

Challenges and pedagogical conflicts for teacher-Forest School leaders implementing Forest School
within the UK primary curriculum

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1 **Abstract**

2 This paper focuses on challenges experienced by ‘teacher-FS leaders’ implementing Forest
3 School within the neoliberal and risk averse culture of English primary school education. Thematic
4 analysis of interviews with 12 ‘teacher-FS leaders’ identified five key themes: embedding Forest School
5 within the curriculum is a long-term process; negotiating the performative culture and curriculum
6 constraints; professional identities, values, and pedagogies; negotiating risk aversion; budget and time
7 constraints. Teacher-FS leaders adapted FS principles to meet the needs of their primary school
8 setting. However, they found ways of overcoming challenges, and sought to persuade others of the
9 value of Forest School and outdoor learning.

10

11 Key words: pedagogy, neoliberal, implementation, Forest School, curriculum

12

13 **Introduction**

14 There is increasing concern in most western societies that children are lacking connection with
15 nature and outdoor play that has healthy learning and developmental benefits (Bento and Dias 2017).
16 In the UK, the importance of children engaging with the outdoors is emphasised within the
17 government’s 25-year Environmental plan (DEFRA 2018), and by the launching of programmes such
18 as Nature Friendly Schools and Pupil Referral Units, which has a specific focus on providing children
19 from disadvantaged areas access to green space. Within the formal educational system, many primary
20 schools now attempt to incorporate some form of outdoor learning within their curricula. Indeed,
21 since 2007 learning outdoors has been part of the UK educational strategy within the Early Years
22 Foundation Stage (EYFS; DfES 2006), and typically rolled out across all primary years including settings
23 supporting older children with special educational needs (Knight 2011, 2013). There has been
24 increasing recognition of the value of outdoor learning (Dillon and Dickie, 2012; Fiennes et al. 2015),
25 especially as it provides a more flexible and less restrictive approach to primary pupils’ learning

26 experiences (Marchant et al. 2019). Furthermore, outdoor learning has also been recognised as a safe
27 and effective method of curriculum delivery during the Covid-19 pandemic (Spiteri 2020).

28 Forest School (FS) is a form of outdoor learning underpinned by a holistic approach to child
29 development and education, with generally common agreements of FS principles and pedagogy
30 through its accreditation by the Forest School Association (FSA 2020). FS is often offered within the
31 primary school setting and delivered via regular timetabled sessions during the school day in natural
32 spaces outside the classroom, thus enabling children to connect with nature (Harris 2021; Kraftl 2013;
33 Waite, Bølling, and Bentsen 2016). Key FS principles include its long-term provision, a woodland
34 setting location, and its promotion of holistic development to foster resilience, confidence, and
35 creativity in its learners (FSA 2020; Knight 2013). It should also offer the opportunity for supported
36 and appropriate risk-taking, the use of a range of learner-centred processes to create a community
37 for learning and development, and be delivered by a qualified FS leader (Ephgrave 2018; FSA 2020;
38 Knight 2013). Notably, pupils' perspectives of FS demonstrates that a blending of FS within their
39 mainstream school setting is not only considered as just a break from the usual school routine, but
40 also fosters cognitive, physical, emotional, and social benefits (Coates and Pimlott-Wilson 2019).

41 Due to its accreditation and qualification process making it feel acceptable to the UK school
42 system and policy context, FS is one of the most popular forms of outdoor learning provision in primary
43 schools in the UK (Cree and McCree 2012; O'Brien 2009) although outdoor activities and play in
44 primary schools are not new (Leather 2018). Despite this, there is a lack of consistency in the delivery
45 of FS within UK primary schools; with some FS provisions operating independently as informal outdoor
46 education providers (Waite et al. 2016). Furthermore, it is also evident that the original FS model has
47 diluted and now comes in many forms, with client groups going well beyond the original FS provision
48 and school contexts (Knight 2018; Leather 2018; Waite and Goodenough 2018). For example, many
49 schools provide a FS delivery led by qualified leaders but are not formally registered with the FSA;
50 whilst other schools are promoting themselves as FS providers, but sessions are not delivered by

51 qualified FS practitioners. The FSA acknowledges this lack of clarity as being problematic for
52 understanding FS provision (Davies 2015). This raises questions as to whether ‘bespoke’ FS provisions
53 should be discouraged as they undermine the FS ethos, or whether, as Knight (2018) suggests, a less
54 stringent FS delivery should be seen positively, as it means greater numbers of students benefit from
55 outdoor learning.

