It is really, really hard to understand what Forest School is,” says Mark Sackville-Ford, senior lecturer in education at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and co-editor of Critical Issues in Forest Schools. “I think of it as an ethos. It makes you feel something inside. Until you do it, you can’t understand it.”

Introduced to the UK from Scandinavia in the 1990s, Forest School has become a hugely popular label for settings to apply to their provision. However, there is a huge amount of variance in its practice, with Mel McCree, senior lecturer at Bath Spa University, describing provision which lacks some or even all the principles of Forest School as ‘Forest School lite.’

Helen Davenport, senior lecturer in childhood studies at MMU and co-editor of Critical Issues in Forest Schools, says practitioners should ask themselves why they want to do Forest School. “Is it because it’s trendy, or because parents buy in? The “why” is very important, and should go back to the principles of child-led learning and giving children space to find things out for themselves.”

There is no legislation or copyright controlling the term ‘Forest School.’ However, in 2013, the Forest School Association (FSA) successfully fought a trademark application by Archimedes Training for the terms ‘Forest School Kindergarten’...
what is forest school?

The six principles of Forest School, as agreed by the UK Forest School community in 2011, are:

1. Forest School is a long-term process of frequent and regular sessions in a woodland or natural environment, rather than a one-off visit. Planning, adaptation, observations and reviewing are integral elements.

2. Forest School takes place in a woodland or natural wooded environment to support the development of a relationship between the learner and the natural world.

3. Forest School aims to promote the holistic development of all those involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners.

4. Forest School offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.

5. Forest School is run by qualified Forest School practitioners who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice.

6. Forest School uses a range of learner-centred processes to create a community for development and learning.

and ‘Forest Schools Kindergarten.’ Jon Cree, founding chair of the FSA, says the lack of copyright can be both a blessing and a curse for Forest School practice.

‘Forest School is a generic term and we never wanted it to be trademarked because then it gets even more commercial,’ he says. ‘At the same time, a lot of people do rightly get miffed when something is called “Forest School” but is not really providing the real connection to a place that Forest School should.’

REGULAR AND LONG TERM

Mr Cree says Principle 1 (see box) is usually the requirement of a ‘full fat Forest School’ which trips up settings keen to include the practice in their provision.

‘Forest School is distinct from outdoor learning in that it is a process. It should be at least every week, and maybe every day. One of the biggest barriers to Forest School practice remains the challenge of making sessions regular and long term. If people go out once a term, it isn’t enough to build a relationship with a place and allow children to take ownership of it.’

Dr Sackville-Ford agrees. ‘A six-week block by definition is not Forest School. After six weeks some children only just feel comfortable, and certainly don’t yet know what to do or have all the skills. They’re just focusing on keeping warm and dry.’

While Forest School is supposedly distinct from outdoor learning, the two are often conflated. ‘Forest School is not better than outdoor learning, but there is too much blurring of the two,’ Dr Sackville-Ford adds.

‘By all means do outdoor learning instead; that alone is outstanding and astonishing. I’d never take paper and pens into a Forest School session; that’s outdoor learning.

‘Children need to know the cues; when it’s OK to let off steam, climb and have choice, and equally when they are sitting down learning, even if they’re in the same area. There is a rich tapestry of amazing outdoor learning experiences and each has its own distinct purpose. Forest School is just one part of that.’

RISK

Principle 4 is also a common concern when assessing whether provision is ‘full-fat Forest School,’ adds Dr Sackville-Ford.

‘One of the issues in nursery settings is whether staff are brave enough to encourage truly risky play or whether they just play around the edges of it. Do children use a knife or a saw, do they really make fire, or are the staff doing it? This is a particular challenge with younger children.

‘I’ve seen practitioners who have done Forest School training move away from what they learned. They know how to use an axe but can quite quickly forget how to do it safely, so practice very easily gets diluted down.’

ENVIRONMENT

For some settings, finding the right space can also pose a challenge. ‘It’s tricky to set up Forest School if you’re based in an urban area, but I have seen all sorts of spaces used, even just a park,’ says Dr Davenport.

‘Some settings re-wild their field space, allowing nature to take over. Being urban doesn’t preclude you from having pockets of nature that can be used in Forest School, in the same way that being surrounded by nature doesn’t necessarily mean you have the right space. It’s all about how you use your imagination and resources. I’d rather you did Forest School in a playground with one tree than didn’t do it at all.’

Mr Cree maintains that woodland is a vital ingredient of Forest School, however.

‘The woods themselves are different; there are a lot more play opportunities and they provide such flexibility. Settings don’t always have a lot of resource, but making the most of what they have and taking children out to proper woods now and then does make a difference,’ he says.

CHILD-LED

It is also important for practitioners to remember Principle 6, says Dr

Holmsdale has gradually expanded its Forest School provision over the years

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Davenport, and ensure learners are directing the course of their own Forest School experience.

