

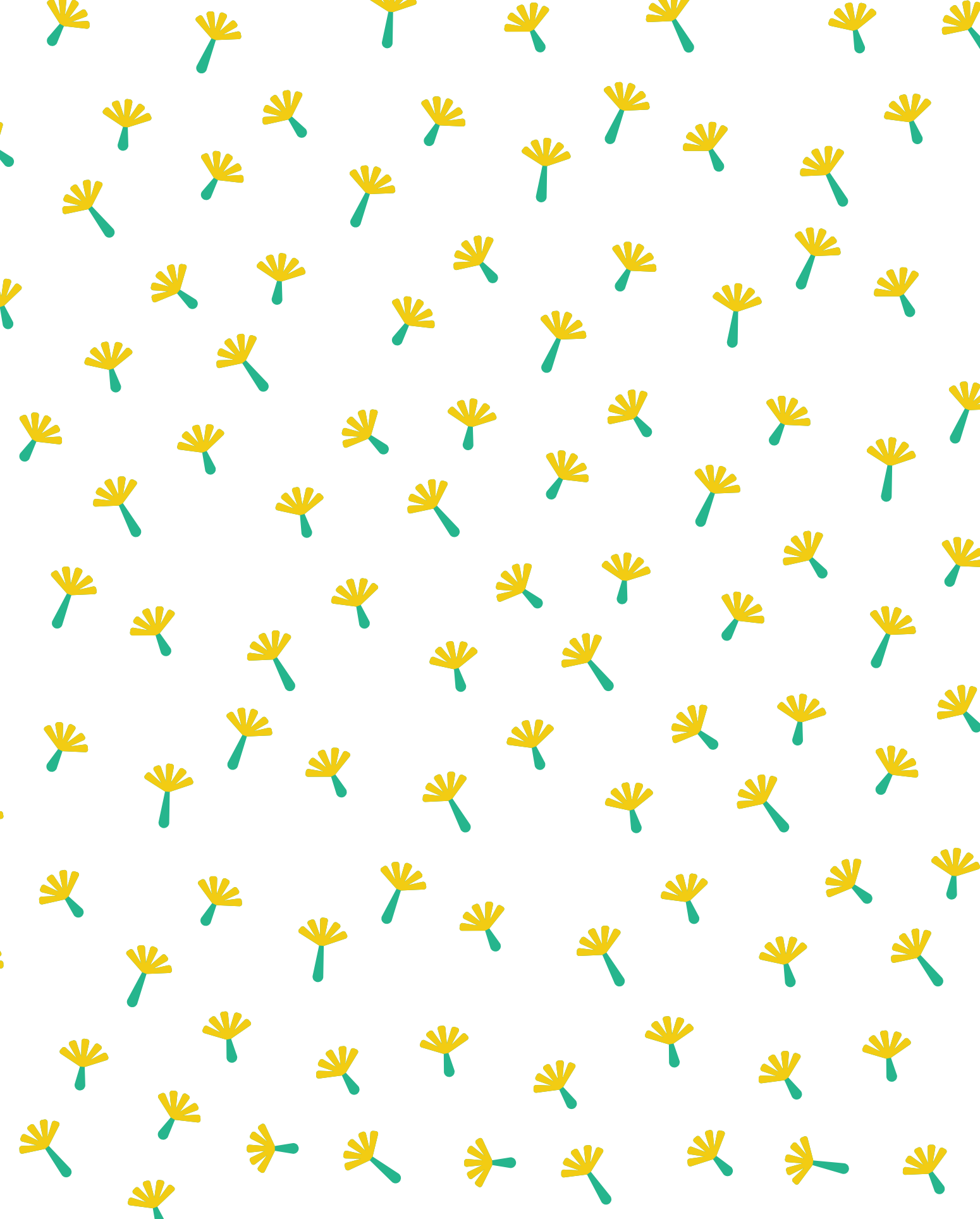


# Forest Fridays

HOW ONE PRIMARY SCHOOL MADE  
FOREST SCHOOL HAPPEN



Yuuki Blakeney & Jennifer Dungan



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## INTRODUCTION

On a lovely spring day in March 2015, when wildflowers filled the air with their scent, a primary school teacher brought her Senior Infant class to a nearby woodland.

It was an experiment, but soon the staff, children and their parents realised that something special was happening. Spending time in nature was transforming the children's wellbeing, learning attitudes and behaviours, their relationship to the nature around them and their whole school experience. It then became "Forest Fridays" and, before long, every class in the school had an opportunity to spend time in nature regularly.

The school is Dalkey School Project (DSP), the first Educate Together Primary School<sup>1</sup> established in Ireland, which has been recognised as a Dublin City University Changemaker school.<sup>2</sup>

This book has been written to record the experience of over a decade of Forest School in DSP. Its aim is to share the knowledge and wisdom gained through this time with other primary schools in Ireland and overseas to support their own journeys towards including Nature Based Learning such as Forest School within their own schools.



1 Educate Together Schools are multi-denominational schools in Ireland.  
2 The network is based on four pillars: empathy, leadership, creativity, and teamwork. For more information visit: <https://www.dcu.ie/dcu-changemaker-schools-network>.

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# 1. HOW FOREST SCHOOL STARTED IN DALKEY SCHOOL PROJECT



## JENNY'S STORY

### JENNIFER DUNGAN, FOREST SCHOOL LEADER, TEACHER AT DSP

In October 2014 I started a course called Forest School Leadership (the 2<sup>nd</sup> such training in Ireland) and I needed to run my pilot project. In March 2015, myself and two other trainees split teacher Angela Beary's Senior Infants class into three groups and ran the pilot project from March until June. Towards the end of the sessions we invited the parents to join us. The feedback from the children and the parents was so positive that we looked at how to bring this experience to more children in our school. The main complaint from the parents was that their other children weren't going to the forest!

DSP has always been about community and it has been a community project since the start: Angela, who spread the word about the benefits to other staff; teachers and assistants who gave this new idea a go; Miriam, the principal, who searched for solutions to challenges rather than using them as a reason to not do something; the parents who gave feedback and organised lifts and kitted their children out in all weather gear; Liz who brought her creativity and experience to

collaborate with us. It is because of this amazing community that projects like Forest School can happen in DSP.

Most people who heard about this way of learning assumed that it was doing exactly the same work as you do in class, you just do it outside. I re-read the Primary School Curriculum principles and realised that they were completely aligned with my experience of Forest School, more so than I'd ever been able to achieve in a classroom. (See Chapter 2 for more information on links between Forest School and the Primary School Curriculum.)

We saw an increase in skills, knowledge and, in particular, positive attitude towards learning and nature and classmates. Children were fully engaged in whatever activity they had chosen. There was no 'being off task'. Their curiosity and wonder and awe developed. They felt a sense of belonging, both with their peers and with nature. And the relationship between the adult and child developed as we learned from each other in a fun way.



As an infant teacher, I was seeing more and more challenges for children with fine and gross motor skills, and sensory regulation deficits in the classroom. Forest School naturally gave children the opportunity to learn in an environment that met their needs. We also observed creativity, problem solving, teamwork, empathy and leadership skills increasing whilst learning in the natural world.

Back in the classroom, when writing recount reports or narratives based on their time in the forest, the children's enthusiasm and skill in writing improved as they had the lived sensory experience of their topic.

After the pilot, we collaborated with Liz McMahon through the Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council Creativity in the Classroom project to provide Forest School sessions to all the children. It was a natural transition for Liz to work with the class in the outdoor classroom rather than the indoor one. We used the model Liz had been working with in the school and started out doing Forest School with the children as 9 week blocks every second year and have adapted to varying needs and challenges over the years.

We worked through and around many challenges. Getting children to and from the forest is an on-going issue. We argued with insurance companies who said we weren't allowed to use tools, even though we use tools in the classroom! We're not allowed to light fires because of the location. Weather can be challenging if children or adults don't have the right gear. Throughout all these challenges, I came to appreciate the style of collaborative leadership in our school that looks at a problem and says, 'How can we make this work?'

During the Covid 19 Pandemic we increased Forest School provision to every child getting a block of sessions every year. We also included Forest School as a core early intervention strategy in our Additional Needs policy. Jennie Casey, a play therapist (see Chapter 5), says that by providing the Forest School play that we do, some children avoid the need to progress to 1-1 play therapy. Their processing or other needs are met in Forest School.

In the last couple of years, we are very proud to have given further training and responsibility to 6<sup>th</sup> class students who have become wonderful

assistant leaders to the younger children in the summer term.

A core part of this programme is inviting the parents to join their children for a session. The children get to be the leaders for their adults and to show what they've been learning. They feel great pride in showing their adults to their special spots and the parents get an experiential understanding of what Forest School is. It is also an opportunity for teachers to develop relationships with the parents - so important in developing a community of support for the children.

We've been working with teachers through the years who are not qualified Forest School leaders and have adapted the activities accordingly. Saying that, every teacher is qualified to lead learning in a variety of environments, including outdoors.

Our journey continues in bringing nature based learning to the children in DSP. Each school and context will have different resources and bring different solutions to the challenges. Asking 'How can we make this work in this situation?' is a great way to start.



## MIRIAM'S STORY

### MIRIAM HURLEY, DSP PRINCIPAL

I love spending time outdoors and I am a great believer in a practical delivery of the national curriculum. When teachers reported the positive effects of Forest School, I was delighted to be able to support the initiative.

In order to understand the requirements, I taught several sessions myself. Observing children totally engaged in activities was uplifting. Some children wanted to explore and discover treasures such as fallen leaves and bark, insects and spiders, fungi and disintegrating wood. Some wanted to balance on fallen branches, climb a tree or tuck themselves under bushes. Every session had a theme so that children learned new language and literacy skills. Boundaries were clearly explained at every session so that children understood that listening and cooperation skills were essential.

Storytelling and making art pieces revealed how imaginative children can be. A winning aspect of Forest School was seeing the learning transfer back to the school setting. In the yard, children were creating new games using natural materials such as stones, leaves, dandelions, daisies and grass. They set up shops, fitness and health salons; they held weddings and funerals. Rather than sticks being guns, they became magical objects. Staff on duty were asking children, 'Is that game keeping everyone safe?' – possibly followed by a discussion – rather than instructing, 'Don't do that.' Social and emotional learning takes place without children being aware. It is magical.

Is Forest School a 'solve everything' programme? No. Forest sessions work if the school can provide the necessary resources:

*Staff:* trained leaders and enthusiastic teachers/assistants are needed for inclusive practices that enable children flexibility to make choices during sessions.

*Funds:* trained leaders must be paid; we were fortunate to be able to adapt an artist-in-residence style project to become the Forest School programme; some additional funding was necessary for insurance and transport.

*Nature base:* while we have a nearby woodland area, Forest School has been adapted by schools to take place in local fields, by the sea, in a small school garden.

*Sustainability:* does the school have the capacity (e.g. available staff) to deliver the programme? At DSP, we adjusted the programme to meet the changing needs of the school community.

*Note:* If you are a teacher/principal reading this section first, be sure to read the more detailed accounts by Jenny, Liz and Yuuki.

What advice would I give schools? If you have one or two staff willing to introduce Forest School, say yes before they change their minds!





## LIZ'S STORY

### LIZ MCMAHON. FOREST SCHOOL LEADER IN DSP. ARTIST

I have been an artist facilitator with primary school aged children in and out of school for many years. I came to work with DSP through a visual arts programme, DLR Creativity in the Classroom, in 2012 having worked on this programme for many years in the Dublin south inner city.

It's been my aim to connect children, through the medium of art, to their imaginative, playful selves through a creative process. I have always been connected to the natural world and I have found that children are naturally drawn to nature when they are given the opportunity. I have drawn on the outdoors, natural objects and materials, and stories as rich resources to explore.

Meeting and chatting with Jenny in the staff room we found this common bond when she shared her experience of her Forest School pilot sessions. This led to more meetings to see how we could support each other in offering the children an outdoor, nature based approach to learning.

*"Creativity in the Classroom was developed in six inner city schools. It aims to support the development of the whole child. The vision is to make a positive impact on children's sense of wellbe-*

*ing and esteem while optimising their capacity to access and complete their education. The mission is to ensure that children have the opportunity to explore and believe in themselves as creative human beings through child-centered, high quality and meaningful arts experiences. By working with committed teachers and talented professional artists children co-create an environment of beauty and fun-filled possibility."* (<https://www.creativityintheclassroom.com/>)

We could see that Forest School would totally support this work and the following September I began my sessions in Killiney Hill Park.

I found this was the ideal way of connecting with nature. The learning is deep for all of us. We are curious, fun, and adventurous together. I spent three years working as the artist facilitator in the team and immersed in the approach, or so I thought. Then I did the Forest School training. It is transformative.

I have never looked back. My artist facilitator role in other projects has changed with this experience. The answers to learning and creativity are all out there in our natural world.



## 2. HOW FOREST SCHOOL FITS WITHIN THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM

## CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

Dalkey School Project (DSP) Forest School sessions bring the children and their school curriculum to the forest on Killiney Hill, a nearby woodland, weekly for a block of consecutive weeks. The structure of each session allows the children to build connections: with themselves through Sit Spots, creative opportunities and reflection; with each other through games and teamwork; and with the world we live in through experiencing it with all their senses. The aim is to foster resilient, independent, confident and creative learners using a flexible approach and natural resources.

The learning flows out of the sessions in so many ways. English, Geography, Science, Maths, SPHE, Music, Art, PE, Ethical Education, Aistear and drama are all covered in the sessions and the richness of the experience contributes to increased engagement and motivation in the classroom and at home.<sup>3</sup>

In this chapter, we introduce the following topics, which give a sense of the DSP Forest School ethos.

- What is Forest School?
- What are the principles of Forest School?
- How does this link with the Primary School Curriculum?
- Why are regular sessions important?
- How does Forest School develop creativity?
- How does Forest School develop sensory integration and emotional regulation?
- Why is child led play important?
- How does Forest School build resilience?

“  
Nature-based learning isn't a trend.  
It's a return to how humans have  
always learnt: by observing,  
exploring, and experiencing.

”  
David Sobel

## WHAT IS FOREST SCHOOL?

Forest School was originally brought to the UK and Ireland based on the Scandinavian approach to early childhood education, where children spend time outdoors throughout the seasons. It is a long-term outdoor education process that is holistic and learner-led. Holistic means 'whole' – and Forest School seeks to enable the development of the whole person.

It allows children to develop through healthy engagement with risk, problem-solving and self-discovery, all within a natural environment in a hands-on and thoughtful manner.

Forest School sessions have activities and offerings to share with the children but we create an environment that allows children to contribute their ideas and inspiration and to engage in child led play. The aim is to support children's creativity and sense of curiosity, to build bonds and friendships and encourage their individual way of learning and interacting with the natural world in a fun and safe environment.

<sup>3</sup> SPHE is the Irish primary curriculum subject for Social, Personal, Health Education, Aistear is the Irish Early Childhood Curriculum Framework from birth up to the age of six years.

## EXAMPLES OF FOREST SCHOOL ACTIVITIES



Ecology education.



Nature games.



Shelter and den building.



Developing observation skills.



Learning new skills like making rope.



Listening to nature stories.



Sensory and mindfulness activities.



Exploring the natural world.



Developing fine motor skills, learning from each other.

2. HOW FOREST SCHOOL FITS WITHIN THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM



Developing physical skills.



Nature art.



Playing with the elements like water and rain.



Foraging.



Nature craft.



Seasonal activities.



Safely working with tools.



Learning new rope skills.



Whatever the children come up with!



# WHAT ARE THE PRINCIPLES UNDERPINNING FOREST SCHOOL?

According to the Irish Forest School Association (IFSA), the principles of Forest School are defined as follows.

## 1. REGULAR SESSIONS

Forest School is a long-term process of regular sessions, rather than a one-off or infrequent visits; the cycle of planning, observation, adaptation and review links each session.

## 2. WOODLAND SETTING

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

## 3. COMMUNITY

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

## 4. HOLISTIC DEVELOPMENT

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

## 5. OPPORTUNITY TO TAKE RISKS

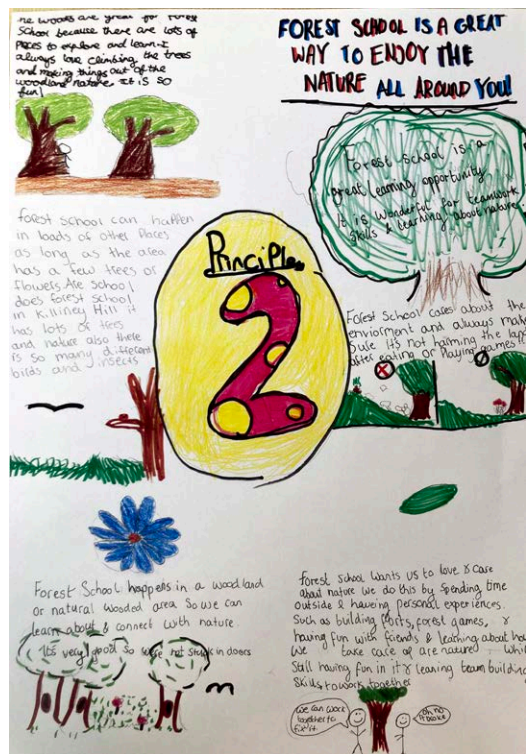
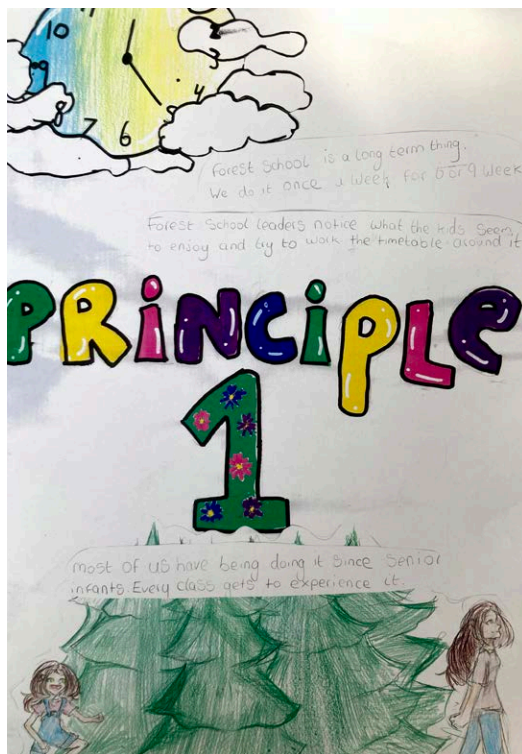
Forest School offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.

## 6. QUALIFIED PRACTITIONERS

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

For more information visit [www.irishforestschoollassociation.ie](http://www.irishforestschoollassociation.ie)

These posters explain the 6 principles of Forest School, and were designed by 6<sup>th</sup> class in preparation for them being assistant leaders to younger children.



**Principle 3**  
Forest School helps us as people to learn

Forest School teaches us to regulate and understand our feelings

Forest School helps us respect nature

Forest School helps us grow our minds because we get to run and play

Forest School helps us grow

Emotionally

Physically

YAY

I ♥ NAT

W/ CROWE YOUR BRAIN

**PRINCIPLE 4**  
Safe Risks

- Forest School gives us the chance to take risks in a safe and supported way. For example we are allowed to climb trees but you can only climb to see the canopies with your arms.
- Before we do anything at forest school we have a chat with our forest school teacher about what is safe and what is not. This is done to keep us safe. For example we talk about our boundaries before we go adventuring.
- Another thing we do is create safety plans. For example if we are climbing a tree we are taught what to do if we are stuck. We are also taught how to use ropes and how to use a first aid kit. We are also taught how to use a whistle and how to use a first aid kit.

I hope to be a forest school leader

**PRINCIPLE 5!**  
FOREST SCHOOL LEADERS ARE ALWAYS LEARNING

1. Forest School is taught by trained forest school leaders.
2. The leaders have to go through a lot of checks to make sure they are safe to work with children and vulnerable people.
3. So everyone is safe there always are adults around.
4. In case of an accident the leaders know first aid.
5. So everyone knows what to do and stays safe, there are rules in place.
6. All the leaders are trying to learn and improve their teaching and they see themselves as learners too.

1

2

3

4

5

6

**PRINCIPLE 6**

In Forest School you get to learn in ways that suit you. You get to play and do the things that you like with the help of an adult.

Principle 6: At forest school you learn by doing things you enjoy and are interested in, with leaders who help you grow and improve.

The leaders are always watching and learning from you too.

After each session you and the leaders talk about what you learned.

They taught me to be respectful to nature and watch the surroundings around me so I don't kill a plant or bug.

## HOW DOES FOREST SCHOOL LINK WITH THE PRINCIPLES OF THE PRIMARY SCHOOL CURRICULUM?

The Irish Department of Education through the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) defines the principles of the Primary School Curriculum in the classroom. Below is a description of each principle as found in the Primary School Curriculum Introduction.<sup>4</sup> It's like it was written for Forest School!

### 1. THE CHILD'S SENSE OF WONDER AND NATURAL CURIOSITY IS A PRIMARY MOTIVATING FACTOR IN LEARNING

*"It is in cultivating the sense of wonder that the curriculum can provide the most fulfilling learning experience for the child and foster an appreciation of the value of learning."*



Nature gives children opportunities to wonder and be curious.

### 2. THE CHILD IS AN ACTIVE AGENT IN THEIR LEARNING

*"First-hand experience that actively engages the child with the immediate environment and with those who live in it is the most effective basis for learning."*



Finding silk button galls on the back of an oak leaf and deciding to bring it as a present for our friend, Harriet the Hedgehog, who wrote us a letter last week about needing to make a hibernaculum for winter.

4 Source: The Primary School Curriculum - Introduction, 1999

### 3. LEARNING IS DEVELOPMENTAL IN NATURE

“Having dealt with particular knowledge, ideas and skills at a simple level, the child should have the opportunity to return to them at regular intervals in order to deepen his or her understanding.”



Using the spiral curriculum of returning to learning at regular intervals throughout primary school we first learn to be in nature and experience it, then want to care for it and learn how to do this.

### 4. THE CHILD'S EXISTING KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE FORM THE BASE FOR LEARNING

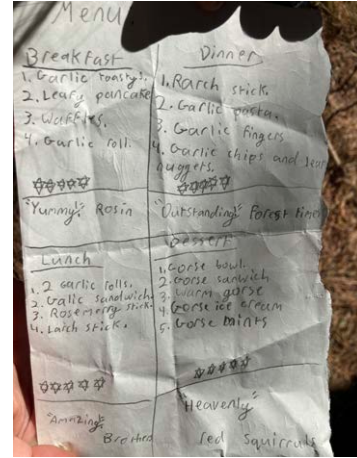
“The curriculum enables the child to move from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the more complex, from the concrete to the abstract, benefitting from a learning experience that is effective, coherent, and relevant.”



Rua, the red squirrel puppet, comes to visit the children. We move from the known to the unknown, from the simple to the abstract naturally through stories and play.

### 5. THE CHILD'S IMMEDIATE ENVIRONMENT PROVIDES THE CONTEXT FOR LEARNING

“A rich experience of different aspects of the curriculum outside the classroom adds enormously to the relevance and effectiveness of children's learning.”



This is a menu that a group of children developed over a few weeks foraging in their immediate environment.

### 6. LEARNING SHOULD INVOLVE GUIDED ACTIVITY AND DISCOVERY METHODS

“The principle of guided activity and discovery and the importance of the teacher in providing the most effective learning experiences for the child are central to the curriculum.”



These children were given tarps and ropes to try to figure out how to set up a shelter for themselves one wet Forest School session. They had been learning knots and now had the opportunity to discover what worked best from trial and improvement.