56 Whilst FS delivery is increasing within the UK primary education system, the purposes of
57 outdoor provision, and the extent to which it is viewed as a way to deliver curriculum objectives or a
58 fresh alternative to formal mainstream schooling, are still contested (Kemp 2020; Rea 2008; Rea and
59 Waite 2012). Across the UK, the primary school policy is underpinned by a neoliberal educational
60 ideology that emphasises measurements of pupil accountability and performance, with a priority
61 focus on core curriculum content as a driver for achievement (Kemp 2020), though there is resistance
62 to neoliberal education reforms by some Headteachers (Fuller 2019). Thus, schools are under pressure
63 to meet the demands of the National Curriculum and to also provide meaningful activities that enrich
64 the learning experience (Harris 2017; Waite et al. 2016), and there is often little room to incorporate
65 any supplement to the existing programmes of study (Pimlott-Wilson and Coates 2019). It is important
66 to emphasise that FS is a vehicle for curriculum and not a curriculum in itself (Maynard 2007).
67 However, authors such as Knight (2016) and Waite et al. (2016) suggest that, due to the child-led and
68 exploratory nature of FS, conflicting pedagogical approaches may be a barrier to its effective delivery
69 as part of the timetabled curriculum on offer. Furthermore, the outcomes from outdoor learning are
70 typically less predictable, specific, or easy to measure than may be required to satisfy pressures within
71 a culture of performativity (Ball 2003, 2015; Waite 2011; Waite and Goodenough 2018). As such,
72 school leaders may be wary of allocating regular time for FS sessions, as it could be to the detriment
73 of the attainment and progress of pupils in other areas, and thus overall school performance (Kemp
74 and Pagden 2019). This suggests that when schools are judged through achievement of outcomes
75 rather than pedagogies, innovative pedagogies may be marginalised (Waite and Goodenough 2018).
76 Tensions can exist in some cases when the curricular goals and philosophy do not fully align with the

77 ethos of FS (Waite and Davis 2007). Indeed, Cree and McCree (2012) argue that the incongruence
78 between the FS ethos and that of traditional schooling is perhaps so different that they cannot be
79 delivered as an integrated curriculum.

80 Regardless of the aforementioned conflict, the delivery of FS is increasing in UK primary
81 schools. However, within a constrained financial climate, rather than hiring an external provision,
82 some schools are supporting the training of existing staff as FS leaders in order to deliver or support
83 delivery (Waite et al., 2016). Teachers training to become FS leaders need to take on board alternative
84 pedagogies and ways of learning through adopting FS principles. However, integrating FS principles
85 and practice into the neoliberal policy context of UK primary schools is not unproblematic for such
86 teachers, with potential for clashes in expectations, pedagogies, and values through training or in
87 practice (Edward-Jones, Waite, and Passy 2018; Kemp 2020; Waite and Goodenough 2018). Teachers
88 who are FS leaders need to re-contextualise their pedagogical practices to meet the competing
89 demands which can potentially compromise the quality of the rich learning experiences outside of the
90 classroom (Kelly 2014). For example, whilst schools and teachers tend to be risk-averse, FS embraces
91 the element of risk, encouraging pupils to recognise and take measures to reduce risk (Harris 2017;
92 Kemp 2020; Swarbrick, Eastwood, and Tutton 2004). As such, teachers who train as FS leaders may
93 struggle to modify their usual instructional and teacher-led teaching style to one that is more
94 confident in allowing the children to take ownership of their learning, and which affords them more
95 freedom of choice (Connolly and Haughton 2017; Harris 2017; Waite et al. 2016).

96 Much research tends to focus on the benefits of FS for learners, or explores the experiences
97 of learners through observations and interviews (e.g. O'Brien and Murray 2007; Slade, Lowery, and
98 Bland 2013). More recently, studies have begun to examine the teacher perspective of teaching
99 outside the classroom, both abroad (e.g. Barfod 2018; Mygind, Bølling, and Barfod 2018) and within
100 the UK context (Connolly and Haughton 2017; Kemp and Padgen 2019; Kemp 2020). These studies
101 have highlighted how teachers can feel professionally isolated as well as how they negotiate their FS

102 practice within the current educational policy climate. In this study we add to this literature by
103 focusing on teachers, teaching assistants, and school volunteers who have undertaken training to lead
104 FS for their pupils. The aim is to explore the experiences of these school staff as they embarked upon
105 their journey; in particular, we focus on the challenges, barriers, and tensions they perceived and
106 negotiated in the implementation of FS in their primary schools.

