

Category: Pedagogies

Forest Schools



Toolkit
**Successful Learning
Practices for
All Children to Thrive**



POLICIES AND PRACTICES BASED ON SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH FOR REDUCING UNDERACHIEVEMENT AND EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN EUROPE



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Authors of this document and project partners are:
University of Deusto, Spain (Project Coordinator)
KMOP - Kentro Merimnas Oikogeneias kai Paidiou, Greece
Ministério da Educação, Ciência e Inovação, Portugal
CESIE, Italy
Dublin City University, Ireland
Red Barnet , MHPSS Collaborative, Denmark
University of Porto, Portugal
University of Malta, Malta
European Parents' Association, Belgium
University of Helsinki, Finland
University of Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK

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Introduction

This toolkit, “Successful Learning Practices for All Children to Thrive,” is a practical resource that shows how to create successful learning environments in classrooms, schools, and communities. It helps teachers and school leaders build effective learning spaces that improve basic skills, support struggling students, and develop children’s social and emotional skills. The toolkit is based on 20 case studies from 9 European countries, offering practical strategies that have worked in real schools.

These case studies come from primary and secondary schools across Europe that have successfully helped underachieving students and prevented early school leaving. The research was conducted in diverse schools across Portugal, Ireland, Finland, Denmark, Spain, Greece, Italy, the United Kingdom, and Malta. From these schools, we gathered concrete practices that improve both academic learning and social-emotional development.

The toolkit is organised around five key areas of successful learning environments:

Pedagogies

Teacher and Student Interaction

Peer Collaboration

School – Family – Community
Collaboration

Wellbeing and Support

While each tool is placed in one of these areas, many tools work across multiple areas. For instance, “Interactive Groups” not only helps students work together but also connects with the community, supports wellbeing, and improves academic results.

It’s important to understand that the most successful schools use multiple tools together. While each tool can help on its own, the best results come from working on all five areas across the whole school. We recommend looking at your school’s current strengths and areas for improvement to help you choose the most useful tools for your situation.

This toolkit is available as an online platform in seven languages: Spanish, Portuguese, English, Finnish, Maltese, Greek, and Italian. All the tools have been carefully tested and developed through dialogic co-creation with nearly 1,000 participants in the SCIREARLY project, including school staff, students, families, and community members.

Our aim is to give educators and communities the tools they need to help every child succeed in school. By sharing successful practices from different learning environments in an accessible way, we’re working to create schools where all children can thrive, regardless of their background.





Glossary

A glossary section is essential in this toolkit to provide clear definitions of key terms and concepts, ensuring that all users, including teachers, school leaders, education experts, policymakers, and community members, can fully understand and effectively implement the successful teaching and learning practices. This section helps bridge any gaps in terminology and ensures consistent understanding, making it easier to apply the evidence-based strategies and improve educational outcomes for students.

Dialogic Teaching and Learning

Dialogic teaching and learning emphasises dialogue and quality interactions as the primary means of achieving understanding, learning and development. A dialogic approach to teaching and learning aims at creating an environment where all students, teachers and other members of the community actively engage in meaningful and respectful dialogue. Here are some of the key premises:

Ensuring that everybody's voice is valued equally, and everyone has the opportunity to contribute to the dialogue. This encourages diverse perspectives and ensures that all voices are heard.

Recognising and valuing the cultural backgrounds and experiences of all students and teachers. This helps to create a more inclusive and understanding learning environment.

Dialogic interactions among students, teacher-student and within the community are oriented towards transforming the sociocultural context and create optimal conditions for learning and development.

Co-constructing meaning and understanding through dialogues between students and teachers. This collaborative process helps deepen comprehension and retention of information.



Building a sense of community and mutual support among students and teachers. This principle fosters collaboration and collective responsibility for learning.

Respecting and valuing differences among students and teachers. Dialogue should celebrate diversity and use it as a resource for learning. Encouraging critical thinking and challenging everyone to think deeply and question assumptions.

Emotional Dimension

Recognising the importance of quality relationships in learning. Successful practices create a supportive environment where students and teachers feel safe, supported and confident to express their emotions and experiences.

Authentic Learning

Ensuring that the dialogue and learning are relevant to the students' and teachers' real-life experiences and contexts. This makes the learning more meaningful and applicable.