## 7. LANGUAGE IS CENTRAL IN THE LEARNING PROCESS

*“Much learning takes place through the interaction of language and experience.”*



Learning to communicate and how to say ‘please stop’ or ‘keep going’ is part of real life learning.

## 8. THE CHILD SHOULD PERCEIVE THE AESTHETIC DIMENSION IN LEARNING

*“The uniqueness of the child is perhaps most apparent in the innate creativity of each individual, while valuing the child’s creative response and expression of perceptions, insights, interpretations and knowledge is an important principle of the curriculum.”*



The children are always finding snail trails in interesting places. This was a child’s unique creation of a postage stamp celebrating a snail.

## 9. SOCIAL AND EMOTIONAL DIMENSIONS ARE IMPORTANT FACTORS IN LEARNING

*“By providing children with a successful and happy school experience, by nurturing essential intrapersonal and interpersonal development, and by developing communication skills, children’s self-esteem and self-confidence are raised and their motivation to learn is increased.”*



Communication skills and self confidence develop as children have the opportunity to try out new experiences in a different environment.

## 10. LEARNING IS MOST EFFECTIVE WHEN IT IS INTEGRATED

*“It is important, therefore, to make connections between learning in different subjects. As they mature, integration gives children’s learning a broader and richer perspective, emphasises the interconnectedness of knowledge and ideas and reinforces the learning process.”*



These children had been learning lots of knotwork before they attempted to create a hammock. It involved teamwork, communication, fine motor skills and patience.

### 11. SKILLS THAT FACILITATE THE TRANSFER OF LEARNING SHOULD BE FOSTERED

*“One way to judge the effectiveness of learning is to look at the child’s ability to apply what he or she has learned in dealing with problems, choices, situations and experiences that are unfamiliar.”*



Every group from Junior Infants to 6<sup>th</sup> class has built some sort of den. The choices are endless as are the opportunities for learning - social skills, communication, problem solving, construction, aesthetics.

### 12. HIGHER-ORDER THINKING AND PROBLEM-SOLVING SKILLS SHOULD BE DEVELOPED

*“In the curriculum the child is encouraged to observe, collate and evaluate evidence, to ask relevant questions, to identify essential information, to recognise the essence of a problem, to suggest solutions, and to make informed judgements.”*



When mapping the base camp using natural materials, children need to use observation skills, identify essential information, ask questions, suggest solutions and make decisions on how to make something 3D into something 2D.

### 13. COLLABORATIVE LEARNING SHOULD FEATURE IN THE LEARNING PROCESS

*“Children are stimulated by hearing the ideas and opinions of others, and by having the opportunity to react to them. Collaborative work exposes children to the individual perceptions that others may have of a problem or a situation.”*



Learning with each other in a spacious, child led environment exposes children to different ways of doing things.

### 14. THE RANGE OF INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCE SHOULD BE TAKEN INTO ACCOUNT IN THE LEARNING PROCESS

*“The breadth and flexibility of the curriculum, the choices it offers in the selection and sequencing of content and its focus on the developmental needs of children ensures its adaptability to the diversity of children’s circumstances and experiences.”*



Every one of the trees is different in the woods. Every one of us in the group is different. We need some of the same things to grow and thrive and sometimes we need something different.

## 15. ASSESSMENT IS AN INTEGRAL PART OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

“Assessment includes the child’s growth in self-esteem, interpersonal and intrapersonal behaviour, and the acquisition of a wide range of knowledge, skills, attitudes and values.”



Assessment for learning: We noticed the children in this group were learning a lot from looking closely at details. We chose to develop this skill by looking at the wider perspective and recording their observations. This is a line drawing of the view from the top of the hill.



Assessment of learning: A drawing by a Junior Infant child after getting to know a beech leaf through touch, smell, taste, sight and even sound after the buds burst in Spring. Notice the observation skills of the bright green colour and the hairs on the edge of the leaf and the different sizes and the veins.

### HOW DOES FOREST SCHOOL SUPPORT THE PRIMARY CURRICULUM?

#### THE ARTS

The Forest School programme integrates process-led arts and crafts, music, drama and storytelling with opportunities for place-based learning and a rich exploration of Irish cultural heritage through nature.

#### LANGUAGE

As children express curiosity and delight in their surroundings, oral and written language become vital means of expression. Gaeilge comes alive as children name the natural world and celebrate the changing seasons through poetry and song.

#### ETHICAL EDUCATION

The natural world provides a rich environment for learning about spirituality and religious practices. Many traditions draw on the natural world as a source of inspiration and place of reflection.



#### MATHEMATICS

The Forest School environment provides many practical opportunities for integrating mathematics in a way that children feel is essential to their experience - from organising natural found objects into sets, observing patterns to exploring weight and angles while constructing a sturdy den from branches.

#### SOCIAL, PERSONAL & HEALTH

Time spent in nature has been shown to have significant benefits for children’s health, wellbeing and self-confidence. It also promotes children’s awareness of themselves, others and their wider community.

#### PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Through games, risky play (including lifting, climbing and running) children of every ability can work on their physical skills in a low-pressure environment. Free-play also enables children to develop their own games, requiring strategic thinking and co-operation.

#### SOCIAL ENVIRONMENTAL & SCIENTIFIC

History, geography and science come alive within the natural environment as curiosity about their surroundings invites children to explore and examine more closely - from bug hunts to wondering about an old building to observing the effects of climate change up close.

## WHY ARE REGULAR SESSIONS IMPORTANT?

Forest School is a long-term process of regular sessions, rather than one-off or infrequent visits to woodlands. The essence of Forest School is the building and developing of relationships; with ourselves, each other and nature. This can't be done in a one off session (one off sessions have great value for other reasons).

The children develop relationships with their classmates in different ways. One of the 6<sup>th</sup> class children said that she likes Forest School because the class is in groups of ten and it gives them an opportunity to get to know other people in the class and make new friends. We frequently notice children seeing each other in a new light. We are different in different environments. Some children shine in a classroom. Others might be quiet and challenged by academic work but in the woods they become a leader and initiator. And this confidence carries back into their school friendships and attitude to learning.

Former pupils, now in Transition Year, have written some memories of their time in Forest School. Here is what Ali said: *“Looking back this was a very useful way of making new friends because we are seeing each other in a different environment, instead of seeing each other in the classroom/school.”*

It also gives the Class Teacher or Special Needs Assistant (SNA) an opportunity to see a child from a different perspective.



A different environment with small groups can foster new relationships.

Children develop their relationship with nature over time. This being a long term process means learners can see the changing seasons, and all that that brings. On our walk up to the woods we notice what changes and what stays the same.

Most children (and maybe adults) don't put together the blossom on a tree (e.g cherry or apple) and its essential connection with the fruit. In Forest School we make that connection real.



Cherry blossom – only blossom for a short time before they start to form fruit. Noticing these changes each week helps develop our relationship with nature.

Regular sessions allow the build up of skills over time. Over the 6 years that this class have done Forest School they have learned whittling, rope work, making cordage, making ink, weaving, knots and foraging amongst many other practical skills. One 6<sup>th</sup> Class child said, *“Forest School was a fun and active way to learn about nature. I remember we learnt about different types of knots which was very helpful.”*



Learning skills like whittling, knot work and putting up hammocks develops over time.

Sessions are developed through a reflective practice of observation, reflection, adaptation and planning (ORAP). Without a long term approach the leaders wouldn't have the opportunity to address individual needs and cater for the interests of the group.



## HOW DOES FOREST SCHOOL DEVELOP CREATIVITY?

In the woods, we gather our resources and then use the colour and texture of the fallen seeds, sticks, leaves, needles and feathers to create. Observing, noticing, discovering, finding, gathering, carrying and sorting our resources is as important as the finished creation. The conversations and questions and learning that happens through the process is much more beneficial than the product at the end. Part of our process is also to let go of the product and just keep the memory and learning with you.



Gathering resources to create with.

Creating through open-ended art values the process over the final product. The process involves discovering, exploration, and learning to trust one's own choices. The product is only the outcome of the exploration and discovery, a reflection of deeper learning. As children create art, there will be repetition, remaking, tweaking and manipulating materials to various outcomes and experiences, all unique to that child. Art pleases the child and honors unique individuality and diversity.



Art is creative and free - letting the rain help us paint!

In Forest School, Art is creative and free with only some very basic techniques to guide the experience. For young children, the exploration and discovery is foremost and the finished product may not even exist! Sometimes children will value the finished artwork as a by-product to their creative explorations, and sometimes it is a way of telling what they experienced. Other times they set it aside and start something new because it was the doing that mattered, not the outcome.



Creativity with circles.

Art as a subject in primary schools can sometimes be seen as decoration or illustration. During our sessions in Forest School, we would like the children to realise that art is a way to organise their thoughts, to spend time noticing, to be able to share ideas, and to experiment. It is a way to communicate with themselves and with others. Just as talking is not restricted to the professional speaker, art/creativity spreads across a spectrum of circumstances.

“  
When children explore art, they are testing possibilities and working through challenges, much like a scientist who experiments and finds solutions. Process art allows children to make their own assessments, while also teaching them that a problem may have more than one answer. Instead of following specific rules or directions, the child's brain becomes engaged in the discovery of 'How' and 'Why'.

”  
**Maryann Kohl**

## HOW DOES FOREST SCHOOL DEVELOP SENSORY INTEGRATION AND EMOTIONAL REGULATION?

Children frequently present in a classroom with sensory and emotional regulation issues. Outdoors we have opportunities to explore and develop our sensory systems. We talk about eight main senses that we work with: sight, sound, touch, smell, taste, proprioception, interoception and vestibular sense.

To make sense of the world around them and engage in learning, children gather and process information by using their different senses.



Children can engage all their senses and imagination when in nature - this group loved making things with blackberries!

According to Early Childhood Ireland, “Children are excited, engaged and educated by the stuff of the earth: plants, trees, water, stones, sticks, and soil. Interaction with and manipulation of these free materials have been building children’s bodies and brains for millennia. To them of course it is all about play and the joy of movement. For us adults it is about providing these experiences in environments that support their development in a child centered way. Their relationships with people and place develop as they explore their world and the way it works. We adults have the privilege of sharing in their experiences and the responsibility of keeping them safe while they learn how to do this for themselves.”<sup>5</sup>

5 Source: [earlychildhoodireland.ie](http://earlychildhoodireland.ie)

In the forest children are naturally drawn to explore the senses. Robb and Cree develop this idea further in *The Essential Guide to Forest Pedagogy* (Robb & Cree, 2021). Some examples are:

1. **Sight** - finding leaves of different shape, colour and pattern.
2. **Sound** - noticing the rain sound on the tree canopy and bird song.
3. **Touch** - sensations of the sun or wind on their skin, the slippiness and squishiness of mud underfoot.
4. **Smell** - smelling the wild garlic or the gorse flowers when it’s sunny.
5. **Taste** - nibbling beech and hawthorn leaves in Springtime, making and tasting pine needle tea.
6. **Proprioceptive sense** - is the coordination of movement, knowing where our body is in space and how much force to put into actions. Swinging, throwing, jumping, carrying heavy objects, pulling on a rope, playing on different surfaces develop proprioception.



Jumping helps develop proprioception.



Swinging and hanging and being on different surfaces helps develop proprioception.

7. **Interoceptive sense** - is the ability to feel what is happening inside our bodies, identifying internal sensations like cold, tired, hungry, thirsty. It is also responsible for allowing us to feel and regulate our emotions. It helps us to know when we feel safe or not and to listen and act upon our internal cues. A lack of interoception can lead to negative behaviours for no apparent reason. Choice, deep pressure of a hammock, checking in with children, having space to be on your own, having a den, having opportunities to take appropriate risks with awareness (supported by a leader) are ways we can support the healthy development of interoception.



Deep pressure of being in a hammock helps develop interoception.

8. **Vestibular sense** - is all about balance and spatial awareness. Children need lots of practice. Vision is closely related. Activities that support the vestibular sense can be up and down movement (e.g jumping), to and fro

movements (e.g dodging) and rotating movements (e.g rope swings), uneven ground, tree climbing, hanging upside down, clambering under things. Difficulty with tasks that require the eyes to move left to right (e.g reading) or up and down repeatedly (e.g copying information from the board) may be signs of an underdeveloped vestibular system.



Climbing trees, hanging upside down and swinging help develop our vestibular sense.

Free play allows each child the opportunity to develop the eight senses according to their own needs.

## WHY IS CHILD-LED PLAY IMPORTANT?

We are designed to learn all through our lives.

*“We now have a large – and growing – pool of evidence to show that learning through play is the best way to support learning. Children are natural scientists – they come into the world ready to experiment and learn through play. And they use what they discover to not only adapt the structure of their brains, but also strengthen the skills they need to continue being engaged, flexible learners for their whole lives.*

*When children get to make choices, try out different methods, and lead their own experiments, it makes all the difference to their learning. That doesn’t mean adults shouldn’t get involved. Just that we need to think in terms of guiding, rather than instructing: it’s the difference between challenging children to build a tall tower that won’t fall over (guiding) and simply telling them to widen the base (instructing).”<sup>6</sup>*

Tina Bruce, a Froebel thinker, outlines 12 Elements of Play (2011)<sup>7</sup> – if more than half of these items are present, then it is considered quality play:

1. Using first-hand experiences
2. Making up rules
3. Making props
4. Choosing to Play
5. Rehearsing the Future
6. Pretending
7. Playing alone
8. Playing together
9. Having a personal agenda
10. Being deeply involved
11. Trying out recent learning
12. Coordinating ideas, feelings, and relationships for free flow play

6 Source: [learningthroughplay.com](http://learningthroughplay.com)

7 Bruce, T. (2011) *Learning Through Play: For Babies, Toddlers and Young Children* (Paperback), HODDER EDUCATION.

“

Close observation of children at play suggests that they find out about the world in the same way as scientists find out about new phenomena and test new ideas...

During this exploration, all the senses are used to observe and draw conclusions about objects and events through simple, scientific investigations.

”

Judith Rodenv



“

When children play in natural spaces, they’re far more likely to invent their own games than in more structured settings - a key factor in becoming self-directed and inventive adults later in life.

”

Richard Louv

## EXAMPLE OF PLAY DURING A SESSION

One group was observed during their free play:

*“The richness of their play built on previous weeks’ experiences. Entrepreneurial skills were developed by one group as they offered a go on the slide. Payment was in leaves. Roles were negotiated. Sometimes ‘staff’ who were minding the shop wanted to get time off to have a go on*

*the slide. For an extra payment a photographer was available. As the play progressed, the slide became a jump and roll. A large branch started out as a fan and then became part of an obstacle course and a limbo pole. Another branch became a roller coaster. According to the 12 elements of play outlined above, 9 or 10 of the elements were present.” (Jennifer Dungan, November 2021)*



The slide (and photographer with a rock camera for an extra fee of 3 leaves.)



A branch as a fan and a limbo pole.



A branch as a rollercoaster.

“ Children come into the world exquisitely designed, and strongly motivated to educate themselves. They don’t need to be forced to learn; in fact, coercion undermines their natural desire to learn.

”  
**Peter Gray**

Offering children choices isn’t a recipe for chaos. Rules and boundaries are essential in many ways for keeping children and adults safe and productive throughout the school day. But by centering choice, leaders offer children scaffolded opportunities to practise decision-making and connect their learning to interests and passions.

## HOW DOES FOREST SCHOOL BUILD RESILIENCE?

Resilience is defined as our ability to recover quickly from day to day difficulties. There are different types of resilience that we need to develop in order to support ourselves during challenging times. These include physical resilience, mental resilience, emotional resilience and social resilience.

Resilience is a skill, like riding a bike. The more you practice, the better you'll be.

Fear and anxiety surround us in society. It is in us as adults and we are passing it on to our children. Children can come into the woods with fears of getting stung, getting wet, getting dirty, falling, getting lost etc.

Not knowing (recognising and having a relationship with) your own local natural environment develops fear. The unknown is generally feared. By getting to know what lives around us, we grow to love it rather than fear it.

Getting stung (tingled) by a nettle or falling on uneven ground and realising that though it

“ Encouraging a child to go outside in all weather builds resilience, but more importantly it saves them from spending their life merely tolerating the “bad” days in favor of a handful of “good” ones - a life of endless expectations & conditions where happiness hinges on sunshine.

”  
**Nicolette Sowder**

might hurt a little, you recover, gives confidence that cannot be replicated in other ways.

Feedback from parents during the COVID-19 pandemic informed us that children who had a Forest School experience, were better equipped for the challenges of the restrictions of the pandemic. When their extra curricular activities were cancelled, they were used to playing, creating and learning independently in nature.



Picking plantain leaves to heal nettle tingle.

## OUTDOOR PLAY HELPS CHILDREN TO...



Willoughby (2014)<sup>8</sup>

8 Willoughby, M. (2014) *Outdoor Play Matters: The Benefits of Outdoor Play for Young Children*. <https://knowledge.barnardos.ie/handle/20.500.13085/238>.



### 3. HOW THE SESSIONS ARE PLANNED



## CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, we introduce how to plan Forest School sessions and outline examples of session plans followed by the 10 years of DSP Forest School themes.

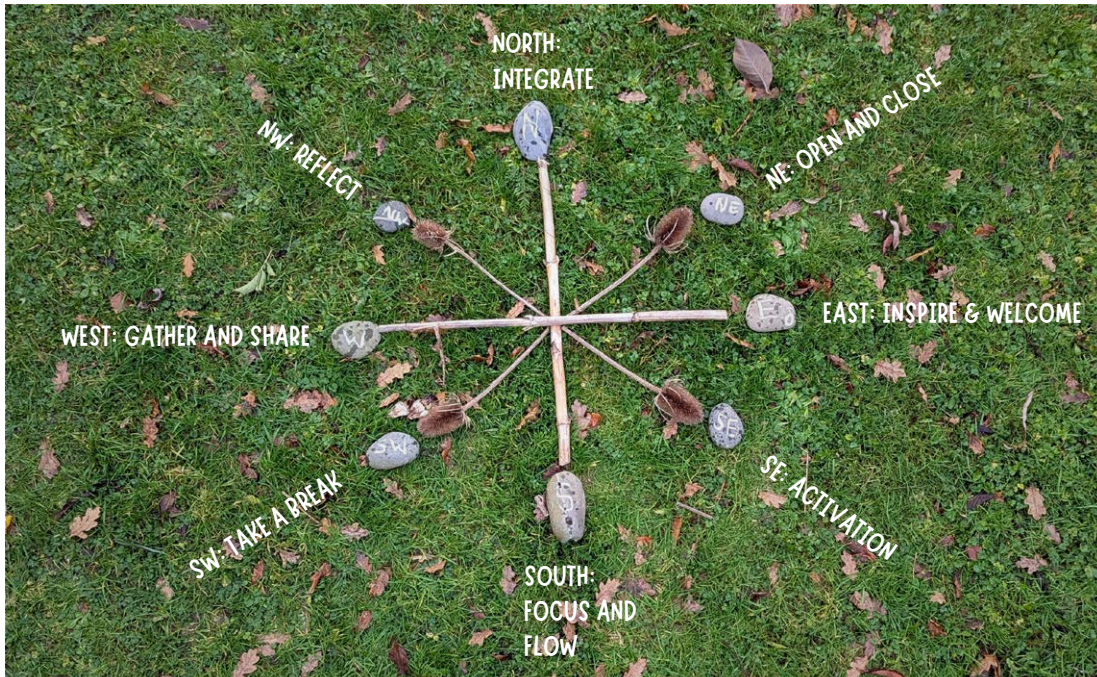
## NATURE CENTRIC MODEL – 8 DIRECTIONS PLANNING

We plan our sessions based on natural cycles or flow learning. This is based on Jon Young's work learning from ancestral nature connection practices across the world and bringing it to modern times (Young, McGown and Haas, 2008).<sup>9</sup>

The Natural Cycle provides a template in which to develop our planning and structure experiences. At its core, is the idea that we follow a natural flow of energy through our day or even a session, and that by following and honouring (and not fighting against) this flow, we allow children the opportunity to find peace and harmony and engage in experiences more naturally.

For example, the start of a session is an inspirational time, filling the children with enthusiasm just like the energy of the sun rising in the East. In the middle of the session, just like when the sun is at its highest and has the strongest energy, the children channel their energy into the tasks at hand and focus. As it progresses, the children might need a break and calmer activities just like the sun's energy weakens as it is setting in the West. After the session is finished, as we are in darkness towards the North, we can reflect and plan for the next session to start the circle again.

This model can be used not only when we plan a session, but also when we plan a whole term.



We use this 'Natural Cycle' tool to plan our sessions and the flow of our programs.

<sup>9</sup> Young, J., McGown E. and Haas, E. (2008) *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature*. Shelton, WA: Owl Link Media.

## EAST – INSPIRE & WELCOME

### AIMS

- Gather together as a group and welcome everyone
- Begin to create a sense of belonging
- Share safety information and reminders of agreements
- Get the body moving
- Set up the day with some inspiration

### EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES

- Action Song
- Circle dance e.g. *"In and out the dusty bluebells"*
- Circle games e.g. Bat and Moth, Heron and Fish\*
- Ask the children to remind you of the green agreements, animal call, any hazards to avoid
- Check energy levels & feeling good levels (thumbs up, middle, down)
- Ask for input - What would you like to happen today? (with more experienced groups)
- Sharing a little story to set the theme for the day



Opening circle - welcoming everyone.



Playing an opening game.

\* Explanations of the games are in the appendix of the e-book, available at: <https://www.dspns.ie/forest-school/>

## SOUTH EAST – ACTIVATE

### AIMS

- Waken up our bodies
- Develop awareness of our senses
- Develop the group sense of belonging by playing games within the boundaries
- Get to know and develop a connection with the space and the plants
- Awaken our imagination, wonder and curiosity

### EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES

- Letter from Grandmother Tree
- Games to develop awareness of boundaries eg. Eagle Eye, 123 Where Are You? Fox & Rabbits\*
- Games to get to know the plants/animals eg. Kim's Game, You're Only Safe If.
- Journey to basecamp - awe and wonder, child led curiosity, not having to know the answers, observation, story and imagination, change leader each stopping point
- Mapping through children naming places of interest
- "I Wonder" Game



Playing games to warm up.



A blind fold game for awakening our senses.

\* Explanations of the games are in the appendix of the e-book, available at: <https://www.dspns.ie/forest-school/>

## SOUTH – FOCUSED ACTIVITIES AND FLOW

### AIMS

- Choice based learning - more directive at start but aiming towards empowering students to make choices for themselves
- Play
- Develop creativity
- Develop decision making skills
- Develop resilience, problem solving and language skills
- Connecting with the natural environment

### EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES

- Opportunities for making and creating
- Using natural found resources
- Free play



Creating with nature - hanging out our wish rags on a May bush.



Part of free play often involves teamwork to lift heavy logs to make dens.

## SOUTH WEST – TAKE A BREAK

### AIMS

- Take care of physical needs - food, water, rest
- Check in with everyone
- Share a story
- Have some quiet nature time
- Gather together

### EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES

- Wash hands, have lunch
- Make a nature tea
- Listen to a story
- Sit Spot (quiet reflection in nature)
- Quick game



Sit Spot - Being quiet in nature.



Having lunch and listening to a story.

## WEST – GATHER AND SHARE

### AIMS

- Sharing stories of what's happened during our time together
- Share your Sit Spot story
- Close the session with a sense of gratitude

### EXAMPLES OF ACTIVITIES

- Circle questions - *“What did you notice during your Sit Spot? What are you grateful for from this session? Any ideas for our next session together?”*
- Rose reflection - flower (something that's blossoming or you're grateful for), thorn (something that's challenging you), bud (something that's got possibility for you)
- Tea ceremony
- Song
- Tidy up
- Mandala/ drawing/ group poem



Reflection circle.