107

108 **Methodology**

109 The study adopted a social constructivist approach, with the understanding that participants'
110 reality is constructed in interaction with others, and in various ways, influenced by politics, values, and
111 ideologies (Carlson 1999). We used qualitative methods, conducted online due to the Covid-19
112 restrictions at the time of data collection, via semi-structured interviews in order to gain an insight
113 into participant experiences and perspectives on implementation of FS into the primary school
114 curriculum. Questions were designed to obtain contextual information on the background of the
115 participant, their views on FS, the positive and negative aspects of implementing FS, and how they
116 feel FS fits in with the curriculum being delivered in their school. The study was granted ethical
117 approval by The Health and Life Sciences Committee at Northumbria University.

118 Twelve participants were recruited; all were employed as educational staff within primary
119 school settings and were also Forest School Leaders, delivering Forest School programmes within their
120 educational setting. As such, in this study, we call them 'teacher-FS leaders' to highlight their transition
121 from traditional to alternative pedagogy and provision. Almost all delivered FS in Reception or Early
122 Years, with five extending provision up to UK school years four, five or six. For inclusion in the study,
123 participants were required to meet the criteria: firstly, they must be delivering FS within an
124 educational setting; secondly, they must have been employed by their school in some capacity i.e. as
125 teacher, teaching assistant or on a voluntary basis, *prior* to undertaking their FS Level 3 training.
126 Ideally, participants should have been involved in the initial setting up of their school's FS provision,

127 although this was not deemed absolutely necessary as the FS provision is an ongoing process, and
128 many of the initial experiences of the first leader would be encountered by subsequent staff who took
129 over the lead role. Participants' school settings were: one urban private, one rural local education
130 authority (LEA), and 10 urban LEA. One participant, working in an urban school, delivers FS within an
131 Additional Resource Centre for twelve pupils with emotional, social, and behavioural difficulties. The
132 other schools were predominantly one- and two-form entries. The timeframe of their delivery of FS
133 ranged from 6 weeks to 17 years.

134 Purposive sampling was used to recruit participants through targeted social networking sites,
135 where groups and pages are created specifically for FS leaders and enthusiasts. The FSA also
136 distributed a recruitment poster on their social media platform and newsletter to members. Upon
137 receipt of a signed consent form, the principal researcher arranged with the participant a suitable time
138 for interview. Interviews were carried out remotely, using the online platforms Skype and Zoom, and
139 lasted between 20 and 45 minutes. Names have been changed to anonymise the data (see Table 1).

140 Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using Inductive Thematic Analysis,
141 following the stages of coding as suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Key themes that emerged in
142 relation to issues faced by participants in implementing FS in the primary school setting were:
143 curriculum constraints, the need to assess and track progress, attitudes of senior management teams,
144 budget constraints and risk aversion. Teachers used a variety of strategies to negotiate tensions;
145 accommodating the demands of neoliberalism educational culture in their FS practice, resisting the
146 pressure for mainstream standards and attempts to educate and 'convert' teachers to the FS
147 pedagogy.

148

149

150 **[INSERT TABLE1 HERE]**

151 **Results/Discussion**

152

153 *...you have these ideals but then when you're in the system, you can't always carry out, you can't*
154 *always be the teacher you necessarily want to be because of other factors. ...I do really need to try*
155 *and fight the system a bit more. – Katrina*

156

157 *Embedding FS within the school curriculum is a long-term process*

158 All teacher-FS leaders faced challenges when implementing FS within their educational
159 settings. Challenges from the onset included how and where to set up the FS site; for example, finding
160 a site that had natural boundaries, and where there was little or no public access. Several interviewees
161 discussed evolving their site in response to children's needs or arranging the addition of new features
162 (for example compost toilets, fires circles, semi-permanent shelters, and storage units). All
163 interviewees also discussed the need for FS to be a long-term provision, for a variety of reasons.
164 Interviewees believed it took around three years to find a comfortable routine for delivering FS
165 sessions and to embed it into the school's curriculum; however, it was an ongoing process that was
166 never 'complete'. Peter described his experience so far as being '*full on*' and intended to use the
167 coming year as consolidation, to secure the provision he had put in place so far. Two interviewees
168 discussed using '*trial-and-error*' to find the model of best fit for their learners and the school's needs.
169 As such, it was evident that implementing FS into the primary school curricula was not a neat process,
170 but rather an ongoing process of development and negotiation.

171

172 *Negotiating the performative culture and curriculum constraints in UK primary schools*

173 All interviewees shared an awareness that the school timetable was already 'crammed' with
174 content that was deemed as being 'compulsory' by the National Curriculum, i.e. the core curriculum.