She says, ‘There can be a uniformity about sessions, with the idea everyone has to take something home at the end, so they all make a birch necklace. That’s lovely, but it’s not what Forest School is really about. If they want to just drag a stick round all day, that could be helping them expend energy, or they might listen to a bird sing while they do it.

‘While it might be hard to pin down what they are learning from a curriculum point of view, they are still benefiting.’

**TRAINING**

There are courses at Levels 1-3 (see box) but no official requirements to top up your Forest School qualification after Level 3, something which Dr Sackville-Ford finds surprising.

‘As a Level 3 course, you would expect to have to top up or do some continued learning. To become an

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**TOOLS AND FIRE**

Employers must ensure health and safety law is adhered to, providing appropriate training, first-aid provision, welfare requirements, supervision levels, protective equipment and emergency procedures for staff. Settings must also have the landowner’s permission to light any fire on site. If food is cooked on fires, staff must know appropriate food hygiene practices. Staff have a legal responsibility to follow their employer’s health and safety guidance and report anything that could pose a risk.

**LAND**

Anyone using a woodland site must ensure they have the landowner’s permission to be there, unless it is a public right of way or access land, or they will be trespassing, with the exception of Scotland, where access rights and responsibilities are governed by the Outdoor Access Code. Managers should work co-operatively with landowners. Employers will usually need to check whether the landowner has public liability insurance and a suitably experienced person to undertake a site risk assessment.

**RISK**

Employers need to ensure the remoteness of the site is considered within risk management systems, access points are known in case of emergency, additional emergency equipment is carried if necessary, communication systems are in place and appropriate ratios used. Staff should follow their employer’s guidelines regarding taking children off site and ensure they obtain parental consent.
FSA-approved practitioner you have to evidence continuation, but you have to pay for this status, so we have to ask who that might exclude. Forest School was developed from the bottom up, and in keeping with Forest School is a 30-hour introductory course worth three credits. It does not equip a learner to lead a Forest School group. Forest School Level 2 is a 60-hour course worth six credits designed to qualify a learner to become a Forest School assistant, enabling them to take a proactive role in helping to plan and deliver a Forest School programme. Forest School Level 3 lasts approximately 180 hours and is designed to qualify the trainee to become a Forest School leader, setting up and running a Forest School programme. It covers practical skills required, creation of a Forest School handbook containing all policies and procedures covering managing risk, transporting children, communication with landowners, other staff, parents and learners, and the use and management of fire and tools. CPD opportunities include short courses, day courses and twilight sessions. Topics include tool use, spoon carving, joining things together using natural materials, working with challenging behaviour outdoors, tree identification and woodland ecology.

Katie Ward, Holmsdale Manor Nursery, Ibstock
Trainer of the Year, Nursery World Awards 2018

‘As a setting with lots of outdoor space and a focus on physical development, Forest School fits well with our priorities. We originally trained one member of staff to Level 3 in 2007. We set up a small on-site Forest School area, planting trees and allowing the area to become more natural, and adding loose parts. Then we gained permission to use a Forestry Commission site for free. Since then, we’ve purchased our own woodland nearby. ‘All our team leaders now have or are working towards Forest School qualifications at Level 2 or 3. For us it was more practical and sustainable to embed Forest School using our own staff, rather than employing freelancers. ‘It’s hard for people who have not completed the training to appreciate the amount of work and level of knowledge required. Some see it as just outdoor learning, but it’s much more specific than that. The qualification requires skills in environmental impact assessment and woodland management, the ability to carry out risk-benefit assessments, and an understanding of a range of theories and practical skills. Time spent in nature is continually decreasing, with statistics showing 75 per cent of children spend less time outside than the one hour a day prisoners are entitled to. Hopefully the long-term and regular nature of true Forest School experiences will go some way towards ensuring this generation experiences, understands and cares about nature and our world. ‘We regularly run CPD days for our staff and practitioners from other settings. We have hosted our local Forest Education Network’s workshop day for the last two years. Workshop themes include spoon carving, wool craft, willow weaving, Forest School and mental health, plus a session called “are fairies waterproof?”.’

The FSA runs a recognised provider scheme for settings which demonstrate they are providing Forest School in line with the six principles. The scheme assesses health and safety and safeguarding policies and session plans. The online assessment, which costs settings £100 to apply for, also asks for evidence of continued learning.

Courses
- Forest School Level 1 is a 30-hour introductory course worth three credits. It does not equip a learner to
- lead a Forest School group.
- Forest School Level 2 is a 60-hour course worth six credits designed to qualify a learner to become a Forest School assistant, enabling them to take a proactive role in helping to plan and deliver a Forest School programme.
- Forest School Level 3 lasts approximately 180 hours and is designed to qualify the trainee to become a Forest School leader, setting up and running a Forest School programme. It covers practical skills required, creation of a Forest School

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