Translanguaging

When one person speaks in one language while another person responds in another.

Reception Classes

Classes where children with another mother tongue are in specialised classes where translanguaging is used to help children learn the host country language - with the intention that the children enter mainstream education as they gain language proficiency.



Forest Schools



Forest School practice is underpinned by six principles, that:

1. Forest School is a long-term process of regular sessions, rather than one-off or infrequent visits; the cycle of planning, observation, adaptation and review links each session.
2. Forest School takes place in a woodland or natural environment to support the development of a lifelong relationship between the learner and the natural world.
3. Forest School uses a range of learner-centred processes to create a community for being, development and learning.
4. Forest School aims to promote the holistic development of all involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners.
5. Forest School offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.
6. Forest School is run by qualified Forest School practitioners, who continuously maintain and develop their professional practice. (FSA, n.d.a)

Forest School is an increasingly popular practice in UK throughout compulsory schooling, in early years settings, primary schools, specialist schools and alternative provision (primary and secondary) and has started to gain international reach with similar models being developed in Canada, Australia, Turkey, South Korea, Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates (Harris, 2022).

It can be used across the whole school on a rotation basis (this is a lighter version of Forest School as sessions are not as regular) or as an intervention for targeted groups. Forest School sessions usually last for a half day (am or pm) and have high staff to pupil ratios, they are led by a Level 3 qualified Forest School practitioner and are supported by teaching assistants.

Research into Forest School practice started in the 2000s, with most peer review articles published in the last ten years (Harris, 2022). In a recent systematic review, Harris (2022) identified key themes including 'research on its development, relationship to classroom teaching and the national curriculum, impact on children's development, and on their relationship to the environment and environmental behaviour' (p.1). Research has evidenced the benefits of Forest School on children and young people's social and emotional development (Roe and Aspinall, 2011; Coates and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019; Tiplady and Menter, 2021); academic attainment (McCree, Cutting and Sherwin, 2018; Coates and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019); school attendance (McCree, Cutting and Sherwin, 2018) and environmental attitude and knowledge (Ridgers, Knowles and Sayers, 2012; Turtle, Convery and Convery, 2015).

Overview:

Forest School has been developing in the UK since 1994, inspired by Scandinavian models of early years education and outdoor life and influenced by educationalists such as Pestalozzi, Steiner, Froebel, Dewey, Isaacs, Montessori and MacMillan and wider outdoor learning and adventure movements (Cree and McCree, 2012). The Forest School Association (FSA) describes Forest School as:

'A child-centred inspirational learning process, that offers opportunities for holistic growth through regular sessions. It is a long-term program that supports play, exploration and supported risk taking. It develops confidence and self-esteem through learner inspired, hands-on experiences in a natural setting. Forest School has a developmental ethos shared by thousands of trained practitioners around the world, who are constantly developing their learning styles and skills to support new and imaginative learners' (FSA, n.d.a).



Implementation Steps:

Preparation

Forest School practitioners are required to have a minimum of Level 3 Forest School accredited qualification. The FSA state that:

‘Level 3 is designed to qualify the trainee to become a Forest School Leader, able to set up and run a Forest School programme. Level 3 covers how to facilitate groups in a learner-centred way, and how to manage a Forest School site sustainably. It also covers the practical skills required of a Forest School Leader. Generally, this course is approximately 180 hours and worth 18 credits’ (n.d.b).

Trainers are accredited through the FSA, see:

www.forestschoollassociation.org/forest-school-qualification/

Implementation

The Forest School leader plans, observes and reflects on each session and for each participating child, adapting sessions to meet the interests and needs of children. Each session varies accordingly but typical activities include imaginative play and games, exploration of nature, climbing and balancing, building dens and structures, campfires and cooking, bushcrafts for example sawing, whittling, using natural materials to paint and create and time for relaxation.

The Forest School principles for good practice are explored further here:

www.forestschoollassociation.org/full-principles-and-criteria-for-good-practice/

Monitoring and Evaluation

Using a theory of change to articulate the steps of change which are anticipated to achieve their intended outcomes can provide evidence such as:

- children confidently use a range of communication and language to thrive and succeed;
- children are confident and curious learners (lifelong skills);
- children experience improvement in social and emotional wellbeing;
- and that Forest School is an embedded part of the school curriculum and offer to pupils.