Tea ceremony - foraging for ingredients and creating a ceremony around wild tea tasting.

## NORTHWEST/NORTH/NORTHEAST – INTEGRATING AND PLANNING IN BETWEEN SESSIONS

### AIMS

- Debrief - share your experiences
- Integrate learning
- Rest and imagine
- Gather resources
- Plan
- Inspire the next session

### EXAMPLES OF ADULT ACTIVITIES

- Debrief with any adults that were part of the session. What worked? What didn't? What do we want more of/ less of?
- Share ideas that came from the children for the next session and ideas you got from observations of needs or interests
- Follow up on the session in the classroom with the children, integrate the learning
- Plan the next session
- Gather physical resources
- Inspire the next session with a slide show

### EXAMPLES OF CHILD ACTIVITIES

- Tell the stories to their adults
- Bring siblings etc. to their base camp
- Teach friends and family games, plants etc.
- Look up things they're curious about
- Look for and bring nature treasures to the classroom
- Make things from nature
- Have a Sit Spot in their garden/under their duvet
- See a slideshow and think about the next session

## EXAMPLES OF WEEKLY THEMES

### EXAMPLE 1: AUTUMN SESSION

Senior Infants (observation of the sessions in Chapter 4)



Jenny with Senior Infants around the base of Grandmother Tree.

#### OVERALL THEME – GRANDMOTHER TREE AND HER ANIMALS

Week	Weekly theme
1	Getting to know base camp, Naming and making signs for special places
2	Introducing Grandmother Tree, Finding nature treasures
3	Making Grandmother Tree creatures from nature
4	Making dens, Apples and Autumn
5	Playing with leaves, Signs of Autumn
6	Halloween in the woods, Games and spooky finds
7	Bats and land art
8	Hedgehogs and hibernation
9	Leafy fun and bug hunts



## EXAMPLE 2: SUMMER SESSION

3<sup>rd</sup> class (observation of the sessions in Chapter 4)



Experimenting with dandelion stem curls.

### OVERALL THEME – FLOWERS

Week	Weekly theme
1	Cherry Blossom, Getting to know base camp
2	Ribwort Plantain and Dandelion experiments
3	Edible and non-edible flowers, Flower printing with oak gall ink, Buttercups
4	Hawthorn flowers and leaves, Wild restaurant
5	Types of leaves and matching leaves to flowers
6	Elderflower, Cleavers and I wonder game
7	Parents Session
8	Child led play

# 10 YEARS OF DSP FOREST SCHOOL THEMES

## WHO CONTRIBUTES TO PLANNING?

Before each series of sessions, we discuss our goals for the children and what leaders and teachers want to explore. Older classes sometimes provide input beforehand, while younger ones guide us as we go.

We develop a theme that provides structure while allowing children to lead much of the learning. Initially, it was about learning with nature and experimenting as new Forest School leaders. As the program grew, returning students deepened their learning through environmental themes like trees, flowers, mammals, invertebrates, edible plants, natural dyes, birds, and life cycles. For example, we focused on a different tree each week, engaging the senses and creativity. Other themes connected us to the land through stories, Irish mythology, or becoming nature explorers.

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, we emphasised resilience with the theme “nature gives

us everything we need,” using found objects for play, healing, building, eating, and drinking. We offered extra sessions during Covid times.

In 2023, to celebrate Ireland’s first Brigid’s Day public holiday, we explored Brigid and other Irish goddesses. It really deepened the experience to think about the fact that these stories have been told for thousands of years on this island and we wove the crafts and activities through this theme.

Each theme offers flexibility, always evolving based on the children’s interests. Some groups focus on den building, others prefer exploring, crafting, or foraging. We adapt weekly to meet their needs, recognising that older and younger children engage differently.

Below are photos illustrating themes and experiences from each year.

## YEAR 0

PILOT PROJECT – Spring/Summer: Senior Infants (10 weeks)



Natural playground.



Sit Spot / Lie down spot.



Making mini homes.



Story time.



Making nests.



Playing hiding games.

## YEAR 1

CREATIVITY WITH NATURE - Autumn 2015: 2<sup>nd</sup> class, 4<sup>th</sup> class (9 weeks)



Creating art with nature.



Creating a comfy couch!



Creating tree faces.



Creating maps of basecamp.



Creating music with nature.



Creating a nature mandala.

STORYTELLING - Spring/Summer 2016: Senior Infants, 6<sup>th</sup> class (9 weeks)



Making friends with worms - naming him and making a story.



Story time with storyteller Fiona Dowling.



Stories with our 6<sup>th</sup> class buddies.



Making hapazome memories with parents.



Characters for stories with burdock and cones.



Creating stories through imaginary play.

## YEAR 2

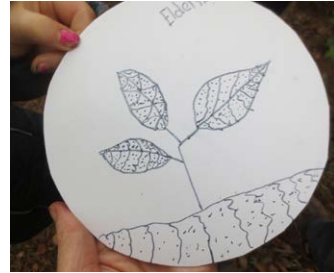
NATIVE TREES – Autumn 2016: 4<sup>th</sup> class, 6<sup>th</sup> class (9 weeks)



Measuring the girth of the tree.



Leaf matching game.



Observing leaves of different trees.



Creating games in the trees.



Making a print of a bramble bush.



Using sticks to make a skeleton for Halloween.

NATIVE PLANTS – Spring/Summer 2017: Senior Infants, 2<sup>nd</sup> class (9 weeks)



Finding many shades of green.



Wishing rags on the hawthorn tree.



Sit Spot in and on the trees.



Planning and working together to make a den.



Elder beads and wood cookie pendant.



Daisy chains.

## YEAR 3

LIFE CYCLES – Autumn 2017: 4<sup>th</sup> class, 6<sup>th</sup> class (9 weeks)



Matching tree seeds with leaves.



Looking at the seeds of an apple after listening to the apple star story.



Life cycle of an apple.



Frog hopper nymph in cuckoo spit.



Finding berries where we used to collect elderflowers for tea.



Noticing spores in a mushroom.

EXPLORING WITH OUR SENSES – Spring/Summer 2018: Senior Infants, 2<sup>nd</sup> class (9 weeks)



Rolling in the long grass.



There are lots of different textures to be explored.



Leaves from each plant have different smells.



What does stickyweed stick to?



Feeling a millipede walk across hands.



Watching our shadows.

## YEAR 4

### THE FIANNA AND NATURE DETECTIVES – Autumn 2018: 4<sup>th</sup> class, 6<sup>th</sup> class (9 weeks)



Noticing colours and textures and recording them each week.



Reading the nature detective records from the week before.



Recording observations each week in nature detective notebooks.



Developing The Fianna skills.



Making arrows.



Arrow target practice.

### BIRDS AND NESTS – Spring/Summer 2019: Senior Infants, 2<sup>nd</sup> class (9 weeks)



Land Art eagle.



Nest lined with feathers for softness.



Blue tit wood cookie.



Pinecone bird.



Making bird shadows.



A nest with eggs.

## YEAR 5

NATURE'S TREASURES AND IRISH MAMMALS – Autumn 2019: 4<sup>th</sup> class, 6<sup>th</sup> class (9 weeks)



Protected treasures.



Finding treasures.



Making containers for treasures.



Collecting and recording treasures.



Land art bat.



Our native red squirrel.

## YEAR 6

NATURE'S COLOURS – Autumn 2020: Senior Infants, 2<sup>nd</sup> class, 3<sup>rd</sup> class, 5<sup>th</sup> class (9 weeks)



Making colours.



Weaving friendship bracelets with dyed string.



Dyeing string and cloth.



Recording our experiment.



Printing using nature inks and natural found objects.



Friendship bracelets.

### 3. HOW THE SESSIONS ARE PLANNED

#### CHANGE OF SEASONS - Winter 2020: 2<sup>nd</sup> class, 6<sup>th</sup> class (4 weeks)



Working together and lifting heavy objects, keeps us warm on a cold day.



Playing Mosquito tag keeps everyone warm.



Creating with natural materials.



Playing games to record them for younger classes.



Leafy fun.



Making short film of games to teach the younger classes.

#### EXPLORERS - Spring/Summer 2021: 1<sup>st</sup> class, 4<sup>th</sup> class, Junior Infants (9 weeks)



Getting explorers bags ready for adventure.



The scientists collecting information.



Recording information.



The scientists gathering information.



Explorers communicating findings - Tea making recipes.



Recording research - Plants in the area.



## YEAR 7

### SEED DISPERSAL. OAK GALL INK – Autumn 2021: 2<sup>nd</sup> class, 4<sup>th</sup> class, Senior Infants (9 weeks)



What seeds are in our base?



Seed dispersal.



Birds help the plants.



Making nature inks from oak galls and forest finds.



Body paint.



Nature's inks have a lot of different tones and colours.

### WINTER CREATIONS – Winter 2021: 5<sup>th</sup> class, 6<sup>th</sup> class (4 weeks)



A christmas star.



Christmas tree.



Choosing to make oak gall ink again to create a drawing.



Weaving a Christmas decoration.



Making a land art Christmas tree with nature.



Making winter pine needle tea.

**GRANDMOTHER TREE. FLOWERS** – Spring/Summer 2022: 1<sup>st</sup> class, 3<sup>rd</sup> class, Junior Infants (8 weeks)



Dandelion seeds are dispersed by their umbrella structure.



Making structures that will fly in the wind.



Flying our paper structures.



Making a flower with clay.



Clay flower.



Flower leaves and their outlines.

**YEAR 8**

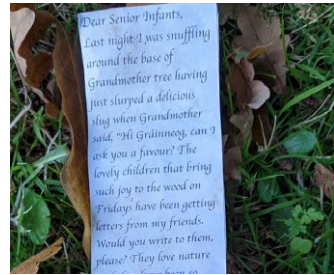
**GRANDMOTHER TREE AND HER ANIMALS** – Autumn 2022: Senior Infant, 2<sup>nd</sup> class (8 weeks)



Every group has a Grandmother Tree in their base.



Bringing gifts for Grandmother Tree.



Grandmother Tree introduces children to her animal friends.



Sitting on and around Grandmother Tree.



Creating relationships.



Connecting with Grandmother Tree.

### 3. HOW THE SESSIONS ARE PLANNED

#### BUSHCRAFT SKILLS – Winter 2022: 5<sup>th</sup> class, 6<sup>th</sup> class (6 weeks)



Using tools safely.



Co-operative shelter making.



Foraging for wild foods in winter.



Testing the timber hitch knot so see if it's strong enough.



Setting up rope bridges.



Setting up a swing and having a go.

#### BRIGID. IRISH GODDESSES. WEAVING – Winter/Spring 2023: 3<sup>rd</sup> class, 4<sup>th</sup> class (8 weeks)



Observing the hazel catkins and flowers of early spring.



Making wind detectors.



Creating Brat Bride for Brigid's Day.



Brigid.



Weaving a Brigid's cross.



Making a Brídóg doll.

### 3. HOW THE SESSIONS ARE PLANNED

#### FLOWERS - Spring/Summer 2023: Junior Infants, 1<sup>st</sup> class with 6<sup>th</sup> class assistants (8 weeks)



Gathering cherry blossom for tea.



Matching leaves to flowers game.



Observational drawing of flowers.



Flower shadow drawing.



Making Hapa zome wish rags for Bealtaine and hanging our wishes on hawthorn tree.



Weaving a cleavers and clover crown to celebrate *grianstad* - the summer solstice.

## YEAR 9

#### ANIMALS THAT LIVE IN OUR FOREST - Autumn 2023: Senior Infants, 2<sup>nd</sup> class (8 weeks)



Watching a squirrel eating walnuts and throwing down the shell.



Collecting and recording badger food - grubs.



Reading a letter from badger found by the children on Grandmother Tree.



Clay Woodmouse.



What mammal has eaten this mushroom?



Pretending to be a deer using oak leaves as antlers.

### 3. HOW THE SESSIONS ARE PLANNED

#### USING TOOLS & FOREST SCHOOL PRINCIPLES - Spring 2024: 4<sup>th</sup> class, 6<sup>th</sup> class (5 weeks)



Doing a site risk assessment.



Opportunity to take risks.



Holistic development - fostering resilience and confidence.



Risky play.



Skill building. Putting up rope bridges.



Learning heritage crafts to teach to younger children.

#### GRANDMOTHER TREE AND HER FRIENDS - Spring/Summer 2024: Junior Infants, 1<sup>st</sup> class with 6<sup>th</sup> class assistants (8 weeks)



Children rush to find a note from Grandmother Tree's friends.



A nest is made after being inspired by a note from Blue Tit.



A note from Hawthorn focuses us on the May day traditions.



Observing the different nests birds make.



Flying his bird.



Summer Solstice (Grianstad) Sit Spot to stop and notice nature.

## YEAR 10

NATIVE MAMMALS – Autumn 2024: Senior Infants, 2<sup>nd</sup> class (8 weeks)



A hedgehog made from pine cone and needles.



A leveret (baby hare) having a sit spot in his form.



Drawing badger print in charcoal.



Letter from hare inspires clay work.



Being shrews, blindly crawling around in the leaves.



Saying goodbye and thank you to Grandmother Tree.



## 4. WHAT FOREST SCHOOL LOOKS LIKE

## CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

Here, we draw from the observation records of actual sessions in 2021, 2022 and 2024. We examine the flow of sessions, the activities, the interactions between the children and the staff. It is possible to get a sense of how a simple question from a child could become a key part of the Forest School activities, or how encountering the death of a small animal could lead to great learning for the children.

We scrutinise how sessions could develop over the weeks, and see how the children benefit from repeatedly coming back to the same place throughout a term. They become attached to the place and a specific tree or object, and gain more confidence in the place. Also they notice the seasonal changes in the woodland.

It is very interesting to observe and compare children in different age groups and how they each interact with nature. Younger children show a great interest in imaginary play; they love playing with imaginary figures such as the Grandmother Tree, fairies or other animals. As children get older, they are more interested in gaining practical skills or other physical challenges, and focus more on spending time with their peers.

The Forest School leaders change the activities and approaches according to the children's developmental stages to give them appropriate stimuli for their learning. This observation record was written by Yuuki Blakeney, a Forest School leader, Ecologist and parent in DSP.

## FOREST SCHOOL FOR YOUNGER PRIMARY CLASS (SENIOR INFANTS) AGED 6-7 YEARS OLD

**Session 1 - Getting to know base camp, Naming and making signs for special places**  
(September 16<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

On a lovely sunny autumn day, Senior Infants had their first Forest School this year in Killiney Hill.

In this session, the children got to know their new basecamp, where they will be spending the rest of their Forest School sessions. They gave names to the places and natural objects such as

rocks, trees and logs in the basecamp, by using all their senses; observing, touching, listening, smelling and even tasting. They explored, drew pictures of the place and played in nature.

We started the session with everyone gathering in a circle, and introduced ourselves with our names and our "nature names". Everyone chose to be a different creature, such as squirrel, rabbit, fox, pine tree etc. and our circle became full of lively animals.

Then we reminded ourselves of the Green Agreements of Forest School, which are;

1. *Keep yourself safe and happy*
2. *Keep each other safe and happy*
3. *Keep nature safe and happy*

These agreements are a very important part of Forest School, where each child has the responsibility to be safe in nature, to cooperate, to protect each other, and to look after nature.

We then moved on to the basecamp. On our way, each child was given an opportunity to name a place or a natural object. They were encouraged to use all types of responses for naming, such as



Using all our senses to get to know our basecamp.



imaginative, descriptive, and sensory. They had to observe objects carefully, and find something unique about them, such as “Spiky Silver Tree”, “Three Toes Tree”, “Stony Bridge”, “Rainbow Tree”. By giving them names, they start the process of feeling more familiar with those places and natural objects and like their friends, they will notice changes in those places throughout the seasons by returning to them every week.



The Three Toed Tree.



Snail Fern Way.

At the basecamp, we first checked our boundaries by taking a walk together. It is important for the children to know their boundaries, inside which they are allowed to explore and play. We named the trees along the boundary, and made sure to call out if one of the children went beyond. In this way, the children feel a sense of responsibility and try to protect each other.

Also, we learned the Wolf Call which is used when the teacher wants everyone to come back. This call, like a real wolf call, can be heard from

a distance so that the group can be gathered in quickly and everyone can take part in the call.

Then, it was time for free play – during this time the children could explore their basecamp freely without any guidance from their teachers.



Moving our bodies inside the boundaries of base camp.

Some of the children started to make a fairy house from fallen branches, leaves, stones etc. The children in this age group love imaginary play, which enforces their creative mind, allowing them to explore their inner imaginary world, express their emotions, and get a sense of connection with nature by making their fairy friends who live in the forest. Through these activities, they touch different shapes, textures and patterns of fallen leaves, branches, and tree bark, and they may notice the berries and flowers found in the basecamp.



Building a connection with place through imaginary play.

Others loved digging holes using sticks or broken tree bark. Often they liked to challenge themselves; finding the longest branch, or digging as fast or as deep as possible. They naturally formed teams in which they learned how to communicate, cooperate, and have as much fun as possible. This helps to promote development of their emotional intelligence.



Digging using nature's tools.

Climbing trees is something all children love, and those who had confidence wanted to go up higher. The teacher showed them which branches were safe to climb on (i.e. not the dead branches). During the Forest School sessions, there are many occasions where the children tried taking risks, such as climbing trees and slippery rocks, or carrying big logs etc. Taking appropriate risks is essential for children at any stage of their development and learning. The children learn their own limits by taking risks, and trying to improve results through repetitive trials. This supports not only physical development but also cognitive development – children try to solve problems; they try to understand their situation and learn by trial and error.



Taking appropriate risks helps us to grow in confidence and competence.

One of the children in this group was very good at finding moths. He found them fascinating and observed their shapes, colours, and how they rested on the leaves. He told his friends where he found them. There is no better way to learn about plants, animals and ecosystems than through exploring nature. This stimulates a child's curiosity, their desire for knowledge and enhances their intellectual development.



Following our awe and wonder and natural curiosity.

The last half of the activity was to name a place or natural object in pairs. The children observed using all their senses, recognised its uniqueness, considered the appropriate words to describe the object, discussed with each other, and tried writing the name on paper with some help from the teachers. In Forest School, there is "No Right or Wrong" so that the children are able to express themselves freely, which may give them more confidence in their own senses and decision making.



Naming places – Rocky Island.

Then it was a time for a “Sit Spot”; everyone sat, leant back on a tree trunk or lay down at any place they liked, and was just being with nature – watching trees swaying, leaves falling, and clouds moving, listening to the birds singing, feeling the wind blowing on their cheeks or the warmth of sunshine. A quiet time in the forest gives children an opportunity for meditation, at a distance from everyday life or any pressures or stress they might be feeling, and an opportunity for a spiritual experience to feel the natural world larger than the human world. It may give them mental resilience in the future, when they experience anxiety or emotional challenges.



Sit Spot – peaceful, quiet time with nature in nature.

At the end of the session, we shared what we had noticed during the Sit Spot, and we also shared what we were grateful for from today’s Forest School session. It is a great experience for children to share the things they have noticed and their feelings within a group, which can give the group a sense of unity. They learn to express themselves, to listen to others, to hear other people’s perspectives and to respect each other.

In this way, Forest School gives the children opportunities for holistic growth (physical, emotional, intellectual, social, cultural and spiritual), the development of their emotional intelligence, risk management skills, and mental resilience, while giving them precious memories.

### Session 2 – Introducing Grandmother Tree, Finding nature treasures (September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2021)

Today’s session was to meet the Grandmother Tree in the basecamp. At the beginning, we talked about our own grandmothers. What is she like? Is she kind, wise, cares about you, gives you treats, or maybe tells you when you are not behaving well? Or perhaps some have never met their grandmothers, but have only heard of them. Usually, grandmothers have a lot of life experience, and have witnessed changes through their lifetime. Trees live much longer than us, and so the Grandmother Tree must have lived for a long long time in the forest.

We collected some presents such as cones, leaves, sticks or berries to give to the Grandmother Tree on our way to the basecamp.



Collecting presents for the Grandmother Tree.

It was a windy day, and everyone noticed that there were more fallen leaves than the previous week. The Rainbow Tree, a huge horse chestnut tree, had turned its leaves more yellowy, had shed more leaves, and had dropped more conkers on to the ground.



Noticing change and continuity – the rainbow tree has dropped more leaves.

The Grandmother Tree in our basecamp looked very old and shrunken, but was still alive with some leaves on it. We looked at its spreading roots, supporting other young trees and noticed that its branches bent and connected with an adjacent tree. The children had a look at this other tree, and decided to call it the “grandfather tree.”

The children touched the trees and gave them the presents they had collected. Then they started to expand their imaginary world around the Grandmother and Grandfather Trees.



Present for Grandmother Tree.



Present of feathers and smiles for Grandmother Tree.

Some of them started to make a little dining room for the grandfather tree using fallen branches and leaves. They made tables, chairs, plates and set out blackberries for him. Then they started to collect more food from other places within the boundary, and eventually they spread out within the boundary.

The children who enjoyed digging holes last week found the same holes again, and progressed to make them bigger and deeper. One child noticed that the ground was covered by dead wood. He found an enormous piece of tree bark which had become so soft and fragile that it was easy to break down into small powdery pieces. Here the children had the opportunity to learn that the dead trees become a part of the soil, and support other life in the forest.



Wow! – Learning from each other.

Others found a very fun game, which was, to catch falling pine leaves. As it was a very windy day, many pine leaves were falling quickly. One of the children kept trying until he finally caught one. Because it had not been easy, it brought him huge satisfaction, and joy in accomplishing this challenge.



Trying to catch pine needles on a windy day  
"I did it!" – perseverance and pride.

All the children were so engaged with their own activities that there was no need for the teacher to introduce new games or activities. (Learning how not to "adult-erate" play is an important skill for a Forest School leader!) Some love physical challenges, or hanging around with their friends, some prefer more delicate play, such as making fairy houses, some enjoyed group work such as making a fort, and some liked drawing and writing letters. They often shared what they found interesting, interacted with each other, learning new and fun things from each other.



I love drawing!



Making a fort around our Grandmother Tree.



Creating beside our Grandmother Tree.

During a break, we talked more about our grandmothers and the free play continued until the time for the Sit Spot. The children lay down wherever they liked and looked at the windy sky, where the trees were moving in such a lively way. We shared what we found during the Sit Spot, and what they were grateful for from today's Forest School session. We said goodbye to the Grandmother Tree, and left her behind in the forest.



Sit Spot beside our Grandmother Tree.

**Session 3 – Making Grandmother Tree creatures from nature**  
(September 30<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

Today, we went back to the Grandmother Tree, and we found a letter and presents from her!

In the letter, she thanked the children for all the presents they had given to her, and wrote that she loved watching everyone playing in the forest and also felt lonely after everyone had left. So she collected the presents – berries and conkers from the forest and asked the children to make some little creatures to play with her and to take home.



Woodland presents from Grandmother Tree.

The eyes of everyone were shining with excitement when the teacher was reading the letter, and also puzzled to wonder how it could be possible. The forest became a magical forest and the children loved it.

They started to make little creatures using natural clay, sticks, leaves, berries and acorns from the presents from the Grandmother Tree as well as some things they found in the forest.



Problem solving with nature.

They made many creative, imaginative and unique creatures, such as a dog, a fairy door, a spiky creature, a smiley face, and a forest fish. One of the children was so concentrated on making a creature, and was taking a long time putting many sticks on clay like a lion's mane. Finally, he combined it with a body part which was also made with clay. However, he struggled to make it stand with four stick legs. He was so desperate to make it stand, that he pulled all the sticks out from the head part, and concentrated on figuring out how to make it stand.