175 Each interviewee identified this as a key reason for implementing FS on the timetable as an optional
176 learning activity. This was particularly so for Gary, who had also delivered FS in several previous
177 schools, and Katrina, who also taught year two French alongside her FS delivery for her reception class:

178

179 *I don't feel there should be curriculum time restrictions in an infant school but there are, sadly...There*
180 *are always conflicts between trying to balance education philosophy and the practicalities of the*
181 *system we work in... – Gary*

182

183 *There's such pressures on us teachers to get the children where they need to be academically at the*
184 *end of the year - Katrina*

185

186 Several interviewees shared their opinion that by having a regular timetabled session in the week for
187 FS, it would make it harder for FS provision to be removed when there were pressures on the school.
188 Katrina, as a newly qualified FS leader, discussed her belief that foundation subjects and FS were the
189 first ones to be brushed aside if time needed to be found for whole-school events:

190

191 *Like French, it's always one of the first subjects to go if there's anything the school needs to do...like*
192 *an extra mass...I do feel I'm on the hierarchy of subjects that get scrapped. – Katrina*

193

194 Several of the interviewees discussed being requested by their Senior Management Team (SMT) to
195 identify where curriculum links could be made, despite this going against FS principles, as it added a
196 more formal element of planning and structure to sessions that would make it less child-led. Several

197 interviewees also found themselves being asked to provide evidence of progress tracking and had
198 experienced either explicit or unspoken pressure from Senior Management Teams (SMTs) to do so.

199 Many interviewees briefly described how adding such a degree of structure or tracking of progress did
200 not sit comfortably with them, as they wanted to deliver FS '*in its purest form*'. This finding supports
201 Waite et al. (2016) who suggest that this desire to retain 'purity' in the form of FS provided can make
202 it more difficult for such practitioners to adapt within their school context. However, it was clear that
203 the teacher-FS leaders in this study were highly cognisant of the focus on performativity and the
204 pressures on them to achieve good results (Ball 2003).

205 Despite misgivings, most did compromise and adapt their practice in response to such
206 requests or pressure. This may be due to their prior experience working in a school environment,
207 compared to other studies such as Harris (2017, 2021) where the FS leaders came from more diverse
208 backgrounds and settings. This is emphasised by respondents' links to the National Curriculum. Only
209 six of the 20 participants in Harris' studies (2017, 2021) made such links, whereas in the current study
210 nine out of 12 interviewees had made explicit links to the curriculum. They did this either in their loose
211 session plans or upon reflection – that is, for example, annotating photographs of session activity with
212 comments on how an activity has linked to another curriculum area. Claire believed it a good idea to
213 identify where curriculum links could be made – although not explicitly planned for – to support cross-
214 curricular learning, allowing for new skills and knowledge to be applied to different settings. Two
215 interviewees were very aware of curriculum links '*creeping in*' in ways they did not want them to, as
216 it did not fit with their view of how FS should be planned and delivered. Hazel, who initially taught
217 nursery and reception, but had managed to get support to deliver FS up to year 2, resisted pressure by
218 taking a direct approach with her SMT, explaining that although there is opportunity for consolidation
219 of knowledge and skills, she would not plan for that to happen, reinforcing to them the fluid and
220 holistic provision of FS.

221

222

223 *I don't like doing literacy outside. That's not FS. I don't like doing maths outside, that's not FS. I don't*
224 *like doing science outside...! Not FS. But FS lends itself to those subjects and we do bring it into the*
225 *curriculum so we don't put the curriculum into FS, we do it the other way round, so we use FS by itself*

226 *- Hazel*

227

228 As tracking is not part of FS principles, some teacher-FS leaders had developed their own ways
229 of tracking progress, most relying on photographic evidence. Three interviewees discussed feeding
230 back to class teachers in an informal manner, such as in the staffroom, what children had done in the
231 session. Peter gave feedback directly to parents, as he greeted their children from the bus upon their
232 return to school. Another shared her method of using learning journals to track progress, where staff
233 and learners can add comments, drawings and photographs. Shelley had invested in 'Wild Passports',
234 allowing the tracking of skills and knowledge progression over a number of years – she also discussed
235 the high cost of purchasing these, but justified it as the children would have them from starting FS in
236 Reception, through to leaving the school (as all classes in her school had FS weekly). James discussed
237 their use of digital portfolio apps to evidence progress, where children can reflect on previous sessions
238 with teachers, adding comments to their photographs. In these ways, teacher-FS leaders were
239 adjusting their principles to accommodate the neoliberalist agenda, including school and parental
240 expectations.