For more information for schools and other settings on Forest School (including practical guidance, measuring impact using theory of change and case study examples) please see:

www.scotswoodgarden.org.uk/images/documents/NU_Forest_Schools_AW_RESUPPLY_LOW_RES_SPREADS.pdf

www.ncl.ac.uk/media/wwwnclacuk/cflat/files/theory-based-methodology.pdf



Examples and Case Studies:

Carlton Grange Primary is a large primary school with 469 children (47% girls and 53% boys) from 2 to 11 years. It is situated in an area of severe economic deprivation in the northeast of England (classified within the 1% most deprived areas in England). The school serves a very diverse population comprising a wide range of ethnic, religious and cultural backgrounds; around 90% of children speak English as an additional language, with approximately 28 languages spoken in school (the most frequent being Bengali, Romanian, English, Czech and Slovak). 26 % of children have identified Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). All pupils have opportunities for outdoor learning and over the last three years the school has developed an on-site Forest School with trained practitioners to deliver provision, both whole-school and targeted interventions. At Carlton Grange, Forest School is practiced with early years classes, across the whole school on a rotation basis (this is a lighter version of Forest School as sessions are not as regular) and as an intervention for targeted groups including two self-esteem groups and the International Arrivals (INA) group (regular weekly sessions). Carlton Grange believe that providing such opportunities are key to engaging children in lifelong learning and that through such opportunities children are intrinsically motivated to develop key skills. In reflecting on Forest School, the head teacher commented:

‘I am really delighted with how it’s developed ... everything we hoped it would be ... of course get them outside, of course build their language, of course build their experiences and their self-esteem at the same time, because all of those things work hand in hand to develop a child as a whole child, as a person’ (head teacher).

Carlton Grange Primary have developed an area of the school field with trees into a Forest School site, which now includes a campfire area, many loose parts including logs, branches and twigs of varying sizes, an area for digging, fixed logs and a slack line for balancing, a hammock, a potions area and mud kitchen. The site also includes an allotment area and wildlife pond.

Figure 1: a selection of photographs from Carlton Grange Primary Forest School site



Children and school staff describe how much the children enjoy Forest School and look forward to sessions. Staff believe children benefit from a less structured environment at Forest School, with more opportunities to direct their own learning, more flexibility in communication with others and no ‘right or wrong answers’, reducing the pressures that some children feel within the classroom. School staff value the role that Forest School plays in helping INA children to settle into school and how effective it can be in helping children to develop relationships with staff and children and build confidence to interact with others both at Forest School and in time back in the classroom. School staff recognise the benefits of children being supported to take risks at Forest School, whether that be physical or emotional risks. School staff report that Forest School helps children to develop their English language skills, particularly crucial for INA children who most often have no or very little English. The head teacher feels that in previous years the school has focused more narrowly on English and mathematics and has been very reluctant for children to miss any of their allocated class time in these subjects. However, they are now convinced of the benefits of experiential opportunities such as Forest School and see that time spent exploring the world supports learning within the classroom. The school finds that even though children now spend slightly less time in focused literacy and numeracy teaching, ‘children learn more, certainly as much and if not more’.

Carlton Grange identified funding as a significant challenge in delivering Forest School, this includes developing a Forest School site (or alternatively accessing an external site) and buying equipment, funding high staff ratios and appropriate training and professional development, health and safety and insurance costs. Under funding of education in England is felt by schools to be an on-going difficulty and Carlton Grange reflected that they felt a greater number of children would benefit from weekly sessions but that funding is a barrier to expanding provision. Other challenges included data driven pressures on schools from the UK’s inspectorate Ofsted (Office for Standards in Education Children’s Services and Skills) and the need to justify deviations from the national curriculum. Additionally, some parents have expressed concerns about cold and wet weather conditions, although the school state that this is usually a short-term concern and that parents are normally convinced once they see how much their children enjoy sessions and that they are well cared for with appropriate outdoor clothing and footwear (provided by the school). As in other areas of practice, the school see continued relationships with families and open communication to be key.