It showed that the process is far more important than the outcome when children play, and when they are learning something by themselves. In Forest School, the children are not judged as long as they keep the Green Agreements. Therefore, they don't have to feel any pressure to not make mistakes, rather, they are encouraged to learn from their own trial and error.



Using blackberries for colour.

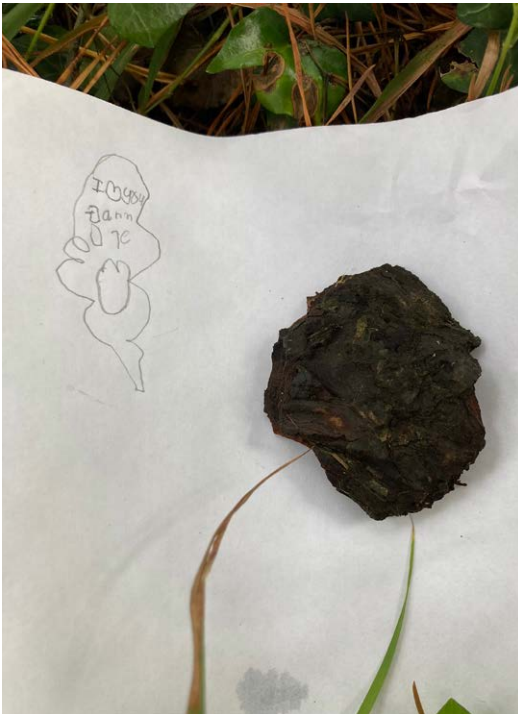
#### 4. WHAT FOREST SCHOOL LOOKS LIKE

Some of them found a baby oak tree near the Grandmother Tree, and they started to make a table and dishes with blackberries on top of it. They gave the nettle tea to the baby oak tree, and talked to it in the nicest and softest way.



Caring for baby oak.

Some of them wanted to write a letter to the Grandmother Tree, saying "I love you grandmother". Some drew pictures, some tried writing using symbols, and some tried spelling.



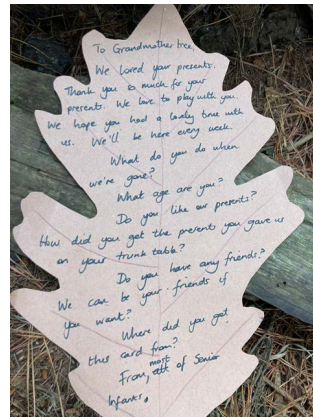
Using symbols and letters to communicate with Grandmother Tree.



Writing to our Grandmother Tree.

The teacher suggested writing letter to the grandmother from everyone at a break time, and it went like this;

*"To Grandmother Tree,  
We loved your presents. Thank you so much for your presents. We love to play with you. We hope you had a lovely time with us. We will be here every week.  
What do you do when we've gone?  
What age are you?  
Do you like our presents?  
How did you get the presents you gave us on your trunk table?  
Do you have any friends? We can be your friends if you want!  
Where did you get this card from?  
From most of Senior Infants"*



The letter was left on the trunk table of the Grandmother Tree. Then the teacher talked about how our breath was connected to the trees. We take in oxygen when we breathe in, this oxygen is released by the trees. We produce carbon dioxide when we breathe out, which the trees take in. Through breathing, we experienced the forest in a more immediate way, and realised that we are connected to each other all the time.



The trunk table.

There was more free play until the time for a Sit Spot, and when we gathered again, we talked about what we noticed during the Sit Spot and what we were grateful for. It seemed that the children felt closer to the Grandmother Tree through this session.

One of the reasons why Forest School is beneficial in the school curriculum is because teachers know the children's learning stages well. The children are learning writing, reading, mathematics, science, or critical thinking in their classroom. They can apply it in a practical way in Forest School. For example, they may write letters, observe their surroundings or inner emotions and put them into words to share in the group, use appropriate words when they are working together, or apply their knowledge of science for making something work.



Look what's under here!

In the classroom, the teachers can use the curiosity, findings and skills which the children gain in Forest School. Also, the teachers may see the children's different characters, hidden talents, or personality more clearly, and this helps enhance their learning. Furthermore, the forest may bring learning to the children, which teachers have never thought about, yielding new discoveries for the teachers as the children share their learnings in school.



Observation - 'Sunshine makes this ash leaf seem a bit see through'.



**Session 4 – Making dens, Apples and Autumn**  
(October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

Today was a mild day with a grey sky. Sometimes the warm sunshine came through the trees. To start with, we played a game of bat and moth.



Having fun awakening the senses – using hearing to find the prey.

On our way to basecamp, we nominated and followed a leader child who counted a given number of footsteps and found something interesting. They already had good eyes for finding interesting things in the forest, such as sticks which looked like the letter “H”, bird toes and deer horns or the hairs on the edge of the beech leaves. Some children remembered what the leaves of ash trees looked like, which we had talked about in the previous week.



Observation skills – Look at the hairs on the edge of the leaves!

At the Rainbow tree, the children found many fallen leaves, which covered the ground like a carpet. First, they started to play scooping with their feet and sticks, then eventually they started to use their hands and whole body to collect the leaves and throw them into the sky. “Like fireworks!” Someone shouted, and everyone became wild under the Rainbow tree. Someone called the place “a leaf pit”.



“Like fireworks!”

Some children gathered the leaves and made a big pile of the leaves which was named a “jumping castle of leaves.” One of the children kept scooping up the leaves. Some children enjoyed throwing the leaves into the air together. One of the children started a business where everyone had to pay a leaf coin to jump on the pile of leaves.



Sweeping the leaves with nature's brush.

Playing with fallen leaves is one of the best things children can do at this time of the year. They use all their senses and whole body, feeling the crunchiness of leaves in their hands and feet, lying down in the leaf piles, gathering as many leaves as possible.



Questioning skills – Why are there different colour patches on this leaf?

We also found some signs of creatures at the leaf pit. One of the children found a spider crawling out from underneath the leaves, and another found a leaf with birds' poop on it.



We found a spider! And made sure to put it back where we found it.

Then we moved to the grandmother's tree, and found a response letter from her. In the letter, she answered the questions which the children asked her in the previous letter. For example, to the question "how old are you?", she answered that "I have lived so long, longer than your great grandparents", which made the children think about the length of time the trees could live.



Reading the letter from the Grandmother Tree.

Then to the questions "do you have any friends?" and "how did you write the letter?", she answered that "I have many friends in the forest, do you know who they are?" which made the children imagine what kinds of creatures might live around her. They thought about the small insects, fungi, animals and other plants which might have helped the Grandmother Tree writing the letter. Also the Grandmother Tree gave apples as presents, which we enjoyed eating later on.



Presents from the Grandmother Tree.

During free play, the children who enjoyed digging the forest ground in the previous week went digging again. This time, they found living roots extending from distant trees which were an unusual colour. They had to stop digging then, so that they didn't damage the roots. Each week, they found something new by digging, and they now have a better understanding of what was underneath the ground.

The child who liked catching the leaves in the previous week wanted to find another physical challenge. He wandered around, and started to throw the blackberries and tried to find where they went. It was a simple game, which another child joined in with. These two children always liked to play together, and play seemed to be their communication tool.



Challenging each other.

Five to seven children were working very hard on making a tree hut, which was named "the tree den". They demonstrated great team work. Some of them were making a roof using tree bark and twigs. One of them found a pile of soil and pasted it on the roof like plaster.



Teamwork.

One of the children found a stick which looked like a hammer, and he started to tap the roof of the tree den with it. Then another child started to copy what he was doing, and they did it for the rest of the day, saying "I am checking if the roof is stable!". The children copied each other, talked to each other, communicated in a constructive way, solved problems and found something fun together.



Communication and problem solving skills being developed.



Making a fairy place.



Finding a beautiful beetle.

Another few played/invented a skipping game with a coat as the rope. One of the core skills we are aiming to develop is resilience and the children come to learn and realise that everything they need is here. Being creative and resourceful helps them know that they can problem solve in other parts of their lives. So - No rope? No problem!



No rope. No problem!



Writing a card to grandmother and grandfather tree.

All of these examples demonstrate the significance of having Forest School for a group of children. The children can learn from each other and every child has a chance to be a leader within the group.

At lunch time, it was time for story telling. The teacher told the "Apple Tree Fairy story". The children thought about how apples grow from a seed, and they found a star-shape in each apple. We enjoyed eating apples and tasting the apple tea. We ended the sessions with a Sit Spot and shared what we had noticed during the Sit Spot and what we were grateful for from Forest School. One of the children said, "I am grateful for everything in Forest School!", and many followed "me too!"

**Session 5 – Playing with leaves, Signs of Autumn**  
(October 14<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

Today was a cloudy and mild day. In the beginning, the children enjoyed a game called “egg, caterpillar and butterfly”, which was a great game for team discussions, negotiations and developing quick thinking.

On the way to the basecamp, they remembered the “leaf pit” at the Rainbow Tree where they played in the previous week, and wanted to go back there. As there were even more fallen leaves, all the children were happy to stay there, before going to their usual basecamp.



Leafy fun in the ‘Leaf pit’.

At the leaf pit, the children invented a new game, a more challenging one. They collected the fallen leaves and made a pile of leaves under the rocky hill, made a line and jumped into the leaf piles one by one. This game was called “the leaf explosion”, and the children developed a turn-taking system themselves.

There were differences in the physical abilities and confidence level among the children, and each child tried in different ways based on their own judgments. For example, a child who had more confidence jumped from a higher place, and another child who had less confidence found a good foot point at the lower place and jumped gently onto the pile of leaves. An opportunity such as this allows the children to learn that they have to find their own solution so as not to hurt themselves. One child hurt his bottom the first time he tried. He was upset for a while, and soon his friends came to comfort him. After a while, he

started to try again, jumping from a lower place to make sure his posture for landing was safe enough. He seemed to have more confidence in his own judgment.



Learning how to judge and take appropriate risks for yourself is an essential life skill that we practise in Forest School. This builds confidence and resilience.

Although almost all the children were involved in this game, some children chose to play different roles, such as a police man role, which was to make sure that the next child jumped off when there was nobody in the pile of leaves. Another child played a leaf pile maintenance role, which was to gather more leaves onto the leaf pile to make sure there was enough cushion for everyone.

After playing in the leaf pit, a child who was not involved in the leaf explosion game said that he wanted to go to the usual basecamp. Some children heard him, and said they wanted to stay here. So the teacher gathered all the children, made a circle, and facilitated a discussion. All the children had an opportunity to share their opinions. For example, “I want to go to the basecamp because I want to see the Grandmother Tree, she might have another present for us”, “I want to see the Grandmother Tree too, because she said she was lonely when we left and we

promised to go back every week”, “I want to stay here because it is so much fun”.

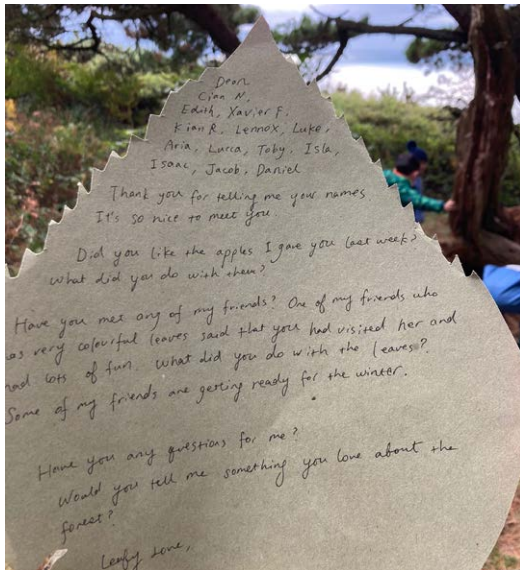
Then a child said “I want to stay here a little more, and then go to the basecamp”. It seemed to be a good option to the group and they agreed that everyone would stay here for a little longer, and then go to the basecamp. They experienced how to solve a problem where there were different opinions and everyone was involved in their decision making.

We stayed a little longer in the leaf pit, and then went to the usual basecamp. They found another letter from the Grandmother Tree, which began with everyone’s name following “Dear...”. Everyone was so happy to see their names in her letter, except a girl who couldn’t find her name, because the Grandmother Tree forgot to put her name. The girl looked disappointed so the other children suggested writing to the Grandmother Tree again to tell her not to forget anybody in the group.

*name) in the letter. We met the rainbow tree and we had fun in the leaf pit. From Senior Infants”.*



Reading a letter from the Grandmother Tree.



Letter from the Grandmother Tree.

Free play gives the children their own time. So this particular child was able to think properly about what he wanted to write. There was no rush, no pressure and no right or wrong for what he would write. The teachers have more time to spend with each child during the free play. They are able to notice the signs of curiosity in each child, and spend time together to deepen his/her/their knowledge and interests.

During the free play some children were looking after a baby oak. Other children found a millipede whilst another group was busy digging and discovering.



Free play - finding a millipede.

When all the children went off to their free play, a child came up to one of the teachers and asked for a pen and a paper. He wanted to write a letter to the Grandmother Tree. He thought carefully about what he wanted to write, took a long time to think, and finally came to the teacher again and said “would you write for me?” The letter went like this; “Thank you for the letter. You just had a tiny accident that you missed (the girl’s



Free play - digging and discovering.

They then had their break time and listened to a story about a leaf man. This was followed by the Sit Spot, a quiet time in nature, and afterwards they shared what they noticed during their Sit Spot and what they were grateful for. Their ability to notice and to put into words what they heard or saw or felt develops each week.



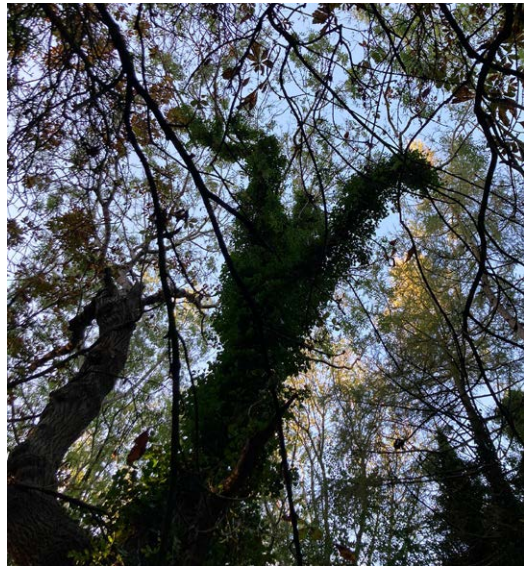
Sit Spot – quiet time in nature.

### Session 6 – Halloween in the woods, games and spooky finds (October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2021)

Today was cold and windy and a little spooky, in keeping with the Halloween theme for our Forest School session. On the way to the basecamp, we looked for scary features in the forest, and the children found many, such as; ghost hands hanging from an ash tree, scary eyes on the oak trees, and four headed snakes etc.



Monster claw marks.



Hands reaching up to the sky. It's a scary Halloween forest!

We stopped at the leaf pit under the rainbow tree, and played the zombie game. After everyone enjoyed being a zombie in the forest, we moved to the basecamp. On the way, we picked up pine cones to make something spooky at the basecamp later.



Strange zombie creatures!

At the Grandmother Tree, the children found the new letter from the Grandmother Tree. In the letter, she answered the questions which the children asked her in the previous letter. To the question "Do you ever hug grandfather tree?", she answered "Yes – I love to hug Grandpa tree. But mostly we touch each other with our leaves. We like to give each other enough space so our leaves can soak up lots of sunlight to make food for ourselves." In this way, the children learnt about photosynthesis through the eyes of the Grandmother Tree.

To the question, "How do you write letters?" She wrote "Well that's my little secret! Have you any ideas?" and the children thought about who could have helped her. The ideas were such as "fungi", "blackberries", "fairies", "tiny branches". The children already knew about the root system of trees and how fungi help trees to communicate with each other from the previous Grandmother Tree's letter. Instead of learning from textbooks, children in this age group are better able to understand ecosystems through stories, imaginary play and by using all of their senses – observing, touching, smelling, hearing and tasting. The Grandmother Tree therefore can be an important feature in Forest School for this age group.



Posting a letter to the Grandmother Tree.



Reading the letter.

During the free play, a child who wrote a nice letter to the Grandmother Tree, wanted to write another letter. He seemed to like the communication with her. A few children made spooky creatures using pine cones. Another child found a small insect and he wanted to show it to everyone.



Sharing our discoveries.



The group of children who enjoyed building a tree hut last week seemed not to be interested in the same activity this week. They found different things to do such as climbing trees, hitting the ground with a big pine tree branch which looked like an axe, or gathering leaves in a big pile.

Children who had not shown interest in it last week started to take initiative and play more in the hut this week. This play was gentler than the previous week. For example, one of the children made a few stairs using stones, a dining room and a shower room using hanging branches. Two other children made a roof with small pieces of tree bark. They started with small constructions, and gradually moved to larger constructions such as moving a branch as long as their own height. They discussed, tried, helped each other, asked for help, and tried again. It seemed that these two children had watched how the children in the previous week played at building the hut, and copied what they had done.

All children are different. They have different abilities, talents, interests, curiosities, likes and dislikes. Their developmental stages are also different, including writing, reading, speaking, and expressing their thoughts and feelings, and their physical skills. Forest School for this age group seems to allow each child to shine. The children can do their own thing at their own pace. In this comfortable but stimulating environment, the children can enlarge their world by finding something new each week, in nature, in themselves and in each other.

After a break, the teacher introduced the “bonfire jumping game”. The children made a pile of leaves and jumped over it in turn. They made it higher each time. This game involved leaf collection, physical challenges and playing with their imagination. By collecting lots of leaves, and jumping as far and high as possible, the children developed their tactile senses, vestibular senses, proprioceptive senses and visual senses.

Some children developed a Halloween game called ‘Black blood river’. Allowing children to use their imaginations freely within play is very important for their development and well-being. The ‘rules’ changed as the children found ways to make it more fun.



Bonfire jumping.

Every session the children and adults share what they are grateful for, from the session. This is a core part of the structure of Forest School, as gratitude helps us to:

1. Feel better about our lives overall
2. Experience higher levels of positive emotions like optimism, enthusiasm, love, and happiness
3. Be kinder and more generous to others
4. Cope with stress more effectively and recover more quickly from stressful situations (develop resilience)

**Session 7 – Bats & land art**  
(November 4<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

Today was cold and dry, and everyone looked refreshed after the midterm break.

We found some pumpkins left behind at Killiney Hill, and the children were wondering why they were there. The teacher asked why people would leave pumpkins there, and some of them said it might be for the wild animals to eat. It was a kind thought, but wild animals such as hedgehogs may eat them before going into hibernation, and could cause diarrhea or sickness. So we agreed that the things which do not belong to the natural environment should not be brought there.

We stopped at the leafy pit under the rainbow tree. Most of the children started to queue up for jumping off from the rock, and some other children who were not interested in the game explored the surroundings and found a secret place.



Shhh – it's our secret place.

On the way to the usual basecamp, one of the children found a beautiful leaf skeleton. We looked at it carefully, and discussed how it could be made. Someone said that it might be eaten by tiny creatures. Another child said that they wanted to bring it to the Grandmother Tree as a present. The more they looked for them, the more they could find the leaf skeletons on the ground. They were like ornaments.



A leaf skeleton that looks like a butterfly!

At the base camp, we found another letter from the Grandmother Tree. This time, she offered her pine needles to make pine tea. She added that “grandfather tree said you could use some of his needles too as it's a good idea not to take too many from one place.” So that the children knew that they could pick just a few pine needles from each tree and in this way they would not disturb the tree. In Forest School, we make tea from different plants each week, such as blackberries, nettles, apples and pine needles. The children have been enjoying the tastes from different plants, and learnt that each plant had a unique fragrance and taste.



Picking needles for tea from the Grandmother Tree.

During the free play, some of the children started to make a hut again. They made a roof with tree

bark, like the previous week. This time, the hut was upgraded – one of the children made a “water construction” where the water can drain. He explained “because this roof has to stay here forever.” The forest provides an experimental place for new innovations and engineering works for the small scientists and engineers.



Building site – engineers and scientists at work.

Some children started to become Forest Ninjas, and enjoyed hiding behind trees or logs so as not to be seen by the adults. Other children collected pine cones and said that “These are bombs to attack bears with.” They imagined that they were in the forest where lots of bears live and who might attack humans when they are hungry.

Some children continued their digging from last week.

Overheard:

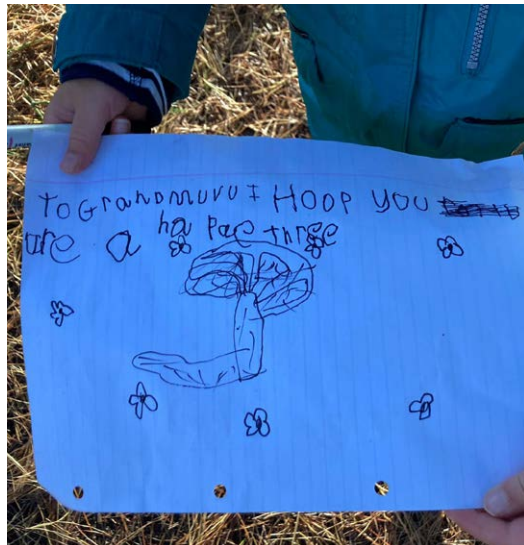
- “I wish I had a big stick to dig with.”
- “Well, you could go find one!”



Digging and discovering and communicating about what is in the soil.

Some other children found a big hole under some logs, and they were discussing whose home it could be. “Foxes?”, “Rabbits?”, “Hedgehogs?” They looked into the hole and it looked very deep. Another child found a twig that looked like a spider. He was happy to find the twig, and played with it for a while, but soon he started to make a little home using the twig. He put it on the ground and covered it with fallen pine needles.

Some continued to connect with the Grandmother Tree by writing letters and drawing.



Connecting with the Grandmother Tree by writing letters and drawing.

During lunch break, the teacher talked about bats, and the children learnt the body structure of bats. Bats are mammals like humans so they have five finger bones. These bones are shaped like wings so that they can fly. In pairs, the children made bats on the ground using sticks and twigs. Some pairs made bats on the ground very well, and some started to draw pictures of bats. Others started to play a battle game instead.

After the children enjoyed their time in the forest, we had a Sit Spot, and shared what we found during their Sit Spot and what they were grateful for from today’s Forest School. The children noticed wind, sunshine, the trees moving, birds singing. By now, they have learnt how to be quiet and observe their surroundings and their own feelings during the Sit Spot.



Drawing bats.



Land art bats.

Because the teacher had told the children to protect each other at the beginning of today's session (some of them are afraid of dogs), one of the children said "I am grateful that (name) was safe and happy today". Forest School provides opportunities to notice other people's fear and feelings, and opportunities to help each other.

### Session 8 – Hedgehogs and hibernation (November 11<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

Today was a foggy day with a grey sky, but the temperature was relatively mild. To start they played a 'catching wishing leaves' game. If they caught a leaf before it touched the ground they got to make a wish.



Catching wishing leaves.

Today's theme was "hedgehogs" which hibernate in the winter. The children were told to pick up some sticks for the hedgehog game on the way.

At the rainbow tree, after some free time, we played the hedgehog stalking game. For this game, the children needed to walk silently like foxes. Before the game, the children tried walking as silently as possible, and shared the ways which worked for them. Each child found their own way, such as "I walked where there are no leaves". "I walked with tiptoes and stepped where there were no leaves", "I made big steps and walked very slowly". Learning from and sharing their learning with each other happens every session in Forest School.



Playing Hedgehog game using our senses.

Then we stuck lots of sticks in a pile of leaves in the ground to resemble a big hedgehog. One of the children was a hedgehog protector, whose aim was to protect the sticks on the big hedgehog on the ground from the rest of the group: the stealers. The protector was blindfolded and had to point at the stealers when he heard them. The stealers aimed to steal the hedgehog stick without the blindfolded protector hearing them and pointing at them. When the protector pointed to a stealer correctly, then the stealer had to go back to the start. Everyone was concentrating intensely. The hedgehog protector used his sense of hearing, and the rest of the group used their body muscles not to make any sound, and walked as silently as possible just like prey and predators in the animal world.