241

242 *Tensions in professional identities, values and pedagogies*

243 Most interviewees indicated that SMTs tried to support them as teacher-FS leaders –
244 logistically and financially. It may be that Headteachers, as policy actors in relation to FS (Kemp 2020),
245 also experienced conflict between their own moral beliefs about the educational value of FS and the

246 performative culture in which they worked (Fuller 2019). All interviewees discussed changing their
247 teaching style, having to learn how to provide a looser structure for sessions and allow the children to
248 lead their own learning, supporting them in meeting their needs (Cosgriff 2017). However, some
249 interviewees also held the belief that SMTs were more interested in data, assessment, and evidencing
250 progress than the alternative pedagogy. This added to the feeling that their Headteacher '*just did not*
251 *get it*'. The feeling amongst some interviewees was that their SMTs were more interested in FS when
252 leaders could measure outcomes and formalise methods for tracking progress. Indeed, Tracy
253 explained how she loved the outdoors and had jumped at the opportunity to deliver FS, but even
254 though she had been delivering FS for two years her school was still not very receptive to its value.

255

256 *There's that mindset in our school of 'well if it doesn't meet a target then what are they learning'... –*

257

Tracey

258

259 This further supports the suggestion by Waite and Goodenough (2018) that tensions are more likely
260 when there is a misalignment of intended outcomes between school and FS principles, particularly
261 when the outcomes from FS are not necessarily easily measured or defined, and there is pressure for
262 FS to become 'more like schooling in its enactment' (p.42). Four interviewees shared their beliefs that
263 their SMTs did not fully embrace the FS approach, but were happy to '*have the badge*' – that is, the
264 SMT enjoyed showing off their FS provision to outside agencies, governors, Ofsted, Trust schools and
265 prospective parents but without wanting to give real support when and where it was needed.

266 Peter, who led FS at a public school, explicitly discussed having to 'sell' FS to his Headteacher by giving
267 it a commercial value:

268

269

270 *...we compete for our children around here...I had to say to him [Head Teacher] this is a unique selling*
271 *point, none of the other prep schools have got it...if you give me this money and time, I'll make us*
272 *marketable way and above the other[s]... – Peter*

273

274 In this type of school setting in particular, where survival depends on competitive advantage, the FS,
275 as a form of 'national model' of outdoor provision quality assured through the FSA, was able to be
276 integrated into provision less for its educational philosophy and more as a marketable opportunity for
277 its stakeholders (Leather, 2018, p.5). Interest in FS by SMT was shown, therefore, when it was
278 perceived to have value as a status indicator and marker of a school's quality provision and hence
279 distinction in the educational market field (Connolly and Haughton 2017; Kemp 2020). Alternatively,
280 James, a PE teacher who led FS every morning and up to year 6, identified how his Headteacher saw
281 FS as a strength for their next Ofsted inspection, within the context of his LEA school in a deprived
282 area of the city.

283

284 *...but our Head has got play and FS as a strength that he wants them to watch – James*

285

286 The new Ofsted Inspection Framework aims to focus more on overall 'quality of education' based on
287 a wider range of evidence, including first-hand observation, and conversations with teachers and
288 learners (2019, p.4). As such, it may be that the Headteacher in this school could see the potential
289 value of how FS, as part of the broader evidence beyond exam results, supported the development of
290 pupils in his school.

291 However, most of the interviewees also acknowledged that, in their experience, the FS
292 philosophy and child-centred pedagogy has been likened to the Early Years philosophy and was viewed
293 by SMT as more congruent at this level with its emphasis on play. For some, this led to frustration, as

294 they argued that FS should be a provision that should be continued for children as they progress
295 through the year groups and not come to an end when children move into Key Stage 1. The reduction
296 in outdoor learning opportunities in general through the age groups is well articulated by Waite (2010)
297 and evident in the current study as only five schools extended provision beyond year 2. For many of
298 the teacher-FS leaders, FS was perceived as under-valued by their SMTs, perhaps because they felt it
299 was hard to convince them of the learning that was taking place. Interviewees often attributed this to
300 the SMTs not observing staff delivering sessions or joining children or leaders during sessions. Indeed,
301 from some interviewees' perspective there was a perceived lack of 'real' interest by their SMT.
302 However, Chloe also admitted to finding it hard, particularly in her first year, to let go of the traditional
303 teacher driven pedagogy and embrace the looser and child-led FS approach:

304

305 *One of the things we found hard was sometimes they just wanted to run around. All day. You feel like*
306 *you should be directing them more, and that, kind of, teacher in me made me think, actually what*
307 *are they learning? And that's still what I find challenging now – trying to fight that battle between 'I*
308 *know it's supposed to be child-led and they get from it what they need'...and more structure...I find*
309 *that hard – Chloe*

310

311 All but one of the interviewees shared their disappointment that their SMTs had not been out
312 to FS sessions to observe the children or the FS leader. Katrina shared her experience of being
313 observed (as part of her Performance Management cycle); she indicated that she felt the Headteacher
314 was unable to feedback effectively as she did not fully understand the FS ethos, therefore did not
315 know what she was looking for as features of the session. Such experiences have left interviewees
316 feeling that their SMTs under-value them and FS, supporting a similar sense of professional isolation
317 noted by teachers of FS (*uderskole*) in Denmark (Barford 2018). Research suggests that FS is seen as a
318 supplement or add-on to the curriculum, rather than an embedded policy, which may lead to FS

319 provision being under-valued or underappreciated (Kemp 2020). In addition, several interviewees had
320 experienced negativity from other staff – particularly from support staff. Francesca, who was a year
321 two primary teacher before training in FS, shared her feelings that other staff under-appreciated the
322 work that she had to put in to achieve her qualification:

323

324 *It was a hard course...on top of what has to be done for school, on a daily basis. There...a lot of*
325 *theory as well...they say it's the equivalent of an A-Level. It's a shame that can't be reflected in there,*
326 *because...people don't appreciate the work that goes in. – Francesca*

327

328 Interviewees expressed the belief that those members of staff see the sessions as *'just playing'*
329 and did not see the real value in the provision. Holly described another teaching member of staff using
330 FS as a consequence for a child not finishing his work, supporting her belief that other staff did not
331 understand the FS philosophy or its value. For some interviewees, the way to overcome this challenge
332 was to educate other staff about the ethos of FS, and so had delivered different forms of 'training'
333 such as by running INSET days, or where staff have taken part in taster days. Hannah produced and
334 circulated a presentation, in the hope of inspiring and exciting staff about the possibilities of FS.
335 Another interviewee invited grandparents in for a tree-planting day, to involve family members. It was
336 clear that in becoming a FS leader, these interviewees had embraced its pedagogy and were actively
337 seeking ways to persuade others of its worth. In this study, teacher-FS leaders seemed to feel that
338 they needed to encourage others into FS, in order to see the value of FS as they had. Shelley said *'you*
339 *either buy into it or you don't'*, whilst Chloe explained:

340

341 *I don't think you can actually understand it until you're actually in it. I mean I didn't really*
342 *know until I went and when you started doing sessions it sort of sells it to you I think, and you see*
343 *how it works and actually feeling the benefit yourself - Chloe.*

344

345 This finding may be partly explained by the suggestion in Kemp (2020) that teachers and FS leaders
346 are typically positioned as separate ideologies, with teachers problematised within a deficit model by
347 FS leaders as lacking understanding of the outdoors or the benefits of FS.

348

349 *Negotiating risk aversion during FS within schools*

350 The reluctance to allow children to take risks is a common critique in UK primary schools,
351 where there is a hypersensitivity to potential harm and a subsequent perceived need for adults to
352 protect children in an increasingly uncertain risk society (Beck 1992). This risk aversion of teachers is
353 in conflict with FS principles, where freedom and the opportunity for children to take risks in the
354 outdoor environment are encouraged, and indeed where it is more likely viewed that children are 'at
355 risk from the absence of risk itself' (Connolly and Haughton 2017, p.106).

356 However, incorporating FS into the school environment has meant that risk assessments have
357 become a central activity for teacher-FS leaders. Several discussed their experiences of having to
358 identify and manage elements of risk during FS sessions. They discuss the lengthy and formal process
359 of writing risk assessments, both generic and specific to FS, such as using tools and lighting fires. In
360 addition, several interviewees have had to create personalised risk assessments for individual children
361 who have specific needs. Shelley had an 'open-book' policy for risk assessments, making them
362 available for other staff, but also insisting that parent-helpers and volunteers read the documents
363 before joining a session. In this, participants seemed to be adopting the view, consistent with Connolly
364 and Haughton (2017), that in order to allow perceived 'risky behaviour' risk management in terms of

365 risk assessments needed to be seen and be performed and was necessary to address parental and
366 school expectations and for self-protection.

