities with their own children
- Cohort studies
- Big data



How much evidence is enough?

- ▶ Robust data
- ▶ Quality – in depth, replicable....
- ▶ Quantity – a large and representative sample

Appropriate methods?

Quantitative or qualitative measurements

Physiological measurements

Cohort studies

Academic measures of achievement

Skills assessment
eg scouts badges

Social skills

Movement trackers

Connectedness to nature scales

Pre and Post questionnaires or assessments



Ethical and Practical Issues of Working with Young Children

- ▶ Ability to give consent
- ▶ Control groups



Research with Forest School Leaders

- ▶ Leaders commonly teachers, teaching assistants, sometimes also those in environmental conservation groups or independent providers
 - ▶ Eg wildlife trusts, bushcrafters....
- ▶ Form a community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991)
- ▶ Organised into regional cluster groups which hold regular meetings to exchange ideas, best practice etc.
- ▶ Semi-structured interviews with 20 practitioners from 3 cluster groups:
 - ▶ Rural
 - ▶ Urban
 - ▶ **Densely populated commuter regions of home counties**



Research Questions

- ▶ What do children learn at forest school?
- ▶ What is the impact of the outdoor learning space on children's experiences at forest school?
- ▶ How do children respond to the forest school experience?



What and how children are learning at forest school

How does forest school link to subjects within the national curriculum?

How does the style of learning at forest school differ from that of the classroom?


How does the approach of forest school leaders differ from that used in the classroom?



What do children learn?


Themes identified in interviews

Themes of Analysis	No. of interviews discussing this theme
Relationship with nature / woods	15
Relationships with others	15
Nature education	14
Progression in learning as children get older	13
Kinaesthetic learning	12
Nature engagement	10
Responsibility / risk	10
Self-esteem and self-awareness	9
Tool use	9
Improvisation / resourcefulness	8
Discovery / experimentation	8
Imagination	7
Skills	7
Sensory learning	7
Learning specifically related to the classroom / curriculum	6
Peer-led learning	3
Independence	2
Place-relation	1
Language / communication	1




How does forest school link to subjects within the national curriculum?

- ▶ although subjects from the national curriculum could be taught in forest school, practitioners focus more on personal, social and emotional development.
- ▶ encouraging children to connect with nature, develop a relationship to the place.
- ▶ Participation, team work, personal, social and emotional development
- ▶ development of skills (e.g. tool use)
- ▶ Learning about nature is incidental: practitioners rarely focus on nature education and science *per se*.



How does the style of learning at forest school differ from that of the classroom?

- ▶ kinesthetic and sensory learning approaches
- ▶ space to work more independently or in new groups allows children to pursue their preferred learning styles, respond to sensory stimulation....



How does the approach of forest school leaders differ from that used in the classroom?

- facilitators of child-led learning rather than teachers
- children were stimulated by the new environment and given freedom to follow their interests.
- teaching is replaced by “facilitation” (Ints 1,7,13,14) as leaders encourage children to learn for themselves
- as children gain confidence they negotiate their learning
- Important that all adults at sessions follow this ethos



What is the impact of the outdoor learning space on children's experiences at forest school?

- ▶ How does the learning space at forest school influence
 - ▶ Activities?
 - ▶ Children's behaviour?
 - ▶ Opportunities for children to express themselves?



“Freedom”

- This discussion of freedom related to several themes:
 - freedom as greater physical space;
 - freedom to behave differently;
 - freedom from the perceived constraints of the national curriculum.



Freedom from physical boundaries

- ▶ *“I think it creates a learning environment that encourages children to work outside what they perceive as the normal constrictions of their classroom setting, and the school timetable.”*
- ▶ Freedom from walls, ceilings, feeling cramped and constrained behind a desk in a classroom.
- ▶ Able to move more, rather than sit still.
- ▶ Allowed to be noisy, shout,
- ▶ More physically demanding tasks of outdoor learning allowed them to burn off energy.



Greater physical space impacts on behaviour and is “calming”

- ▶ *“The formula exists that each child is worth so many square feet within a school. That isn’t a great deal of square footage if you ever work it out. Once we’re outside though they’ve got 10, 20 times that amount of space so they’re not hustled in like in a pressure cooker. And I think just giving them that space, that chance to breathe, that chance to express their own thoughts and opinions in a, sort of, more relaxed environment does take the pressure off and they’re not as, if you like, stressed or intense as it is in the classroom.”*
- ▶ lack of boundaries and removal from the classroom created a more relaxed atmosphere (Ints 12, 15,4,2,5,)
- ▶ “Calming” (Ints 2,10,11), “serenity”(Int 2), “less formal” (Int 2)
- ▶ allowing children to be “more relaxed amongst themselves (Int 3).

Freedom from the perceived constraints of the national curriculum

- ▶ “Less target driven” (Int 1) which “Takes the pressure off” (Int 1).
- ▶ “because there’s no, sort of, stress, there’s not targets for the children to meet, I think they’ve become more relaxed...” (Int 5)
- ▶ The removal of targets therefore teachers can “accept where they are” (Int 20),
- ▶ only “light touch monitoring” (Int 18).
- ▶ it’s not about ...having a test...it is more laidback than that, and I think that appeals to the types of children that Forest School looks to build the confidence and self-esteem of” (Int 1).
- ▶ “Building them up rather than making them feel they have got to succeed... short achievable tasks” (Int 18)



Impact of being outdoors

- Greater physical space and accommodates a wider range of behaviours at the same time.
- Planning may be disrupted by changing environment, so instead activities become contingent on the weather, seasons, and the local environment at the site
- Children are freer to pursue learning styles and a learning pace that suits them
- Separation from the national curriculum removes pressures of targets for both children and staff.



How do children respond to the forest school experience?

- ▶ Shy and quiet children seem to 'come out of their shell' (Int 4) and develop confidence
- ▶ Calmer
 - ▶ find it hard to concentrate indoors
 - ▶ struggle to engage with lessons,
 - ▶ anxious in the classroom
 - ▶ autistic children
- ▶ Disengaged children
 - ▶ Those not accessing the curriculum and on the verge of exclusion
- ▶ Minimum 6 weeks needed to reach 'tipping point' where it has an effect

Conclusions

The combination of three aspects of forest school

- ▶ the range of learning outcomes,
- ▶ the flexible learning environment
- ▶ children's responses of the children to the setting,

creates a situation in which every child gains, in his or her own way.

The range of learning offered ensures that each child will be challenged in one or another area.

Children respond to the Forest School environment in different ways. While they might not all like it for the same reason, it meets the needs of many in different ways.

Freedoms take away pressures from children and teaching staff

The flexible learning environment allows Forest School leaders to adjust activities to suit each child's progress and needs.