At the basecamp, the children found another letter from the Grandmother Tree. In the letter, she thanked the children for all the letters she received in the previous week. She wrote about her friend, a hedgehog. "I noticed a heavy hedgehog snuffling around me last night. I think he was looking for food. Or maybe a little place to make a hibernaculum. What do you know about hedgehogs?" The children learnt the word "hibernaculum", and shared what they knew about hedgehogs.

Because it was a foggy day, the usual basecamp looked different today, as one of the children described "as if we are in the clouds!" Some of the children started to hide behind trees and logs, and looked for someone to chase them. Soon, they started a ghost chasing game in the foggy forest.



'As if we are in the clouds'.

The atmosphere and the mood in the woods are different each session, and the children seem to pick suitable play on that day. In the same way, the mood of each child is also different each day, and Forest School seems to be able to provide a suitable space for everyone. One of the children who was normally energetic was quiet today, and he spent time alone, and drew some pictures.



Hiding in the forest fog.

At lunch time, the teacher read a story about a hedgehog called Harry. The children learned hedgehogs like to eat "gooey snails", "fat caterpillars" and "slimy slugs".



Might a hedgehog eat this?

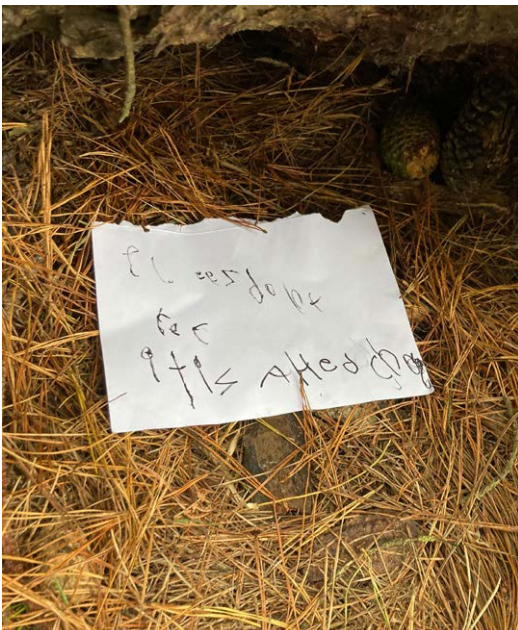
After lunch, some of them made hedgehogs using teasels and clay, some of them continued making the tree hut, and some of them enjoyed playing the ghost chasing game.



Making a hedgehog with teasel and clay.



Continuing to build our tree hut.



"Please don't wreck – it is a hedgehog home!".

The session was nicely closed by the quiet Sit Spot time, followed by sharing what they noticed during the Sit Spot and what they were grateful for. We listened to each other's findings, experiences and feelings. One of the children said "I was grateful for (his best friend's name) and the forest!"

**Session 9 – Leafy fun and bug hunts**  
(November 18<sup>th</sup>, 2021)

Today was our last session together this term. The air was mild, and there was warm sunlight coming through between the trees. The woods looked so calm and peaceful. The children enjoyed the last day of their Forest School for this year.

The trees at the meeting point had shed most of their leaves, and there was a thick layer of fallen leaves on the ground. While waiting for everyone to arrive, some of the children played the hedgehog stalking game, and the others enjoyed playing with the fallen leaves. They collected the leaves, made a pile, and started to throw them at each other. One of the children told the others to put up their hoods so that the leaves would not get inside their jackets. They knew how to play with the fallen leaves by now.

Soon everyone joined in playing with the fallen leaves. It was so much fun. Anyone who wanted to be buried in the leaves lay down on the ground, and others helped cover them with the leaves. They said it was nice and cosy. When the children on the ground moved their hands and legs, they could make “leaf angel” marks on the ground. Some of them jumped on the leaf piles, or threw the leaves into the sky like fireworks. Playing with the fallen leaves looked like the best present they could get. Children played as wildly as they could – jumping, rolling on the ground, scooping leaves, throwing, shouting with excitement and laughing.



Leafy fun.

After the excitement with the fallen leaves, we had the opening circle, and the teacher asked everyone what they would like to do on their final day of Forest School. There were many suggestions coming up from the children such as; playing at the leafy pit, having some pine needle tea, drawing pictures for the Grandmother Tree, playing games which they liked from the previous sessions, introducing a new game, playing with the Grandmother Tree, and making land art.



Picking pine needles for tea.



Finding nature's treasures.

After playing at the rainbow tree for a while, we moved to our basecamp, and found the last letter from the Grandmother Tree. In the letter, she thanked everyone for being so kind to her and her friends, and for having fun around her. She also mentioned that she was wanting to get quieter and slower because there was not enough light to make lots of food. The children learnt that the trees also get sleepy during the winter like hedgehogs. The Grandmother Tree asked the children if they would come back to say hi to her after finishing Forest School, and most of the children said "Yes!"

During the free play, one of the children noticed that the pine cones he had put on the grandfather tree in the previous week had gone, and he believed that it was because hedgehogs took them. He was so excited and started to look for the hedgehogs that might be hiding under the leaves.

The teacher brought magnifying glasses, and some children started to look for bugs. One of the children was particularly interested in insects and tiny creatures. In the previous sessions, he was the one who had found some insects and showed them to everyone. With a magnifying glass, he was so desperate to find some insects, and he looked everywhere he could think of – under the rocks, logs, tree holes or barks. However, what he found was that there were not many insects out at this time of the year, and this was a great discovery also.



Looking closely at a worm.

The teacher put up three hammocks at the basecamp, and the children enjoyed lying on them and being relaxed. At the tree hut, a few children were building its roof. This time, two of them

wanted to be the leaders, and they had to agree on a rule that satisfied both of them, which was challenging. It was a great opportunity to learn to solve emotional conflicts.



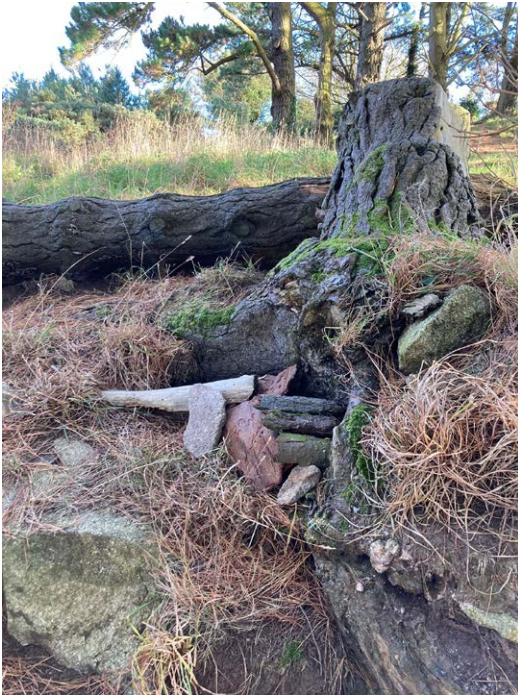
Helping untie hammocks.



Happy hanging out in the hammocks.

At lunch break, we talked more about the life of hedgehogs. Then we had a little more time for free play. One of the children made a small hedgehog hibernaculum, some of the children made a big hibernaculum as a team, and some others played the ghost chasing game.





Fly hotel.

During their final Sit Spot the children noticed that the sea looked like it was moving really fast, that the clouds were moving quickly and the wind was blowing in our faces, that the heat from the sun was warm, the trees dancing happily in the wind, the pine needles blowing, the trees waving hands and talking to each other, and that the scenery was very beautiful.

There was a magic in the Senior Infants Forest School, which was tied to their particular age group. The relationships which the children could build with nature seemed to be so intimate. This could be seen in the attachment to the Grandmother Tree, digging holes and finding something new each week, building fairy tree houses, talking and giving tea to a baby oak tree, or finding insects and looking at them carefully. These attitudes, full of imagination, driven by their curiosity, finding the incredible things in nature with innocent eyes, could disappear with their development, as they get older.

However, having these experiences at their age could influence their attitudes toward nature for the rest of their lives.

## FOREST SCHOOL FOR MIDDLE PRIMARY CLASS (THIRD CLASS) AGED 8-9 YEARS OLD

**Session 1 – Cherry Blossom, Getting to know base camp**  
(April 29<sup>th</sup>, 2022)

It was a warm summery day on the first day of Forest School for third class. As soon as the children arrived at the meeting point, we could see their excitement and enthusiasm from the sparkle in their eyes.

The meeting point was in an open field, so we could make the most of this gorgeous season. We enjoyed seeing the seasonal flowers such as dandelions, daisies and cowslips, which are more likely to be found in sunny open fields than in our base camp within the woods. The forest is very busy in this season – the trees changing day by day with new green leaves growing, the birds singing loudly and raising their chicks high in the trees. Some migrating birds are returning from the South. Bees are getting busy visiting flowers and more insects are coming out from the ground.

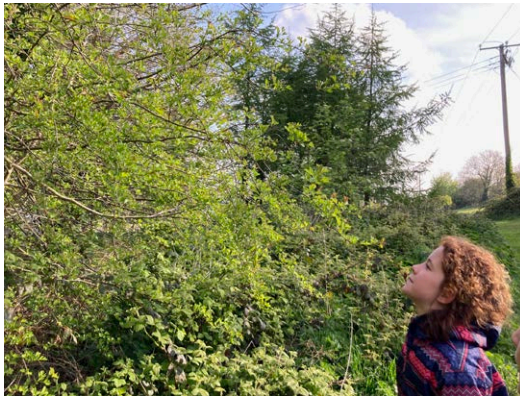
Normally, children are allowed to explore the meeting point when they arrive until everyone gathers. So in the beginning, we went around to check the boundary together. It is very important to set a clear boundary in Forest School for children to safely explore within.



Sharing skills like grass whistling with each other.

Even though Forest School gives children a lot of freedom, there are certain rules that they need to follow in order to avoid serious accidents. We call them the Green Agreements - Keep yourself safe and happy, keep each other safe and happy and keep nature safe and happy - and we remind ourselves every time before starting Forest School. In this way, children learn how to act responsibly and respectfully in the natural environment.

The children in this class had previously participated in Forest School when they were in senior infants and in second class, so that they already seemed to have a good sense of nature. They found a larch tree with new fresh green needles, and were curious to know what kind of tree it was. The teacher let the children observe the tree first, before telling them its name. The children noticed the cones on the tree, and asked "Are they acorns?" Then the teacher explained "Acorns are only for oak trees and pine cones are only for pine trees. But you can call them cones. This is a larch tree." The next thing the children did was to touch the needles gently and say "Oh wow it is so soft!".



Nibbling the larch needles like a deer.

Then another child asked "Can we eat the needles?" (It is hard to imagine that many children would look at a tree and think of eating its needles!). The teacher first reminded them to "Remember to never eat things from the forest unless adults say it is OK", before indicating that "Yes, you can eat larch needles". Then the children tasted the fresh larch needles and shared their experience. A child said "It tastes like lemon!" Another child also smelled it and said "It smells like a christmas tree." In this way, the children got to know the larch tree.

The next tree they noticed was a hawthorn, which some children were already familiar with from previous Forest School sessions. They remembered the tree because they observed, touched, smelled and tasted it – some of them even remembered that it had a bitter taste.

During Forest School, children are encouraged to use their senses to get to know places and natural objects, and their knowledge about nature accumulates with their senses and their memories. Also, this fun way of getting to know the trees and plants seems to encourage their curiosity about new trees and unknown plants.

After walking the boundary of the meeting point, we made a circle, remembered the Green Agreements and introduced ourselves with animal names and movements.

Then it was time to move to our basecamp. On the way, we stopped at cherry blossom trees and picked some flowers and leaves for today's nature tea. The assistant leader was from Japan, and the teacher realised that it could be a nice cultural experience for the children. Cherry trees are culturally significant in Japan, as they bloom all at once but then the petals scatter in an instant. People in Japan see it as a symbol of the beauty and fragility of life, and make the most of the moment by having picnics, parties, drinking, singing and dancing under the cherry blossom. So of course, that is what we did. The children and adults enjoyed making noises, singing and dancing under the cherry blossom trees.



Catching falling blossoms.



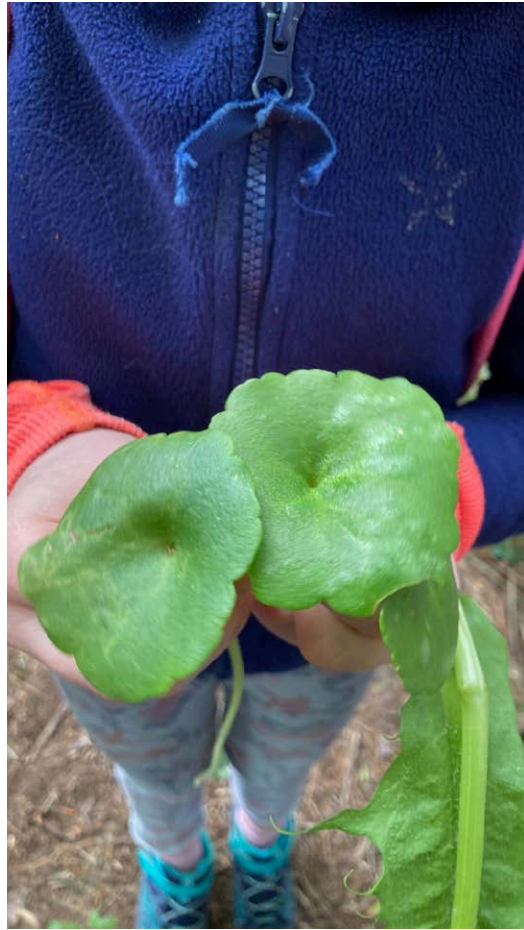
Getting to know the cherry blossom.

Also, on the way to the basecamp, we picked up some dandelion flowers. In Forest School, children are usually encouraged not to pick living plants, but the teacher told them that if they were abundant species in Ireland and in this location, they could pick a few.



Look how tall my leaf and stem is.

The children kept finding interesting places and things and finally arrived at their basecamp.



Remembering and reconnecting with parts of Killiney Hill through observation and discovery.

At the basecamp, we first conducted a site risk assessment, which involved the children in naming any risks and how they might keep themselves and each other safe. The children looked at the sites and shared their opinions. From their previous Forest School experiences, they were aware of most of the potential risks such as getting branches in eyes, gorse thorns, falling because of uneven ground, getting hurt by sharp objects like broken glass etc. The teacher also made sure the children understood the potential danger of climbing trees, by asking them how to check if it was safe to climb and how high they could climb. (They have to check if the branch is alive and strong enough, and they can go to the height that they can reach with their hands).



Learning how to take appropriate risks such as tree climbing helps develop physical skills and confidence.

A core principle of Forest School is to learn to take appropriate risks. In supporting the children to be aware of hazards and risks and how to approach them in a safer way, they learn to build confidence and keep themselves safe. If we don't give children space to learn to take appropriate risks all through their childhood, they will be much more likely to take inappropriate risks in later years.

We confirmed our boundary by walking around it together, and then it was time for free play. As soon as we started the period of free play, everyone dashed away to do whatever they wanted to do. This age group of children (9-10 years old) seemed to play in groups more than the younger age group (6-7 years old), and more verbal communication was observed within the group. They also seemed to use more cognitive functions during their play.

For example, a group of children was digging a hole. Some of the children in the younger age group (6-7 years old) also loved digging holes, but they seemed to purely enjoy the action itself, which eventually led to the findings of living roots and dead trees turning to soil. However, the children in this age group (9-10 years old) had a purpose for digging. They wanted to find out why some parts of the ground under pine trees were so soft. They were digging the

ground gently so that they wouldn't harm living roots, and they found that the roots made the soil springy "like a hammock". The assistant leader encouraged them to look at the soil more carefully, and they found that the soil was made of decayed pine needles, which were providing their organic matter to the tree as well as protecting the roots.



Investigating and exploring are scientific skills that naturally develop.

Also, this group of children was trying to find "ground trolls", and they were looking for signs of their existence. For example, the ground trolls turn into rocks when they are dead, and they build huts. They explained that there were signs everywhere in this basecamp, so they tried finding the signs and communicating with the trolls by leaving presents for them. The imaginary world created by this age group seemed much more detailed than that of the younger age group, the contents were more complicated like a story, and importantly it was shared between friends.



Creative, imaginary play.

Forest School allows children to escape into an imaginary world. The world they create together might be based on games, books or movies, but they use their full imaginations and combine them with physical actions – they run around, shout, discuss the characters, create new story lines, and use natural objects such as stones, sticks, acorns as props for the story. Having free time in nature with their friends seems like something they welcome in their everyday life.

Another group of children was working on making a hut. It was the same hut that the younger children had been building. However, this time, the construction work was more strategic.

First of all, they had a clear aim for the construction work, which was to build a “Green Tea Cafe”. So, they took all the branches away, and tried to build it from scratch. They called it a “Renovation”. They lined up the branches on the ground, and discussed which were the suitable branches for the foundation of the building. One of the children was struggling and frustrated because it was difficult to make the structure as he wanted, so he asked the assistant and the teacher for help. But the teacher said “I think it is much more fun to figure it out by yourself, but I can listen if you want to talk things through.” So he started to think again.

There are big plans for the renovation of this space to



create “The Green Tea Cafe”.

Another group of children loved climbing trees and challenging themselves. A child climbed quite high (up to the height she was allowed), and called her friend to look at her. She managed to come down safely, although it was tricky and

she had to think carefully about the safest way to come down. She was used to climbing trees with her own trial and error system from her previous experience of Forest School, so she was confident as well as sensible. Her friend was watching her, and wanted to go up next. So she asked “How did you get up there?” and the first child told her friend how to safely climb the tree. It was great to see the children teach each other.

In Forest School, we constantly encounter life and death. It could be trees, plants, insects, and other animals, and the children are able to learn about life and death in a gentle way as well as about interdependence and the circle of life in the natural world. This week, a child found a dead bird. It was lying at a bottom of the tree, in relatively undisturbed form, as if it were sleeping. Everyone gathered including the teacher. One of the children instantly started to dig a hole to make a grave. They discussed whether it was ok to touch dead animals but decided it could be infected, so they used sticks to move its body into the hole very gently. It was still soft, so the teacher said it had probably died very recently. Some of the children discussed how it may have died. One child thought it had bumped into a tree and fallen, and another child thought some other animal had attacked it.



Making a grave for the dead bird.

One of the children said “We shouldn’t bury it because the foxes will eat it anyway.” And the teacher said “That’s okay too, it is a part of life.” We made a grave to respect its death. Most children eventually scattered to go back to what they had been doing, while some of the children continued decorating the grave and holding a ceremony.

Then it was time for the lunch break. We always gather in a circle during lunch break, because eating lunch together in nature gives us a sense of unity. The teacher told a dandelion story and gave a dandelion to the circle to make a wish that they want to come true during Forest School. Their wishes were “I want to find out the mystery of ground trolls”, “I want climate change to stop”, “I want to have fun with friends”, “I want to climb high in trees”, “I want to have a new school bag for Forest School”, and “I want to finish building the Green Tea Cafe”.



Chatting about the story and the dandelion flowers.

Then we had a Cherry Blossom Tea Ceremony. The children learnt that the Japanese traditional Tea ceremony is the art of serving, receiving and drinking green tea. It developed in an era when the society was divided by hierarchies, but inside of a tiny Tea Ceremony room, everyone was equal and they could also be apart from real life. The door is small so that guests have to bow to come in (bowing is an important gesture to show respect). So we bowed, and each of the children was given tea one by one. They enjoyed the smell of the tea and then we shared what we are grateful for and drank the tea.



Cherry Blossom Tea ceremony.

After this, we played a quick Eagle Eye game, and it was time for the Sit Spot. Before the Sit Spot, we gathered in a circle and the teacher asked the children to share what they could see, hear, feel and smell and sent them to quiet spaces where they could stay still for a few minutes. We shared what we found in the circle after that, and left the basecamp.

So much had happened in just two and half hours. Due to their previous Forest School experience when they were younger, they already seemed to have an attachment to nature and with the place, and they had receptive antennas to what they could take in from Forest School – their senses were awakened, their mind in motion, curiosity drawn out, constantly trying to find something new or different to do, which they always do. Because of the experience they had when they were younger, they now don’t miss the opportunities that present themselves to learn from nature, from friends, and from the accompanying adults.

**Session 2 - Ribwort Plantain and Dandelion experiments**  
(May 6<sup>th</sup>, 2022)

On the day of this second session together, the sky was gray with thick layers of clouds. While waiting for everyone, some children started to play with Ribwort plantain. This is a native plant in Ireland, and the tiny flowers were just in bloom. As this plant is widespread in Ireland and in Killiney Hill, it was OK for the children to pick some of them and play with them. One of the children knew how to make the flower head fly with its bending stem and she proudly shared her technique with the others. The children also enjoyed a soldier game, fighting each other with the plantains' long stems. Some of the children were brave enough to taste its leaves, which the teacher told them are not poisonous but have a bitter taste!



One child knew how to make the head shoot forward, Another child wanted to learn how. Learning from each other and with and from nature.



Developing observation skills with the leaf and flower of ribwort plantain (slánlus).



Observation skills - 'I noticed the hairs on the stem and the bottom of the stem is red'.



Observation skills - 'I noticed how when you break into the centre, it looks like a star.'

After everyone shared their findings, the teacher introduced more about this plant. For example, the fact that this plant is called "Ribwort plantain" and is perhaps linked with the way the veins of the leaf can look like a human rib. In Irish it is called "slánlus", which is translated as 'health herb', as it was used as a medicinal plant in the past. It can still be used as a cure for nettle stings.

Soon after the teacher explained this, one of the children was stung by a nettle, but luckily she knew what to do. She immediately put a plantain leaf on her finger and felt better. A bad experience like being stung by nettles led to development of knowledge about the properties of Ribwort Plantain, and an understanding that being stung by nettles is not such a fearful thing. These little nuggets of knowledge the children get from Forest School are a form of wisdom that they can pass on to others, and even to the next generations.

Having Forest School at this time of the year is great, as we can see so many changes week by week. More and more leaves are growing, the flowers of some trees have gone, and some berries or seedlings have started to form. On the way to the basecamp, the children were encouraged

to pick out something which had changed from the previous week. Under an ash tree, children noticed that more buds were bursting and more leaves were growing. One of the children also noticed that there were more leaves growing on one side. Then the teacher asked them why this could be. They didn't have a good answer, but when the teacher introduced them to the sun's movement, they learnt that the side that had more growing leaves was the south facing side.



Asking good questions leads to learning.

Forest School learning is so organic that the content of the sessions is determined by how the group of children act and interact, and how the Forest School leaders and other adults react to their questions, actions, curiosities, findings and needs. In this case, without this curiosity coming from the children, and without a teacher who picked up on it, the group of children wouldn't have learned about the relationship between tree growth and aspect.



Learn how the earth moves around the sun.



After that, we moved to the cherry tree where we had danced in the previous week. The children noticed that the blossom had almost gone, and the leaves were bigger. The ash tree bore tiny ash keys, which will become like helicopters in the autumn. The children then could not help rolling down the hill, which looked so much fun.



Developing healthy sensory systems.

Children need to move and play outside on a regular basis in order to develop healthy sensory systems. Rolling down hills is one way to increase our body awareness and sense of space. Our vestibular or balance system is challenged by moving in all directions while rolling down grassy hills. Rolling also helps provide necessary stimulation to the muscles and ligaments in the body. This helps improve the proprioceptive sense and sensory processing.