367 Several interviewees discussed their experiences of updating the physical FS site in response
368 to risks posed to the children. One interviewee talked about adding a fence around a pond area, to
369 ensure children would not become too attracted by the water; another responded to his
370 Headteacher's concerns about tree climbing by cutting higher branches from the trunk, leaving only
371 the lower branches to climb. In these ways, they were still able to facilitate children's freedom yet had
372 reduced the 'risks' to which they would be exposed.

373 Some interviewees shared their belief that the amount of risk involved in FS provision, and
374 the fact that several risk assessments had to be created, is off-putting to many staff involved in
375 working with children. As much as risk is a challenge to be overcome, teacher-FS leaders believed FS
376 supports children's ability to identify risk for themselves and their FS training supported them in taking
377 measures to control the degree of risk present and in risk assessments appropriate to their context.
378 Shelley further explained that the benefits for the children outweighed the pressures that came with
379 it; this included the risks taken travelling to and from the FS site:

380

381 *...they're learning road safety. It's part of knowing where they live, in their village, they should know*

382 *how to get to places... – Shelley*

383

384 *Negotiating budget and time constraints*

385 All interviewees shared their experiences of setting up FS as being a costly venture. During the
386 FS leader training, trainees indicated they were excited by the prospect of using equipment and a
387 range of outdoor tools with their learners, but the reality was that they had to fund the purchasing of
388 such equipment and often the school budget did not have enough allowance to purchase a good range

389 of equipment or maintain it. Schools' budgets across the UK are tight, with little room to support new
390 initiatives such as FS, which can prove to be costly over time. Britton, Farquharson, and Sibieta (2019)
391 report that school funding has dropped by 8% in real terms between 2009/10 and 2019/20, with
392 England and Northern Ireland being the most affected by the cuts in the UK. Adequate staffing of FS
393 sessions to ensure 'true' FS is being delivered can also be costly; currently the staff-to-child ratio is
394 quite high (at 3-years of age the requirement is 1:8; FSA 2020). Additional costs that interviewees
395 encountered included on-site tree surveys and permits from local councils to use the land, where costs
396 can range from £50 to £500.

397 Having discussed challenges presented by the cost of running FS, most interviewees shared
398 experiences of raising money to subsidise the range of costs. Overall, schools were willing to provide
399 a small budget or give leaders pockets of money to get FS up and running. However, interviewees
400 discussed the ongoing costs, such as replacing waterproofs for children, buying / replacing /
401 maintaining equipment, purchasing annual site permits, travel costs where needed (public or hired
402 transport to sites), ongoing staff training and First Aid certificate renewals. In response to financial
403 needs, interviewees had applied to external agencies for grants – which have ranged from £200 to
404 £20,000. Two interviewees discussed having to 'play the disadvantaged card', as they know that
405 schools in socio-economically deprived areas are more likely to be granted funding awards. Tracy was
406 successful in applying to a large commercial company and was able to use the funds to purchase
407 storage space. However, in addition to grant applications, other fundraising activities were engaged
408 in. These included organising a Christmas carols service, inviting parents to a sing-along around the
409 fire on the FS site and fundraising stalls at school fayres. Several interviewees discussed the support
410 of the school PTAs or, 'parent-power'. Three interviewees paid for their own training to make their
411 proposal of delivering FS within their schools more attractive for SMTs, as they believed the additional
412 cost of training for their schools would result in their proposal being turned down. Four interviewees
413 discussed having to spend their own money to buy in resources, or spending their own time finding
414 suitable resources from other places, such as car-boot sales. All of the above-mentioned ways of

415 overcoming financial barriers were time-consuming for teacher-FS leaders. It was evident that several
416 had spent their own time, outside of work hours, writing applications for grants, engaging in
417 fundraising, or sourcing equipment.

418 In addition to financial constraints, time was a further constraint to curriculum practice.
419 Interviewees who worked with Reception and Key Stage 1 classes highlighted the amount of time it
420 takes for those children to prepare for FS sessions – that is, getting ready in waterproof clothing and
421 footwear. One of those interviewees then travelled to their FS site, taking more time away from the
422 actual sessions. One easy way to address this was to ask the parents to send their children in with
423 waterproof footwear already on; another interviewee allowed children to come to school in their own
424 clothes on their FS days. Staff time was also pressured, in terms of preparing resources for sessions.
425 Interviewees acknowledged that little can be done about this, although Francesca explained how she
426 used her PPA allowance to prepare for FS sessions (PPA: time allocated to teaching staff for planning,
427 preparation, and assessment). Interviewees who delivered FS off-site often visited the site before their
428 school day with the children began, to do site-checks, or clearing up rubbish left by members of the
429 public.