Benefits:

Forest School requires investment in developing a site and training staff to deliver provision, with specific expertise in outdoor studies, health and safety and the learner-led pedagogical approach that differs from usual teaching practice in UK schools (beyond Early Years). Carlton Grange have received support from a local Forest School network which has provided Forest School training and professional development, including practical, pedagogical and research support. Appointing appropriate staff who are passionate about the outdoors and supporting children's holistic development is key, with Carlton Grange appointing a Forest School lead within school. Timetabling is also important in ensuring that sessions are regular, long-term and that a high staff to child ratio is maintained.

Staff reflected that children benefitted from a less structured environment at Forest School, with more opportunities to direct their own learning, more flexibility in communication with others and no 'right or wrong answers', reducing the pressures that some children feel within the classroom.

'Opportunities to work together and working together on a practical thing rather than something that they've either got to read or write down. I think it's really valuable because it's all of those skills that they learn from that, that they can develop into what they need'

(head teacher)

The schools are able to give specific examples where they believed Forest School had played an important role in developing children's confidence, enabling them to begin to interact and talk with their peers and their language development:

'Child C started sessions and did not interact with other children. Within a term, she was beginning to form relationships with others in the session. During the next term she felt more comfortable and is now confidently chatting within the group. She also plays well independently as well as with others in the group'

(INA teacher)

'I can't stress how much it (Forest School) supports their language development though because there's just so much comes from that ... when you talk about different leaves, the names of different leaves, the names of different trees, the names of nuts, berries, it just generates a whole lot more in a natural way than it does in the classroom ... it just has more meaning for them and ... that supports them to develop those skills in different areas ... everything works together, maybe without such a sharp focus, the children pick things up themselves and they just really enjoy it and, as we all know, if children are happy then they're more able to take things in and to remember things'

(head teacher).





Tips for Success:

Be clear about what you want to achieve and for which children

Deciding to take time out from delivering mandated curriculum needs to be justified and so a strong leadership vision with a clearly articulated evidenced based rationale is necessary.

Do not use attendance at Forest School as a reward or as a punishment

Incorporate freedom as well as some structure in the sessions

Prioritise relationship building between staff and children and between children over time

Longer sessions have greater impact and allow immersion in the learning environment

Encourage a high ratio of staff to children for most impact

Choose your site carefully with opportunities to run, climb, play and engage with nature



Additional Resources:

<https://forestschoollassociation.org/what-is-forest-school/>

<https://forestschoollassociation.org/forest-school-qualification/>

Coates, J. K. & Pimlott-Wilson, H. (2019). Learning while playing: Children's Forest School experiences in the UK. *British Educational Research Journal*, 45(1), 21-40.

Crabtree, B.F. and Miller, W.L. (1999). 'Using codes and code manuals: a template organising style of interpretation', in B.F. Crabtree and W.L. Miller, (eds.), *Doing Qualitative Research*, 2nd edition. Newbury Park, California: Sage.

Cree, J. and McCree, M. (2012). 'A brief history of the roots of Forest School in the UK', *Horizons*, 60 (Winter).

Harris (2022) Forest School. *CABI Reviews*, <https://doi.org/10.1079/cabireviews202217041>

McCree, M. Cutting, R. & Sherwin, D. (2018). The hare and the tortoise go to Forest School: Taking the scenic route to academic attainment via emotional wellbeing outdoors. *Early Child Development and Care*, 188(7), 980-996.

Ridgers, N. D., Knowles, Z. R. & Sayers, J. (2012). Encouraging play in the natural environment: A child-focused case study of Forest School. *Children's Geographies*, 10(1), 49-65.

Roe, J. & Aspinall, P. (2011). The restorative outcomes of forest school and conventional school in young people with good and poor behaviour. *Urban Forestry & Urban Greening*, 10, 205-212.

Tiplady LSE, Menter H. (2021). Forest School for wellbeing: an environment in which young people can 'take what they need'. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 21 (2,) 99-114.

Turtle, C., Convery, I. & Convery, K. (2015). Forest School and environmental attitudes: A case study of children aged 8-11 years. *Cogent Education*, 2:1100103.

Conclusion:

Forest School is effective in engaging children, developing relationships and supporting social and emotional development that enables children to engage in learning.

The learner-led pedagogy of Forest School and immersion in the natural world intrinsically motivates children's language development and supports literacy within the classroom and beyond.

Understanding the challenges and strengths within a school community and building supportive relationships with parents and families enables children to use these strengths, engage in education and succeed. Supporting the whole child and their development is key.



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