Experimenting together.

As there were so many dandelions in the open field, we picked some dandelion flowers from the bottom of their stems and carried out an experiment. The children peeled the stems of dandelions in a few strips and put them in the water. Then they watched the stems curl up. They discussed why this happened, and learnt that the inside of the stems was “hydrophilic” (water-loving) and the outside was “hydrophobic” (water-hating). This meant that the insides absorbed so much water that they swelled, whereas the outsides remained the same size, which forced the strips into curls. In this way, they learnt about the structure of the dandelion stems and the mechanism of how they absorb the water from the ground. A child put a clover leaf in the water for another experiment, and found that the leaves were waterproof.



Finding beauty through experiments.

When we arrived at the basecamp, it was time for free play. Some children built a den, which they wanted to use as a café, and they used a bundle of pine leaves as a duster to clean the floor. Others were trying to find signs of ground trolls.

Some of the children in this group were so curious and knowledgeable about trees and plants. From previous Forest School sessions, they knew

the inside of elder tree branches have white soft parts. A child questioned why some of the elder leaves had strange patterns, which the leader had never noticed and didn't know the answer to.



Encouraging curiosity where children's questions are more important than adults having answers.

Compared to the younger age group (6-7 years old), this age group of children (9-10 years old) seem to have more desire to know the plants' names, and why and how certain natural phenomena happen. They enjoy finding out facts, carrying out scientific observations and conducting experiments together.

After free play, the teacher introduced a "bird game", in which a team of three people act as parents and a chick, and the parents need to collect food without being caught by predators. It was a great game to understand how hard it is to be a bird and protect chicks as well as collect food for them. They developed more empathy for our non human friends through play based learning.

At lunch time, one of the staff talked about forest bathing. This word comes from Japan ("Shinrin-yoku") and it is embedded in Japanese culture. When we walk in the forest and are immersed

in nature, our body and mind are so relaxed and refreshed, and the healing effects of nature have been used by medical professionals. Knowing these effects might give children resilience in their life when they feel stress and are dealing with inner problems. Having this in our mind, we went to have our Sit Spot and experienced forest bathing.



Forest bathing – Shinrin-yoku.

The closing circle is an important part of Forest School where we share what we noticed during Sit Spot and what we were grateful for from today's Forest School. Everyone in the circle has the opportunity to speak out about their feelings and findings. By doing this each session, the children get used to reflecting upon their experiences, thinking about what attracted them, what gave them joy, and sharing these thoughts with the group.

Forest School is not only a place where the children have a fun time in nature and learn about plants and animals, but they also learn so many life lessons – what it means to be alive, how trees, plants and animals strive to live and why all living things including us die and how we can contribute to the lives of others. They also learn how to reflect on their feelings and what it means to share our time, space and feelings with others, and many other things besides. These, I think, are important lessons that we as adults can share with our children.

**Session 3 – Edible and non-edible flowers, Flower printing with oak gall ink, Buttercups**  
(May 13<sup>th</sup>, 2022)

It was a sunny day with a bit of a chilly wind for the third Forest School session for 3<sup>rd</sup> class. We gathered at the meeting point, and the children enjoyed rolling down the hill while waiting for everyone to gather. We started the session by looking for things which had changed from the previous week.



Rolling and climbing have multiple benefits including being fun!

The ash tree at the meeting point had a lot more leaves. A child noticed that the ash keys looked brown and dead. Then we went to see an elder tree, and noticed that the flowers were almost in bloom. The teacher encouraged the children to touch the buds, and let them guess when they were going to bloom. A child said, "I remember building a den under this elder tree!" so she tried to get inside the bush, but soon said, "I can't get in, I am too tall!" When we went around to see the tree from the other side, they noticed that the tree was quite old.

Everyone then came up with names for the tree such as "old nugget", "elderly tree" and "red spider tree (because some parts of the branch were red)". Then they found that there were a young oak tree and a young holly tree growing under the elder tree, so that they changed the name to "kindly helping tree", "oak and holly sitter", and "elderly sitter tree". Giving a name to a particular tree helps children to look at it carefully, and provides them with an attachment to the tree. They will recognise the tree when they come back and be able to notice changes through the years.



Noticing and naming helps create connection.

The leaves of horse chestnuts were almost at full size, and their flowers were in full bloom. The children enjoyed its sweet scent. The teacher told them it is called "cnó capaill (horse nut)" in Irish. Another child noticed the next tree, which had oval, pointy leaves, and it was so soft. The tree was a hazel tree, but the children could not find the nuts yet. The children kept finding different trees and plants, smelt the flowers, tasted the leaves with the teacher's permission, and shared their experiences.



Touching and smelling the tree flowers and leaves

For example, they found willow and wanted to do weaving, so the teacher said that she would bring some from home. They found wild garlic that was in bloom. They picked 1-2 flowers and tasted the flowers, and found the garlic flavour to be quite strong.

#### 4. WHAT FOREST SCHOOL LOOKS LIKE



Tasting wild garlic – creamy.

The teacher spotted “witch’s broom” growing on a birch tree, which is likely caused by a fungus.



Witch's broom on a birch tree.

They also noticed samaras on an elm tree, which emerge before the leaves, giving the branches a frilly appearance. The samara consists of a seed surrounded by a papery, round covering about 1cm in diameter, and it is quite tasty to eat.



Picking and tasting samaras on elm tree.

A relatively small number (10 children, 2 adults) and a few very enthusiastic and knowledgeable children made the group so open to learn so many things. When they found tree species they already knew about, or something interesting or that they had never seen, they wanted to share them with their group and the teacher, and the teacher was happy to have the opportunity to share her knowledge.

After the exploration, we went to an open field where there were many dandelions, buttercups and daisies. The teacher had black ink made from oak and paper and the children enjoyed making marks and patterns using different flowers. They noticed different shapes, patterns and textures in the petals, and different effects they could make when printed on paper.



Flower printing with abundant wild flowers.



'Look how tall this plantain flower is!'

When we finally arrived at the basecamp we had lunch, while the teacher told a buttercup story. The teacher also explained that the buttercup is not edible for humans. During free play, some children enjoyed playing in a den, which they called “Green Leaf Cottage”. They served real edible plants (gorse petals), in a leaf plate with chopsticks which were made from sticks with the skin peeled off for a customer. A child made a sign for the cottage by making marks on dead bark with a stick.



Green leaf cottage cafe.

Other children were on ground troll investigations again, and one child was enjoying making different sounds using sticks. Another group of children found some charcoal, and they used it to make some natural face paint by mixing it with water. After that we played the birds game, followed by Sit Spot and shared our findings and what we were grateful for at the end.

During this session, the teacher noticed that some living trees had been cut and used for building a den by somebody before we came here. She gathered the children and shared her reaction to this. The teacher pointed out that the tree seemed to have been cut very recently, which could be deduced by looking at the leaves.

Also, the cut was quite jagged, which would make the tree susceptible to infections. It is very important for the children to understand that they have power to both damage and protect the environment. This understanding brings with it growing awareness of the responsibility held by human society for environmental stewardship.



Free play allows children to learn to meet their own needs for creativity, fun, connection, play, solitude or togetherness.

#### Session 4 – Hawthorn flowers and leaves, Wild restaurant May 20<sup>th</sup>, 2022

It was a grey day for 3<sup>rd</sup> class’s fourth session. We started with the “Cuckoo bee game”, where a cuckoo bee that is trying to steal the hive, needs to find who is leading the movement of the group.



Playing games helps us to move our bodies and learn about nature.

After having a great laugh playing that game, we moved on to take a look at the same trees we had observed in previous weeks, and make note of the differences. There were so many changes in the wood within just a single week. The children noticed that the ash tree had a lot more leaves and there were some ash keys forming too.



Noticing changes - ash keys getting bigger on the ash tree.

The “elder sitter tree” (an elder tree which has a baby oak and a baby holly tree growing underneath) had more flowers blooming, and the leaves of the little oak tree were bigger than they had been the previous week. The baby holly tree had new leaves coming out, which were light green and so soft to touch. The horse chestnut trees were also forming nuts. The children touched the nuts and found that they were soft.



New tender leaves on the holly.



Noticing changes - horse chestnuts are soft at this stage.

The white and small flowers of the hawthorn tree were still in bloom. The teacher reminded them that the flowers and the leaves of the hawthorn are edible, so we picked some for our nature tea. One of the children smelled it, and said, “Oh this is so fruity.” The stems of the ribwort plantains had grown very long, and the children compared the length of their stems and their heights. One of the children accidentally picked the plant from its roots, and the teacher said to him, “It is better not to take it from the roots. Put the roots back and it might grow again,” and he did so.

The needles of the larch tree were a bit darker and bigger than in the previous week, and we found that the taste was stronger too. It was the same for the beech trees. The children were learning the seasonal changes in trees and plants using all of their senses, and in this way, the natural cycle is becoming part of their lives.

The teacher found a new plant, which appeared more dominant this week. She said, “Do you want to taste a new plant?” and the children said excitedly, “Yes!” It was vetch, a member of the pea family, and is edible. The children tasted the flower petals, and exchanged opinions. “It tastes more bitter than peas, and I don’t like it.” “I don’t like peas, but I like this!”



Vetch is tasty to some!

Then we went to the cherry tree, and the children found that it was forming cherries. They were still green and small. One of the children asked “Can I eat it?” and the teacher answered, “The plants usually protect themselves by not being edible before they are ripe, so it’s not a good idea to eat them at this stage.”

It took a long time to get to the basecamp, as there were so many things to observe and appreciate on the way. When we arrived at the basecamp, it was time for free play. This week, the competition between a café and a new restaurant emerged. A group of children created a café in the previous weeks, but another group of children decided to make a new restaurant in a different setting. They named it “the grey wolf restaurant”, and everyone in the group found a role, such as collecting edible plants, constructing a wall, chopping edible plants, or serving food. Their menu was “wild garlic and gorse spaghetti!” The leaves of wild garlic were chopped to make pasta. The other group booked the restaurant, and eventually they came and tasted their food.



Cafe style.

There was a magic in the imaginary play in the woods, because the resources are so rich and limitless in nature. Stones become tables and

chairs, logs become a counter and walls, the leaves become money and decorations, sticks become knives, spoons and chopsticks, dead bark becomes a sign board, etc. There is no right and wrong in Forest School, and what the children have is the freedom of innovation, creativity, imagination and collaboration.



Using cleavers to make a bowl.

The most fun part was that they were playing together. Imaginary play seemed to give them a feeling of connection with their peers, which is important for their sense of security. They cooperate, watch what others are doing and react accordingly. Everyone was part of the play, in his or her own way.

Because everyone was so engrossed in this activity, the teacher let them decide whether they wanted to continue playing in the restaurant or doing the activity which the teacher had originally prepared for that day. The children wanted to continue playing restaurant, so the teacher let them have more free play. This is because the role of leaders in Forest School is to observe, reflect, assess and plan accordingly and to cater for individual children.



Picking gorse flowers for the cafe.

The smaller groups allow the leaders to facilitate more child led learning where they get to choose what they are interested in both individually and as a group. Where possible Forest School leaders say “yes” and help them to develop their curiosity and love of learning. Though there is a lot of thought put into plans, it is pleasing if the session takes a different direction because the woods inspired something in the children.

### Session 5 – Types of leaves and matching leaves to flowers

May 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022

It was a lovely summery day for the fifth session. While waiting for everyone, one of the children noticed that some of the cherries were changing colour to red, and another child discovered that she could stick an ash key to her face.



Ash key clans.



Noticing cherries up high.

In the opening circle, many children wanted to share their news of the last week. One of the children shared that his parents had told him that the three-cornered leek originally came from England. Another child said that she had elder flower tea at home over the weekend. It is great to hear that the children bring Forest School home, and share their discoveries and knowledge with their parents.

After the opening circle, we checked the “Elder sitter tree”, and picked a flower, which had the nicest smell to put it into the nature tea. The baby oak tree was getting even bigger under the baby-sitter tree. The teacher told them that oak is “Dair” in Irish, and that there are many place names in Ireland that incorporate “Dair”. The children came up with some place names such as “Kildare” and “Derry”. Through learning the language, children get the opportunity to realise how Irish culture has been deeply connected with nature.



Making sure we have the nicest smelling blossom for our tea.



On the way up to the basecamp, one of the children shared her finding that the pattern of fern leaves is repetitive from a small scale to a coarser scale, which the teacher said was called a “fractal” in the natural world. The observations of children sometimes surprise adults. As they become accustomed to sharing their findings, they notice more things, which leads to a positive spiral of active learning.



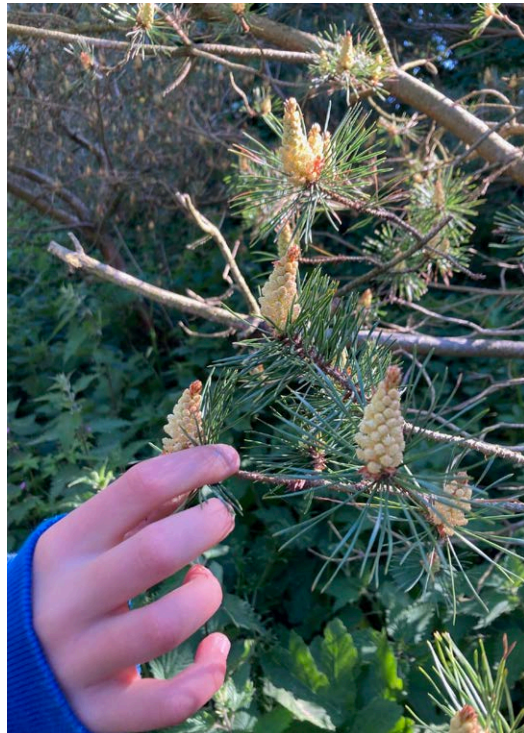
Ferns are fractals!



Cleavers.



Vetch.



Powdery pollen from male pine cones.



Beautiful leaves and flowers.



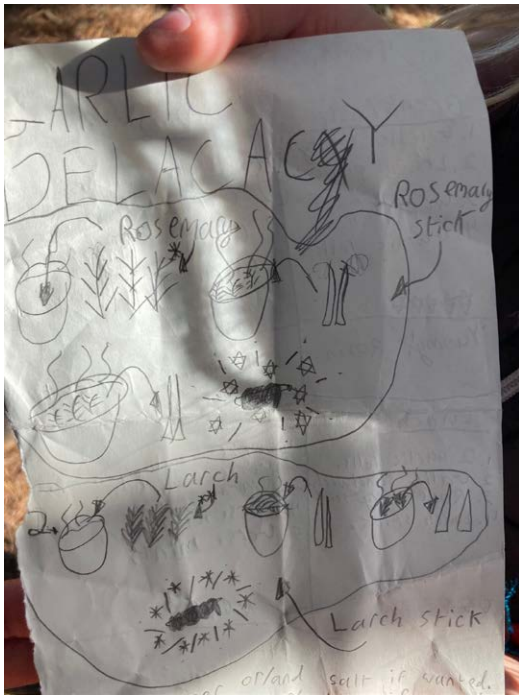
Hawthorn blossom.

This week, one child's idea became the theme for the group. She brought a string from home, and started to make a big arrow with a big stick. Then the other children started to ask her how she made it, and by the end of the session, most of them had their own bow on their shoulders. They also mixed charcoal and water to mark tribal symbols on their faces. They experimented until they were happy with the colour and consistency. Once again, we digressed from the plan the teacher had developed, and it was great to observe how the session was led by the initiative, enthusiasm and inspiration of the children.

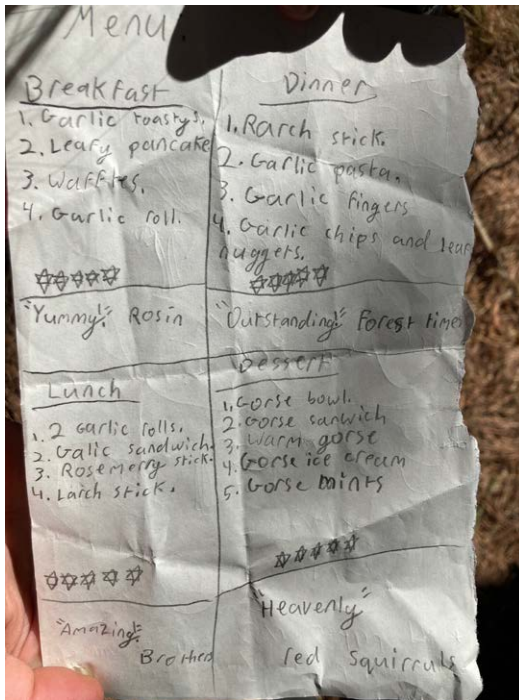


Bring string – make bow - being inspired and taught by each other.

Another child brought a menu for her café from home. She wrote her very original cafe menu with such delicacies as “Garlic toasties, leafy pancakes, gorse sandwich” and she even included reviews from customers such as “Heavenly” by red squirrels. The ideas and imagination of children are way beyond adults' expectations. While other children were creating a restaurant as a team, this particular child liked to just spend her time, seriously thinking about how to make her own café even better. She was completely absorbed in her imaginary world.



What an amazing menu! – Creativity, communication, knowing your local natural environment, art, genre writing!



Breakfast, lunch, dinner and dessert options with reviews!

Free play in Forest School means time free from any external impositions from adults in the form of games, cards, digital devices, toys or TVs. In a space where there is nothing but nature, children seem to sharpen their own imagination, creativity, thinking, observations, judgements and their own senses. Children are able to cultivate their own selves and their relationships with each other, and I believe that it enriches and deepens their personal development.



Look – I'm making confetti using dried leaves!

At lunch time, the teacher read a leaf fairy story, and looked at the different leaves we had collected on the way to the base camp. The children noticed that they had different textures, patterns, and shapes. Leaves can be spiky, hairy, wide, straight, tall, thorny etc. They learnt that they are all green, and that the chlorophyll of the green leaves is working to absorb energy from sunlight.



Leaves come in all shapes and sizes – just like us!



Questions that we don't know the answers to – what made this?!

### Session 6 – Elder, Cleavers and I wonder game

June 10<sup>th</sup>, 2022

It was a sunny and warm day for our sixth session together. The first thing we noticed was that a dead branch was hanging high up on the ash tree at the meeting point. We observed it carefully, and conducted a risk assessment together. We agreed that the dead branch looked well supported by the other branches, but we wouldn't go near it if it were a day with gusty wind. The leaves of the ash tree were fully grown, and some branches were hanging down, as the leaves got heavier. It was like a secret tent, and the children enjoyed camouflaging themselves with the leaves.



The AB (Ash Bag) tree, where we gather, changes each week.

At the opening circle, we talked about the next session. The children can bring an adult with them to Forest School! The teacher told them “You will be the Forest School leader, so you need to make sure your adults are safe and happy.” They looked excited and came up with lots of ideas for activities to do with the adults such as “sticky back tag”, “the bird game”, “showing them special spots”, “making restaurants with the parents as customers!”

Then we went to the “elder sitter tree”. It had so many flowers blooming. We played the “I wonder game”. In pairs, the children took turns to look carefully at the elder leaves and flowers and started a sentence with “I wonder ....”. The challenge here was not to answer any of these wonders even if we knew the answer except with another “I wonder...”.



Playing 'I wonder' game with the elder tree.

There were so many “wonders” exchanged between pairs, and their favourites were shared with the group. For example, I wonder: “why there are lines going throughout the leaves and some of them are pink”; “if the light and water get into the bushes”: “why leaves and stalks are in the same colour”; “why there are spots on the leaves”; “why the back of leaves have lines like blood vessels”; “why some of the leaves have purple edges”; “why the leaves turn orange in the autumn”; “if it is edible”.

The ability to muse over such things is precious in Forest School, and this game helps them to develop their curiosity and their observation skills. In Forest School, we hope that the children will develop a sense of wonder that will remain with them throughout their lives. This is sometimes more important than providing them with knowledge as facts. This is not only because it enriches their life experience, but also because it encourages children to seek explanations and solutions by themselves. In particular the ability to notice abnormalities in natural cycles is crucial in reacting to the unknown effects of Climate Change, pandemics etc. in the future.

The children also smelled the elder leaves, and noticed that the leaves had a strong smell. Some children described the smell as being like “cucumber” or “dandelions”. The teacher explained that it was to avoid being eaten by insects. When we observed again with this in mind, there were not many insect bites on the elder leaves. We also used the elder leaves as insect repellent for ourselves.

The leaves of horse chestnuts were greener and the berries were spikier. The children touched them carefully, and noticed that they were a bit harder compared to the previous weeks. This time, the children found many mushrooms on the ground. One of the children found a particularly big mushroom, and we all looked at it carefully. Half of the mushroom was eaten and we wondered what kinds of creatures had nibbled it.



Questioning - what might have nibbled this mushroom?

We also noticed that the cherries were bigger and more orange. The teacher asked the children why they would be tasty for birds and other animals. The children learnt that this is a way of spreading their seeds by animals pooping them out (!).

Then, one of the children found an eggshell beside a bush! It was white and approximately thumb-sized. We observed it carefully, and the teacher explained that a chick must have been successfully hatched, because the edge of the eggshell was clean. We looked up at the tree where the eggshell was, but couldn't see any birds' nests. We learnt that birds normally drop their eggshells away from their nests to hide them from predators. For most of us, it was our first time to find an actual eggshell of a wild bird, and it was so special to be able to get a feel for the bird's life cycle.



Making a crown using sticky backs/cleavers/robin run the hedge/garbhilus.



Exciting discoveries.

There were some sticky backs (garbhilus – rough herb in Irish) flowers blooming, so we looked for the tiny white flower. The children counted the petals, and looked for tiny green seeds. This is a wonderful plant to play tag with, because it sticks on clothes. This time, some of the children made crowns using it and added in daisies and buttercups.



Finding the tiny white flowers and counting the petals.

On the way to the basecamp, one of the children was telling other children her plan for the free play today. She wanted to be a doctor, and she asked the other children whether they wanted to be a nurse or receptionist. Forest School has a routine, and the children know what to expect from a session. In particular, because they know that they have time for free play, they can plan in advance, just as other children brought string for a bow and arrow and a menu for the café.

As soon as we arrived at the basecamp, a couple of the children started to choose the place for a doctor's surgery, and created a system; patients needed to book at the reception and wait at a waiting seat (a log). When they were called, they should come to the doctor's room (a bush), and have a doctor's consultation. They were then given a prescription (a leaf), and the adjacent pharmacy (adjacent bush), provided them with medicine (edible plants).

In Forest School, children experience different forms of life such as animals and trees through games, activities and observations so that they develop empathy for other lives. Empathy is an important ability, which can help the children to build good relationships with people around them, and also to act responsibly in society and toward the natural environment.

This time, the children chose to experience working as a medical team. At the end of the session, one of the children involved in this play mentioned that she was grateful for her medical team at the doctor surgery, and also grateful for the doctors and nurses in real life who worked hard throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Session 7 – Parents Session June 17<sup>th</sup> 2022

It was a summery day for the seventh session for third class, and it was the parent's session. Children brought their parents or older siblings to their Forest School. At the meeting point, the children were showing off what they knew about the surrounding nature. It was already a nice atmosphere, in which adults were ready to have a great time with their children and to learn from them. The children looked proud and acted differently from how they were in the regular

sessions. We welcomed everyone at the opening circle, and introduced our names with gestures. We played the cuckoo bee game, and demonstrated what we have been observing throughout the sessions.



Welcoming our parents to Forest School.

First of all, the children introduced their adults to the Elder Sitter Tree, and showed them what they had been noticing about this plant over the weeks. Because of the "I wonder game" from the previous week, the children knew many features of this plant. The adults enjoyed the lovely scent of its flowers and the strong smell of its leaves, and were impressed by the detailed observations by the children. We moved around to show them different trees, and three older siblings started to play sticky back tag. They were former Dalkey School Project (DSP) pupils, and seemed to remember how they had played in the woods.