430

431 **Conclusion**

432 The aim of this study was to explore the experiences of ‘teacher-FS leaders’ in implementing
433 FS in their school environment. The findings highlight both the challenges and how teacher-FS leaders
434 negotiated this implementation, providing further evidence of the conflict between pedagogical
435 ideologies of FS and traditional schooling (Kemp 2020; Waite and Goodenough 2018) within a primary
436 school culture of performativity where emphasis is on targets, assessment, and results. The FS
437 philosophy is to take a ‘child-centred, inspirational learning process’ (FSA 2020) which aligns with the
438 philosophy of EYFS provision. In addition, the philosophy is often regarded as being the ideal – that
439 children’s learning should not be driven by targets, assessments, and statistics but should be a

440 personalised journey for each child where learning opportunities can support the child's physical and
441 cognitive development.

442 There is much existing research that supports the FS philosophy, where learning is largely
443 child-led and play-based (Leather 2018; Samuelsson and Carlsson 2008). Yet it was evident that many
444 teacher-FS leaders had to adapt the FS principles in order to meet the current needs of their primary
445 school setting and its performative culture (Waite and Goodenough 2018). The study uncovers some
446 of the tensions of teacher-FS leaders who may not be vocal about how they have had to be a little
447 more flexible in their approach, through either internal tensions in compromising their values or
448 concern for being frowned upon for not delivering 'true' Forest School (Leather 2018). Despite the
449 various challenges, it was clear that the teacher-FS leaders in this study were not passive recipients of
450 'pure FS' or the neoliberal UK education and policy demands, but, similar to Kemp (2020), were finding
451 ways and means of being agentic, overcoming challenges and indeed, trying to persuade others of the
452 pedagogical value of FS and outdoor learning in their schools.

453 As the number of trained FS leaders will likely continue to rise, there needs to be a wider
454 understanding of the experiences of those implementing FS provision within their educational setting,
455 perhaps comparing those who have come to FS from different backgrounds beyond those of formal
456 schooling - such as outdoor education or adventure professionals. The FS training providers would
457 also benefit from having a greater awareness of the challenges that newly qualified FS leaders face
458 when implementing FS within their school settings.

459

460

461 **Authors' biographical information**

462 Victoria Whincup is a Postgraduate researcher, with an interest in the extent to which socio-economics
463 impacts the opportunities people have in accessing green spaces. Her previous background is in
464 Special Educational Needs, with over 15 years working with secondary school aged children. She is a
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466 urban school for young people with a range of additional needs and complex health issues. Victoria
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469

470 Linda Allin is Associate Professor in Sport Development, in the Department of Sport, Exercise and
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475

476 Joanna Greer is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology, in the Department of Psychology, Northumbria
477 University. Her PhD in 2016 investigated executive functioning in adults with Williams syndrome.
478 Joanna's research now focuses on executive functioning in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder
479 and subclinical populations.

480

481

482 **Data availability:**

483 The interviews from this study can be supplied on request from the corresponding author:
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485

486

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610 **Table 1: Participants' pseudonyms, roles in school, and current FS provision and delivery**

Name	Role in School	Year groups doing FS	How often classes do FS	Where FS is delivered
Claire	Volunteer teacher FS leader	Reception, Other year groups, Nursery	Weekly Occasionally weekly Not all due to allocated nursery hours	On School site
Chloe	Primary teacher in Additional Resource Centre (ARC) for children with emotional, social, and behavioural difficulties – FS leader	Learners who attend ARC	Weekly	On school site
Francesca	Year 2 teacher – FS leader	Reception & Yr 1 KS1	Weekly - After school club	On school site
Gary	Infant school headteacher – FS leader	Reception, Yrs 1 & 2 (all classes)	Weekly	On school site & local woodland
Hannah	School teacher, now FS leader	Reception, Yrs 2 & 5	Weekly	On school site
Hazel	Primary school teacher	Nursery & reception Yrs 1 & 2	Weekly - Six-week blocks	On school site
Katrina	Reception class teacher – FS leader (newly qualified)	Reception	Weekly	Local woodland
Peter	Previous teacher, now FS leader	Reception to Yr 6	Weekly	Off-site private woodland
Tracy	Primary SEN teacher – FS leader	Selected KS 1 & KS2	Weekly	On school site
James	Primary PE teacher – FS leader	Reception to Yr 6	Weekly	On school site
Holly	HLTA – now FS leader	Selected Reception to Yr6	Weekly	On school site & local woodland
Shelley	FS leader across two first school	Reception to Yr 4	Weekly	On school site & local woodland