3<sup>rd</sup> class becoming leaders and having so much to share.



Helping our parents get to know the elder tree.

On the way to our basecamp, the children pointed out the site where we had found an eggshell, played sticky weed tag, showed the adults edible plants such as vetch and beech leaves, and picked flowers with their leaves for use later in the activities. At the basecamp, the children introduced their restaurant and started collecting edible plants from the surrounding environment. The parents were a bit suspicious, but tried some of their restaurant food such as gorse seeds and flowers. In this way, the children were able to share their favourite spots and favourite things to do in the woods with their parents and siblings.



Playing the "I wonder" game with our adults.

Then in the circle, we played the "I wonder game" in pairs or in family units. The adults also made detailed observations of plants and shared their "wonders" with their children. Then they chose either to make replicas of the plants out of clay, or draw them in charcoal, or make charcoal prints. Some families made charcoal prints as a team, while others made clay flowers individually. Two brothers went to sit down in a quiet place

together, and made clay flowers in silence. The adults took pleasure in sharing moments of creativity with their children, and some also found making their own art works therapeutic.



Being creative and having fun with our adults/siblings.



Drawing inspired by nature.

We played a bird game, through which adults also experienced the busy and challenging lives of birds. Then children took their adults to their favourite spots, sat down and had a quiet moment. The forest was silent, and the children and their accompanying adults shared intimate time together in nature. In the end, we had a tea ceremony and shared our gratitude from the day. Adults also live a busy life, and the session provided a great opportunity for them to spend time in nature with their children, see and understand what their children were seeing and feeling, and to notice their new abilities, knowledge and skills. It must have been a great gift for the children to be leaders and to be able to share what they love about Forest School with their family.





We loved having past pupils return to Forest School with their siblings.

The teenage siblings also seemed to enjoy spending time in the woods, reminiscing about what they did when they were in DSP. One of the boys started to climb a tree, and the others said, "You're climbing too high, remember the shoulder rule!" There was also a point when they had a challenging task in picking some nettles to make tea with. They tried pressing the leaves hard enough that they would not be stung, but it didn't work. The third class children were delighted to help their older brothers with medicinal plants to heal their pain.

The teenagers are now in a different life stage. They are busy and might not have time to spend time and play in nature to the same extent. However, we hope that the attachment and awe toward nature they once felt, and memories of exploring their curiosity and the imaginary world they occupied when they were small will stay somewhere deep inside them, and travel with them throughout the challenging years of adolescence and indeed, throughout their lives beyond.

### Session 8 - Child led play June 24<sup>th</sup>, 2022



Natural found objects as inspiration.

The last day of the third class Forest School was windy, and the teacher decided to make the session completely child-led. The children shared what they wanted to do in the opening circle. As requested by one of the children, they played the cuckoo bee game to start, and then went straight up to their basecamp. On the way up, they marched while singing a song.



Our AB (Ash Bag) tree changes every week as does our play and interaction with it.

#### 4. WHAT FOREST SCHOOL LOOKS LIKE

At the base camp, free play time began. It was a windy day and everything surrounding them was moving dynamically, so that the mood of the children seemed to be affected, and their play was dynamic. Children were running around from one space to another, forming groups, separating, and forming other groups. Some children sat under bushes, pretending to have a drink with leaf cups, or using clay to make cups or mini creatures. Another group of children started to play a gambling game using leaves as money. One of the children said he was bored, but he also said that “sometimes boredom brings great ideas” and just enjoyed collecting sticks and putting them on a piece of dead bark.



Caption.



Creating with nature - making a ladder.

Children play to make sense of their world, and try to understand and digest what they have been observing in their everyday life by imitation. Even play in the woods is sometimes influenced by what they have been reading, seeing on TV, on the Internet or in the lifestyle and behaviour of the adults around them. In particular, children of this age are becoming more aware of and engaged with the world around them. Nature provides a safe and healthy environment, and all the raw materials they need to process the world around them in this way.



Creating and adapting ideas as they give them a go.



The Forest Gym.

On the other hand, in Forest School, there are opportunities to absorb ideas that children of this generation might not be exposed to in their everyday life. They can experience making tea from living flowers instead of from packs, or creating something from scratch instead of buying it in the shop. Even gathering in a circle, eating together and immersing themselves in stories told by their peers and teachers, a very fundamental human experience, is something they may not all have experienced.



Finding beauty in nature and wanting to create with it.

At the end of the session, the children chose to play a tag game as a whole group, and after that, it was time for the Sit Spot. In the closing circle, we shared our gratitude from Forest School. Here are some things they felt grateful for:

- “playing the bird game, and making restaurants”
- “happy memories”
- “being in DSP and having Forest School, building cafés, restaurants, a surgery and it was great that it changed every week, and we noticed so many things thanks to everyone”
- “being here every Friday”
- “playing here instead of doing maths”
- “having the chance to make a café with my parents”.

I have been observing the DSP Forest School for a year, and I am grateful to have encoun-

tered several moments when the children’s eyes shone. These faces, full of excitement and joy, sometimes obvious and sometimes quiet, coming from the bottom of their hearts remain in my mind. These were the moments when they had the freedom to express themselves, concentrate on their own curiosity, thoughts, challenges and imaginary world, or where they achieved goals they had set themselves. I also loved watching the children gazing on nature, having a private moment.

In these moments, I saw the child’s inner strength, a young life striving to grow, just like any life forms seem to be programmed to strive for their survival and growth.

## FOREST SCHOOL FOR OLDER PRIMARY CLASS (6<sup>TH</sup> CLASS) AGED 11–12 YEARS OLD

**Session 1 - Principle of a woodland setting**  
March 12<sup>th</sup> 2024

For the sessions that we had with 6<sup>th</sup> class, we brought their attention to some of the principles of Forest School. We started with “The principle of the woodland setting”.

These children had the embodied experience of Forest School sessions most years of their time in Dalkey School Project (DSP). For some, they mainly focused on the idea that it was fun! This year as they were getting ready to leave primary school, we planned to look with them at Forest School from a more adult viewpoint. We trained them to be assistants for the sessions run for younger children in the summer term and we hope they will be ambassadors for this type of learning when they leave DSP.

The first principle is that Forest School happens in a woodland setting. Though this may be obvious from the name, we looked at why this was important. We think of the environment as the third teacher for learners (parent and school teacher being the other two). Among other things, the woodland environment:

#### 4. WHAT FOREST SCHOOL LOOKS LIKE

- supports creativity and imagination
- facilitates and encourages communication
- provides the learners with the space in which to explore and discover, and allows for rich and emergent learning
- supports open ended enquiry based learning
- allows the use of natural resources for inspiration, to enable ideas and to encourage intrinsic motivation.
- enhances physical development



Woodlands provide exploring and discovering opportunities.



"It's a Storm Trooper!" – Woodlands encourage creativity and imagination.



Woodlands have natural resources.



Woodlands enhance physical development.



Figuring out rules of the game – Woodlands facilitate and encourage communication.



Woodlands support enquiry based learning.

### Integrating learning over time

The last time these children were in Forest School was in December over a year ago and they have had Forest School most years they've been in DSP. The ecosystem knowledge they have developed and retained over time is impressive.

Within the group we recognised/reconnected with:

- an oak tree by some galls on the branches
- hawthorn from the thorns
- dried up jelly ear mushrooms on elder trees
- ivy by the shape of the leaf
- navelwort by the texture and remembering that you can eat it
- roses by the dried up rose hip and thorns
- gorse by the smell and colour
- dandelions by the 'lion's teeth' shape of the leaves.
- bud burst on elder trees



Finding these plants inside base camp - bud burst on elder.

We noticed changes in the season and the growth of plants.

### Using all our senses (including tasting, smelling, looking)

We learned about some new plants. This group hadn't been in these woods in February before so we got to meet some parts of the plants we haven't had a chance to get to know before.

- Alexanders – an invasive plant that we can eat. One child remembered this plant because the last time we were here he had made a snowball from the snow gathered on its leaves. We tasted a small bit of the leaves and it tasted green and celery like. The flowers tasted sweeter.
- Pine pollen tea – We noticed the growths on the pine trees and were wondering what it was. We also noticed that if we tapped it, there was a cloud of powder released.
- Lords and ladies – We noticed that the leaves when bigger have two ears at the bottom but when they're younger look quite like wild garlic.



Male Pine Cone full of pollen.



Learning about Lords and Ladies.

## Boundaries & trust

“Can we make our boundaries bigger please?” Boundaries help keep us safe and also help us to feel safe. Asking for bigger boundaries means that the children feel safe and happy and want to experience and learn more. As children grow older they require more room to explore. They also need to feel that they are trusted as that gives the message and belief of ‘*I am capable. I am trustworthy.*’ It is one of the ways we support the development of confidence and self-esteem in children.



Expanding boundaries.

Trust, as we know, goes both ways. Teachers have to be happy that the children can be safe and happy and that the size of the boundaries are within their comfort zone for that to happen. One of the many benefits of the long term nature of the programme we have in DSP is that the teachers know that they can trust the children to not only keep themselves safe and happy but also to keep each other safe and happy.

## Playing games

We started off the day with some structured nature based games. We learned *Cuckoo Bee*, played *Bat and Moth* and agreed on the rules for *Fox and Rabbit*. Playing these games help us keep warm on cold days, learn about nature and have fun together. They help us develop our physical skills as well as our empathy when we play predator / prey games.

There is also playing that is due to the fact we are in a woodland environment. ‘Affordances’ are the opportunities for action that are present in the environment.

A steep, rooty slope, a pile of sticks and logs, a tree with branches at just the right height, places to hide, places to run - the psychologist James J. Gibson called these ‘affordances’. In his 1977 article ‘The Theory of Affordances’,<sup>10</sup> He defined affordances as “action possibilities latent in the environment”.

There were two long fallen trees on the ground where we gathered and the children started balancing on the logs. Before long they were challenging themselves to jump from one to another and were trying to push each other off the log whilst remaining balanced themselves.

Fundamental movement skills are essential for us to be healthy and well. These physical skills such as dodging, jumping, ducking, climbing, balancing, running on uneven surfaces are all part of the sessions as they take place in a woodland setting.



Dodging and ducking and playing develop fundamental movement skills.

## Choice child led experiences

Two of the children started free play wanting to climb trees while others were playing a game. They then started shouting encouragement to the others from the tree. Next they actively gave information to those playing the game. Then they joined in fully. Allowing the children a sense of agency and a feeling of freedom is so important to their development.

<sup>10</sup> Gibson, J.J. (1977). The Theory of Affordances. In R.Shaw and J. Bransford (Eds.) *Perceiving, Acting, and Knowing. Toward an Ecological Psychology*. Hillsdale: NJ, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 67-82.

### Care for the woodland

*“Can I throw this orange peel into the gorse?”*

We discussed this question. Understanding the potential impact of something can help develop pro environmental behaviours throughout our lives. One person suggested that we could because the peel will decompose. Fair point. Another said that oranges don't grow in Ireland so it's not a good idea. We discussed how an animal might eat it and give it a sick tummy. We also mentioned that litter being visible (and it takes about 6 months for an orange skin to decompose) in the environment encourages other people to litter more. It's not nice for us to see other people's litter even if it will eventually decompose.

### Being with the woodland

We ended the session with a Sit Spot and relaxed in our woodland setting allowing space and time to develop the relationship between the learner and the natural world.



Sit Spot in a tree - allows us to 'be' in nature.

### Session 2 - Principle of appropriate risk March 19<sup>th</sup> 2024



Hanging out in the hammock can give us a moment of relaxation.



Taking appropriate risks is important for growth.



Being in nature allows us to develop a positive relationship with the natural world.

It was a lovely sunny day for the second week of Forest School with 6<sup>th</sup> class. The theme of this week's session was "Taking appropriate risks". One of the six principles of Forest School is to offer learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves. Learning how to manage risks gives them independence and confidence, and is important for their growth. We want children to be able to risk assess a variety of situations for themselves. As they progress into teenage and adult years, where the risks can be higher, we want the children to have the skills to know what feels safe or unsafe and how to navigate that.



Ropes allow skill development and appropriate risk taking.



"How can you keep yourself and others safe when doing that?"

Rather than saying "Be careful!" which can create a feeling that the world is a scary place and they are not equipped to deal with it, we try to get the children involved in assessing risk and doing what feels right for them.



Playing games like 'Meet a tree' with a partner requires communication and trust – both important skills involved in appropriate risk taking.

From Junior Infants on we help the child foster awareness by saying:

- Notice how... these rocks are slippery, that branch is strong
- Do you see... the nettles, the big drop?
- Try moving... your feet carefully / strongly / quickly
- Try using your... hands, feet, arms, legs.
- Do you feel... stable on that rock, the strength of that branch?
- Are you feeling... excited, tired, scared, safe?

We help the children problem solve by saying:

- What's your plan... if you climb that boulder, cross that log?
- What can you use... to get across, to strengthen?
- Where will you... put that rock, climb that tree, dig that hole?
- How will you... get down, go up, get across?
- Who will... be with you, help you, go with you?
- How can you keep yourself / others safe when doing that?

This week, the children were introduced to the use of knives, and making arrows. At first, we discussed the risk of using knives. The children have used knives before, so they knew that the blade of a knife needs to face away from themselves, and that they must give space to people who are using tools, which is called a "blood bubble". The children chose their tool area themselves.



Learning how to use knife safely.



During the free play, while two of the children were using knives to make arrows, the others started to do other things such as climbing trees, putting up hammocks, putting up rope bridges and building dens.

Forest School with the 6<sup>th</sup> class looked so different from those of younger classes. The element of imaginary play has almost gone, and their minds were more focused on practical tasks, helping adults or each other, following orders, and most importantly spending time with peers. Or for some children, having their own space.

It seemed that the woodlands were no longer a magical place where fairies, monsters, and tribes lived. The pretend kitchens, cafes and hospitals were no longer there either. I remember some of the same children two years ago enjoying being a tribe or being warriors, running around with sticks as “weapons”, making a base and being guards etc. Sharing this imaginary play was their way of bonding, and their main conversations were who was what and how they would guard their base etc. These tribes seem to have disappeared.



Being creative and making their own bows and arrows.

Instead, they seem to enjoy more structured games, or practical tasks. When they play nature games, they like having initiative and ownership, and they wanted to decide teams and rules themselves. More space to run around, and more thrilling activities were better. They were able to reach a consensus when deciding the teams to make sure everyone felt that it was fair and happy, which involved negotiations and compromise. This process requires higher emotional intelligence and higher linguistic skills.

One of the children showed his skill at making knots for putting up hammocks and a rope bridge. He said that he knows lots of knots because of rock climbing. He showed different types of knots and demonstrated them to the others. In Forest School, children get to be seen in different ways by their peers and children learn from each other as much as they do from the leader.



Children learning from each other.

Another child found a fallen branch with big pine cones, and showed me that it was like axes. We looked up at the trees together to see which tree the branch fell from, and talked about the risks of heavy pine branches after snow and high wind.

Some of the children helped make pine needle and gorse flower tea, and we enjoyed the tea with the whole group, while also sharing what we had noticed, and the things for which we were grateful.

The 6<sup>th</sup> class children are ready to be leaders for the younger classes, which may give them important learning at their developmental stage. With their peers, however, the benefits of Forest School seem to be more similar to adults spending time in nature. They can relax, learn practical

skills, spend time with their friends and feel the pleasure of being away from their busy routine. As a Forest School leader, I hope they still have eyes that see our debt to nature, that they notice things constantly changing, and have the empathy that will give them the sense of responsibility to act as leaders to create a future in which society is more in harmony with the natural world.



Making pine needle and gorse flower tea – foraging for wild food is an appropriate risk activity.



Listening to a story.

### Session 3 – Principle of holistic development March 20<sup>th</sup> 2024



Throwing games involve a discussion on how to keep others safe.

It was a cold, still and cloudy morning. There was almost no wind in our base camp and we could hear lots of birds singing throughout the session. Today's theme was to think about the Forest School principle: "holistic development". Forest School programmes aim to develop, where appropriate, the physical, social, cognitive, linguistic, emotional and spiritual aspects of the learner.



Playing together help us develop physically, socially, linguistically and emotionally.

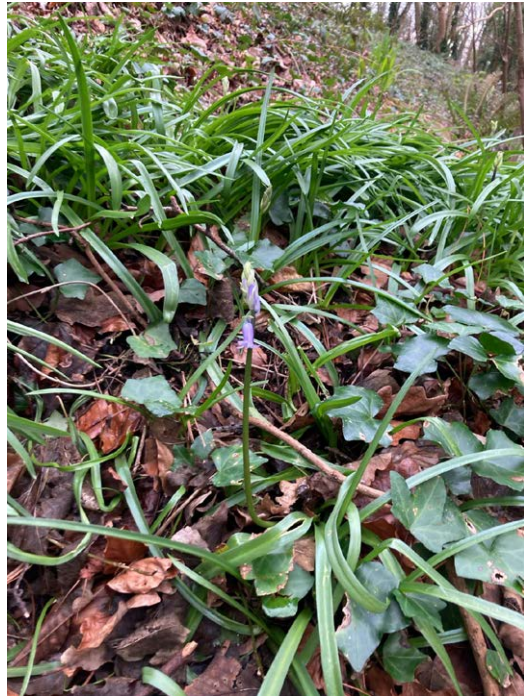
We started with Zombie tag, which was a great warming up game. We discussed how we could make this a more nature based game for the younger children. One idea was to call it Parasite Tag, another was to call it Caterpillar Tag. Having fun together, agreeing on rules, physically moving are all parts of holistic learning.

On the way up to the base camp, the children noticed that jelly ear mushrooms were more spread over an elder tree than two weeks before. They touched and compared the softness with their ears. They talked about how they felt, and how it could be tasty when it's fried.



Using our senses and being curious help us cognitively, physically and emotionally.

One of the children noticed a bumble bee stuck in the mushroom, and they debated whether it was alive or dead. Then they noticed the first bluebells blooming this spring.



The first bluebell of the season.

When the children got to the base camp, some of the children went straight to a den, and started to make an “extension” part to their existing den. They discussed how they wanted the den to look, and one of the children played a leading role organising the overall structure. The other children disappeared into the woods and came back with big sticks. They took these big branches from their old den which they made last year.



Is this bee alive?



Linguistic and cognitive and social and emotional development.



Den building – sense of achievement, ownership, a sense of belonging to each other, satisfaction, joy and contentment.

The children were engaged, serious and focused, it looked like a very important team-work project. I realised then that it was a high-level form of play, and there was so much deep learning beneath it. There were no set goals, and not a right answer, so they needed to communicate and figure out what they wanted to achieve.

They naturally decided their individual roles to maximize the efficiency of the project, which involved observations, understanding their needs, thinking about what they can do as an individual within the team. These abilities are essential for team work.

Building work needed brain work – they needed to have strategy, trial and error, and patience. Each branch was unique, sometimes in an unexpected shape - they didn't have saws to make them the right length, so they needed to work out where to use these branches to build the most stable and sturdy structure, which was challenging.

It was great to observe that the 6<sup>th</sup> class children are capable of enjoying this kind of deep play. They can create fun out of nothing. They don't need expensive gear, and they don't need external approval to feel it is right for them. But these children were able to immerse themselves into such simple play, and it seemed to give them a sense of achievement, ownership, a sense of belonging to each other, satisfaction, joy and contentment. Having Forest School throughout their

primary school years might have given them this important ability. Knowing how to make themselves safe and happy. And they know with their instincts what nature can provide.



The calm and focus of whittling.

The other children enjoyed making bows and arrows using willow sticks and knives. They made notches at both ends of the bow, and tied them tightly with a string. Two children made an aiming circle, and they had a competition to see who could get their arrows closest to the circle. One of the children's arrows always went further, and then the other child investigated why this was. One of the children tried putting weight at the front edge by coiling up the wool, but it didn't work. Finally, he decided to make another arrow with a longer willow stick. He tried the new arrow again, but it still seemed to need more work in the following week.



Problem solving through trial and improvement - how to make the arrow go where you want it to.

At lunch time, the teacher shared a story from Irish mythology, and it was about an Irish mythological hero Finn speaking of his favourite music in the world. Everyone shared their favourite music (sounds) from nature, and their answers were poetic.. “The sound of trees waving in the wind, the sound of sea when I am lying beside it, the sound of a blue tit, the sound of insects, and the sound of cuckoo birds.” The children have got used to sharing their honest feelings. Forest School not only gives them freedom to explore, but also encourages them to use their senses by having a moment to share this at the end of each session.

As today’s theme was “holistic development”, the teacher asked them about the routine of Forest School, and what each Forest School activity gives them. The children started to think about which part of the body and senses they used when they were doing activities such as games, free play, Sit Spot, sharing stories and gratitude. We are all made up of lots of parts and it is so important that all our parts get the opportunities to be nourished and developed.



Bouncing on a tree root found on the journey to base camp.



Taking a break.

#### Session 4 - Principle of long term process of regular sessions

March 22<sup>nd</sup> 2024

On the day of the final DSP Forest School session for the 6<sup>th</sup> class children, the sky was grey, and it felt chilly and windy as we arrived at Killiney Hill. The theme was to go through the Forest School Principle: “a long-term process of regular sessions.”



Playing Bat and Moth in 6<sup>th</sup> class, preparing to be assistants for the younger children.

Most of the children in the group started Forest School when they were in Junior Infants, and have returned to it every year or every two years throughout their time in primary school. When they were in the infants’ classes, the woodland was a magical place where they enjoyed imaginary play. Little insects and animals under the earth were all friends, and every part of nature - its smell, feel, taste and the beauty of it fascinated them.



Finding bird eggshells in Spring.

Also, they have experienced the Forest School way of learning - child-led, trial and error, responsibility to make themselves and everyone surrounding them safe and happy - has given them opportunities to develop self-belief, confidence, empathy, and empowerment, which wouldn't necessarily be as accessible in the classroom environment.



Who can shoot the arrow the furthest.

These children are now 11-12 years old, and facing into adolescence. They have started searching for deeper meaning in what they see and are taught, and making social groupings is a very important part of their lives. Forest School for them becomes an important place to make bonds with their peers, gain skills, take time to be free from tasks and pressures, and to be able to relax. The woodland remains a familiar place for them and they continue to find joy in being in nature – such as by making dens, making crafts with natural objects, climbing trees, or finding something fascinating.



Working out how to move a large granite rock to make a safe area for a swing.

As their final step in Forest School in DSP, they will be leaders for the junior infants and first-class children in the coming weeks, and they will have more responsibilities, and can pass on and share their knowledge, skills, and memories to their juniors in DSP. So, this week, the teacher prepared them for what leaders need to be able to do. They were told to imagine what the junior infants would do when they first came to the Forest School. We practiced how to respond to all the questions the little ones might ask, and how to teach some of the games they previously learned themselves.



Testing den spaces.

They also had time for their own free play. Some of them went back into their den, some of them made bows and arrows again, some of them put up the hammocks, or played on rope swings and rope bridges. One of the children climbed up a tree that she always loved when she was in the younger class. We had lunch at a spot with a view of the sea and listened to stories, and had a Sit Spot. It was a lovely quiet time – everyone looked at the sea, the sky, Bray head or the hill and just enjoyed the moment spent in nature.



Testing the strength of our hammock.



Hanging out together.

At the end of the session, we shared our favorite memories from Forest School in their primary school days. Many of them liked to come to a different environment than the class room or yard. They liked the fresh air, and having their own time for play. Some children liked learning new skills such as putting up hammocks and ropes and rope swings, and for some of them, the Sit Spot (being quiet in nature) was an important time for them.

Forest School aims to cater for children's holistic growth. It helps them know themselves better, using the whole of their bodies and all of their senses, developing their empathy and emotional intelligence. Throughout their time in primary school, the children experience significant development. In each developmental stage, spending time in nature provides important stimuli which will influence their growth. Our main hope is that the children will look back on the experience they had as a meaningful thread running throughout their early education.



Groups have the opportunity to develop friendships in a different environment to the classroom.



"If we want children to flourish, to be truly empowered, we must first allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it." Sobel.

As Sobel (1996) states, "If we want children to flourish, to be truly empowered, we must first allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it". Carrying with them our very best wishes, the 6<sup>th</sup> children are ready to go onto the next stage in their lives, and spread their wings towards the future.



## 5. WHAT STAFF, PARENTS AND CHILDREN SAY



## CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

Like all school initiatives, Forest School has to be evaluated regularly to ensure it meets the changing needs of the school.

Throughout the 10 years, the school faced various challenges in organising Forest School. Sometimes staff felt under pressure to cover the curriculum within the given school hours. It is very important that the benefits of Forest School are measured, understood and appreciated in order for the school to keep supporting it. The DSP team conducted several questionnaires and workshops with staff, parents and children over the years for this purpose.

## FEEDBACK FROM STAFF

As school staff are in the classroom with the children every day, they see the difference in individual personalities and learning behaviours when the children are in a Forest School environment. Through the interviews and a workshop, we tried to understand staff perspectives on the benefits of Nature Based Learning in a primary school.

### A LETTER FROM A CLASS TEACHER

Angela is the first teacher who experienced Forest School with Jenny in 2015. Her experience helped Forest School to spread to other classes in DSP.

*"I was first introduced to the idea of Forest School by Jenny Dungan when I was a Senior Infant class teacher in 2015.*

*It was such a new concept but I was happy to "give it a go" as it seemed it would be a wonderful experience for a bunch of 5/6 year olds! And it certainly was!*

*In no particular order, these are the huge benefits of Forest School as I saw it in action:*

*In particular, children who found it difficult to be confined to sitting in a crowded classroom were really helped by the change of environment in a Forest School. We understand so much more now about the need for movement breaks for all of us, but certainly small children need and must be able to move.*

*As a way of teaching / explaining boundaries to young children it was a much more interactive way than saying "you need to stay in this part of the yard". Each group had their own base and the extremities were decided on – no need for rails or walls, we just picked environmental objects and drew imaginary lines. Incredibly there was never an issue with children disappearing or getting lost. A call signal was agreed, to recall everyone back to the centre of the base when we wanted to gather together. This all worked so well and the children responded appropriately. So much nicer than calling individual children's names and gave the children a level of responsibility for their own behaviour and response.*

*Exercise outdoors – what could be better for younger children? The release of beneficial "happy hormones" (serotonin and dopamine) is so important for mental health and positive feelings of wellbeing. A lot of parents found it helped with sleep issues. Parents reported stories of children who would moan or refuse to go on family walks at the weekend but after Forest School would be dying to bring their parents out to show their "Base" or activities they had done, spreading the advantages out to cover the weekend.*

*What small child doesn't love the idea of "a base" and all the play and imagination it allows. In each base we had "Sit spots" for quieter activities. These were small round waterproof mats. On the sit spot we would do simple meditation activities or "golden moments". A great calming experience and one that could be continued in the classroom.*

*With flasks of hot water, we had snack time and tastes of nettle tea among others!*

*All activities promoted exploration, observation and discovery – essential components of the Infant curriculum across all subjects.*

Forest School allowed children to develop the essential life skills of problem-solving, teamwork, creativity, conflict resolution and building friendships.

Lessons were very well planned but also child-led. Learning was cross-curricular – in particular art (nature art, leaf art, mark making), music (Song singing), PE, Literacy (story telling/reading, poems and rhymes), SESE (all areas), SPHE. Forest School fostered a love of nature with childlike wonder.

Forest School happened irrespective of the weather (unless it was a safety issue). Being outdoors in the cold and wet builds resilience to enjoy the climate we live in. I have a distinct memory of a very wet Friday walking down from the top of the hill to the car park, adults and kids soaked, but happily splashing in puddles while singing at the top of their voices all the way down "The animals went in 2 by 2, just to get out of the rain!"

(Angela Beary, a teacher at DSP, Feb 2024)

### A LETTER FROM A PLAY THERAPIST IN DSP

Jennie Casey currently works as a play therapist in DSP, and originally worked as a SNA (Special Needs Assistant) in the school. She also trained as a Forest School leader. She wrote about her Forest School experience in DSP from the perspective of an SNA, Forest School leader and play therapist.

*"Dalkey School Project has been a pioneer in integrating Forest School and Nature-Based learning into primary school life and I have had the privilege of observing the power of this at various stages in my career. In 2018 I completed a placement as an SNA in Dalkey School Project. At this time the Forest School Programme was 3 years old and I observed how children who struggled to concentrate within the classroom were thriving in the outdoor learning environment.*

*In September 2019 I began volunteering for the Forest School programme while training as a Forest School Leader. I observed Jenny Dungan and Liz McMahon's hard-working, creative and child-centred approaches. They worked closely with the class teachers and designed programmes that best supported the needs of each class and age-range. This facilitation, combined with the natural therapeutic landscape of the woodland, enabled children to learn in new ways, to develop at their own pace, and to form friendships in a gentle environment. I also observed how hardy the children (and teachers) were and how their positive attitude to rainy or muddy days grew into both playful and resilience-building experiences.*

*In 2020, as Covid loomed over life, I was training to be a play therapist. The forest school setting at DSP provided a safe space to practice therapeutic play skills with children. I worked alongside classroom teacher, Maryrose Leeson, with a group in the woodland, integrating puppetry and imaginative play. The work was effortless because nature does most of the work. There is extensive research in the fields of Environmental Psychology (Kaplan 1995), including Biophilia (Fromm, 1964; Wilson, 2009), and Environmental Neuroscience (McDonnell & Strayer, 2024) about how time spent in nature is good for health and well-being. There is also significant literature and research on the benefits of nature for children (Hanscomb, 2016; Louv, 2010) as well as on the benefits of nature and the outdoors as a therapeutic approach (Courtney et al., 2022; Fearn 2014).*

*In 2022, I had qualified as a play therapist and was now working within the DSP school building again so it was time to bring nature indoors. A wide range of natural sensory materials were integrated into the DSP Play Therapy programme, which was in its infancy at that stage. Now in 2025, I work one day per week in DSP, as an Accredited Child and Adolescent Psychotherapist specialising in Play Therapy, and I never cease to be amazed by how a bird flying past the window; the rain falling on the skylight; or natural play materials such as shells, sand or stones, can provide the child with an opportunity to express their feelings. All of the children who come through the Play Therapy programme in Dalkey School Project have had the incredible opportunity of experiencing Forest School, some of them for many years. I believe it lays a wonderful nature connection foundation for them, supporting regulation and learning and providing lasting and treasured memories. Current neuroscience research (e.g. McDonnell & Strayer, 2024) is now also validating what many outdoor practitioners have known for years: nature grows brains."*

(Jennie Casey, Play therapist at DSP, Jan 2025)

## STAFF INTERVIEWS AND A WORKSHOP

Two class teachers with experience of Forest School were interviewed after their sessions in 2016. Also, a workshop with staff was conducted in June 2024 in order to document the benefits they observed. 12 staff members with experience of Forest School were interviewed in groups at that time.

They discussed the benefits of Forest School, drawing on the examples of particular children. From the record of those discussions, five main characteristics of Forest School that were particularly valued were identified. They were “Outdoor & Physical movement”, “Nature-based & Sensory”, “Long term & Routine”, “Child-led learning & Free play”, and “Small group”. “Small group” refers to the fact that there are only 8-10 children in each group for Forest Schools.

The benefits the children derived included: “Reduced stress”, “Concentration”, “Resilience”, “Creativity”, “Imagination”, “Knowledge”, “Respect for nature”, “Observation skills”, “Confidence”, “Self-belief”, “Social skills”, “Personality emerged” and “Reduced social anxiety”.

There were also benefits for the staff themselves. For example, some of the activities in Forest School were integrated with classwork and the children were more engaged with what they were learning. The small groups gave staff confidence to allow the children to take appropriate risks, and the free environment allowed the staff to get to know the children better.

Some of the staff pointed out the types of children who particularly benefit from Forest School. For example, they mentioned children who were “Quiet”, “Had learning difficulties in the classroom” or were “Not outdoorsy”. There was also a view about how Forest School fostered every child’s growth and provided an environment where all the children could mix and learn from one another. Figure 5.1 summarises the staff’s opinions

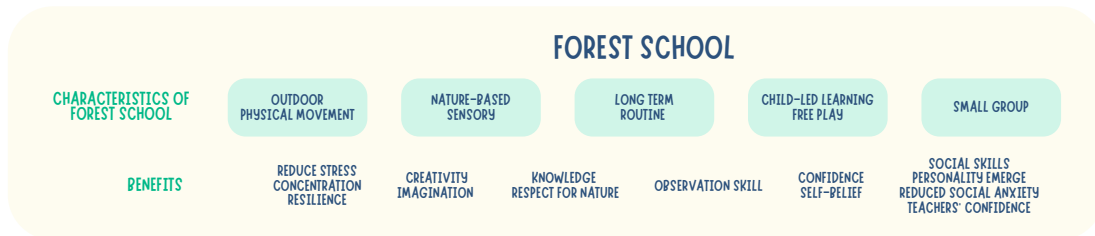


Figure 5.1 The benefit of Forest School - staff perspectives (Workshop 2024).

Here are some of the responses received from school staff:

### <Fosters every child’s growth>

- “Forest School allows children to thrive in different ways: Even high-performing children experience setbacks, fostering resilience. Struggling children find opportunities for success.”

### <Integrates with classwork>

- “Forest School integrates with classwork, including writing poems and creative pieces about nature or recounting Forest School sessions. Children are genuinely interested in writing and art related to their Forest School experiences.”
- “Forest School provided opportunities for reading and writing, which they weren’t interested in before.”
- “Forest School has the potential to include a scope for drama, storytelling, Gaelige, history, writing stories and poems.”
- “Trying different mediums – abstract thinking and creativity, Problem-solving and oral language skills & SPHE.”

### <Creativity>

- “Art in the forest focuses on the process rather than just the end result, which differs from the classroom setting.”

### <Social skills>

- “In the forest, children from diverse socio-economic backgrounds come together. There’s less emphasis on material possessions or social status. Children play, explore, and learn side-by-side, fostering a sense of equality and shared experiences. Children learn teamwork and cooperation, with ample opportunities for group problem-solving.”
- “Two children in third class experienced significant growth in confidence and their social skills improved notably.”
- “Children seeing each other in a more positive light.”
- “Children learn essential skills like sharing and taking turns.”
- “One child, who was not very talkative in class, improved socially in Forest School. The smaller group size and relaxed atmosphere allowed him to connect with peers more easily.”

### <Small groups>

- “Working collaboratively with others in small groups reduced social anxiety. Forest School fosters a supportive environment where children feel less pressure to perform, enabling them to share ideas and work together effectively.”
- “Teachers learn to manage their discomfort with children taking safe risks in smaller groups. Forest School encourages educators to step back and allow exploration, fostering resilience and independence.”
- “The teacher-to-child ratio allows for more individualised attention. Smaller groups lead to greater student involvement in learning.”
- “When the group is small, you get to hear the different voices. You get to know their personality when they’re learning outdoors.”

### <Quiet children>

- “Another child, who is very quiet in class, began to open up in the classroom after gaining confidence from Forest School.”
- “A child who was typically quiet in the classroom became a leader in the forest.”

### <Long term>

- “Over the course of 8 or 9 sessions, quiet voices become more expressive, and children feel comfortable sharing with the group.”
- “With each week, they’re getting more confident and comfortable.”
- “Progression of activities threads the whole way through providing continuity. Planning week-by-week is really good. It differentiates each week.”

### <Ripple effects>

- “Forest School extends beyond regular hours. Children continue activities at home, sharing their experiences with parents and learning more, both at home and in the classroom.”
- “The ‘leave no trace’ aspect of Forest School encourages children to care for the planet and their surroundings.”



## FEEDBACK FROM PARENTS



The Forest School experience has been a journey for the parents as well. Once Forest School was introduced, some parents started to see changes in their children's attitudes toward learning, their view of the school, their relationship with nature, with their classmates and staff, and their independence and confidence. A few children showed significant changes, not only in the forest but in general, while other children exhibited happiness and contentment at having an opportunity to experience freedom in nature once a week.

Some children talked about what they did in the forest, and showed their favorite places and shared their knowledge with their family when they went on a family walk in Killiney Hill. The parents were also invited to the "parents session" at the end of the term, where they could share in their children's experience.

Some families already love the outdoors, and the children are naturally confident in nature having lots of knowledge already, while other families are not comfortable with their kids getting dirty or undergoing any risk of injury. Forest School sometimes changes the viewpoint of parents, and the parents realise, through their child's experience, the importance of connection with nature and free play.

As the meaning and the benefits of Forest School differ for each child, the experience of Forest School is different for each parent. We are trying to understand the impact of Forest School in each household.

### A LETTER FROM A PARENT

First of all, we would like to share a letter from a parent who also volunteered for one term of Forest School.

*"It has been such a privilege to attend Forest School with Jenny and the team these past few weeks. I previously attended in the past with my older son and was reminded again what an amazing experience it is for our kids. An experience, I believe, will stand to them for life. In a world of lockdown and restrictions, fear and uncertainty, teaching kids the skills of the outdoors and nature seems even more relevant and important than it did before.*

*I wanted to take the time to share what I observed in Forest School with our lovely kids in the wonderful setting of Killiney Hill.*

*Jenny and the team greet the children when they arrive with warmth, a sense of fun and potential adventure. The group arrives from school, and we hear the excitement before we see them.*

*Time to settle before moving into their pre-assigned groups, I suspect thoughtfully chosen, taking any anxiety or anticipation about who you are with, from the equation. My group then were given time to*

bury each other in leaves, with Jenny quietly navigating and developing group skills without anyone realising. The kids were encouraged to take calculated risks, with 'do no harm and everyone safe and happy' as the central principle, a theme that is repeated throughout the morning. They buried those that wanted to be buried, and roles all negotiated with ease, whilst developing these important skills.

We then moved to our base camp. The morning offers an opportunity to explore uninterrupted, but it is of course structured thoughtfully which adds to its ease. The routine is quickly appreciated, and the children move through it, exploring and developing, with safety and confidence.

There are so many advantages to Forest School but the one I observed the most, was the opportunity for each child to find something that suited their needs and disposition. Some did it in large groups, some in twos and some on their own. Group games are offered and taken, art and creativity using nature progressed, an invitation to contribute and speak in a group, with mindfulness and attention to self all part of the session. All offered with firm kindness, an invitation that is always taken but individual pace is accommodated. I was so impressed with the kid's ability to contribute to a speaking circle, respectful of each other, while building their own confidence and self-esteem. Extroverts and talkers listen, and quieter and more introspective personalities are given time and firm but gentle encouragement to engage. All did in their diverse ways, adding more experiential learning.

The children are also asked to problem-solve, to find solutions to their invited tasks. Some jump in immediately in groups and fly rapidly through their challenge. Others take their time, some a little worried and anxious. But I watched, as Jenny gently guides and encourages, and solutions are found, and confidence builds.

School can be hard for our children, and the classroom suits some more than others. The greatest advantage I observed in Forest School is that every child can shine, be their best selves while learning such important life skills. They get to choose and initiate their morning, within an invisible, thoughtful structure that facilitates their best selves. To be able to do this within the beauty of Killiney Hill is an added bonus.

Thanks to Jenny and the team and to DSP. Our children are so lucky to have this experience. I feel so lucky and privileged to have been part of it too. All of us leave with a greater appreciation of nature, more pertinent in the times that are in it."

(Denise Charlton, volunteer and parent, 2021)

## A LETTER FROM A PARENT

The following is another letter from a parent who shared her experiences of observing the life-changing impact of Forest School on her child.

"My child is a wonderful neurodiverse child with a huge capacity for learning. He is sociable, adept in many aspects of life and possesses a strong curiosity about the world around him.

Unfortunately, the transition from the pre-school to the primary school environment was very challenging for him. He struggled with the new sensory environment and the demands of the classroom. One of his responses was to go into his own world and zone out whilst in school. At home he felt frustrated and angry. Along with his fantastic teaching team at school, as parents we were doing our best to find ways to support and understand him.

His first Forest School sessions in Junior Infants were a huge breakthrough for him. All of a sudden, a happy, confident child emerged in this new learning environment. Freed from the sensory difficulties of the classroom, his true self started to emerge. The child we knew at home was now able to express himself in school! The ripple effect in the rest of his life was very clear, all of a sudden the other four days in school became achievable.

School resistance became more manageable. He looked forward to his Forest School sessions each week. The friendships and confidence he started to develop in the forest continued as he began to adjust to the classroom. It was a major breakthrough for him, finding his "thing" that he was good at and made him feel alive.

He has continued to learn and grow through Forest School. It is not always easy, some days are a "bad day" in the forest, but more often than not he returns energised and happy. I don't think it's an exaggeration to say that Forest School had a profound impact on him at a very pivotal time in his life.

(Sarah Sheeran, a parent, 2024)"

## PARENT QUESTIONNAIRE

We looked into more opinions on Forest Schools received from the parents in questionnaires which were used when Forest School was introduced in 2015, and 2016. Also, a questionnaire for the whole school was employed in 2024 as part of the 10 Years Celebration project.

Below are the results of the questionnaires. Some of the same questions were combined and shown in charts in order to understand and provide an overview of the opinions and thoughts captured.

### Q. DESCRIBE YOUR CHILD'S FOREST SCHOOL EXPERIENCE IN THREE WORDS

The parents answered describing their child's experience in three words. Figure 5.2 shows the words utilised by the parents. The bigger the text size the larger the number of answers while the colours of the text differentiates between categories. It shows that many parents felt that their children had positive experiences through Forest School.



Figure 5.2 Word Cloud of the answers by the parents - describing the child's forest experience in three words (Parent questionnaire, 2024).

### Q. WHAT DO YOU FEEL YOUR CHILD GAINED FROM FOREST SCHOOL?

This question was asked of the parents whose children were in Senior Infants or 4<sup>th</sup> class. It was an open-ended question, and their answers were categorised and shown in Figure 5.3.

Forest School supports building friendships and engaging in teamwork. For the 4<sup>th</sup> class children, it seemed to help them be independent and be more creative. For the Senior Infants Forest School gave them the chance to like school more.



Figure 5.3 Categorised answers to the question “What do you feel your child gained from Forest School?” (Parent questionnaire, 2016).

Here are some of the responses received:

#### <Joy of learning / Interests in nature / New skills >

- “Nature knowledge, more detailed observations of elements of nature. ”
- “How to play in nature. A chance to spend time with classmates he wouldn’t normally gravitate towards. A new way of looking at the world around him. It’s taught him to notice.”
- “I think the whole Forest School experience was wonderful. The children had the opportunity to explore and be creative in the outdoors and to see the wonders in everyday things in nature.”

#### <Confidence>

- “I believe that she gained a lot of experience in the context of her confidence and ability to mix and cooperate with others. Also understanding of the outdoors and many other personality traits that we are sure will develop over time.”
- “Confidence being in the outdoors. The shared experience in seeing her peers and teachers in a new way. Becoming more aware of texture and colours.”
- “He has a sense of exploration and discovery when out and about. He has gained some independence and confidence being on his own. Good opportunity to connect with friends and teachers outside the classroom.”

#### <Sense of freedom>

- “A sense of freedom that learning can be fun ... seeing the real actual world... that the weather shouldn’t hinder one’s activities.”
- “My child truly enjoyed it. He does not have good concentration in class and struggles to keep concentrated. I found Forest Schools was an approach which really suited him and it was a way to break the week up for him.”
- “My child gained knowledge and happiness. I think the sense of freedom made him happy.”



## Q. WHAT ASPECT OF FOREST SCHOOL ARE YOU ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT?

This is a similar question to the previous one, but is more focused on their own opinions. The answers of the parents from 4<sup>th</sup> class and senior infants class were combined. The words were extracted and are categorised in Figure 5.4.

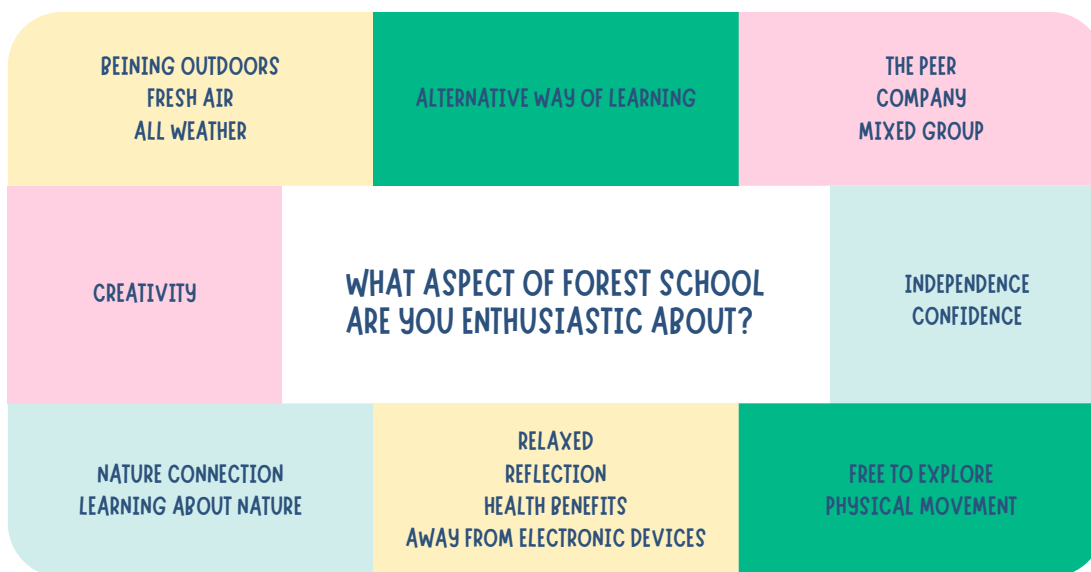


Figure 5.4 Categorised answers to the question “What aspect of Forest School are you enthusiastic about?” (Parent questionnaire, 2016).

Many parents were enthusiastic about the children being outdoors, and experiencing an alternative way of learning. A few parents focused on the way the children were away from electronic devices and using their senses.

Here are some individual answers to the question.

### <Alternative way of learning>

- “The chance to give the children to know that there is more to learn than from books. They don’t realise they’re learning, however they think it is just fun.”
- “A good idea to show kids that learning isn’t just about classrooms and books.”
- “It is different - that can be good.”
- “It was great for the children to spend time learning in an unconventional environment, where they were free to explore new things. They got a great appreciation for nature and the beauty in everything. The creative aspect, where they made the most beautiful things from what was around them, was particularly special.”
- “Opportunity to get back to basics and learn through traditional medium. No technology involved, and out of the classroom.”
- “I love that the children had the opportunity to learn outdoors. Wonderful experience. “Hands on” experience made him observe more information.”
- “Learning outside of the classroom, applying knowledge to action, every child gets to be a little bit more themselves. Being outdoors, no matter the weather.”

## Q. PLEASE SHARE ONE OR TWO STORIES THAT DEMONSTRATE THE BENEFITS OF FOREST SCHOOL TO YOUR CHILD.

For this question, we were looking at more specific stories to illustrate their children's experience.

Many parents shared stories of how their children shared the knowledge and experience they gained in Forest School. Some of the parents noticed significant changes in their children's behaviour - in particular, those children who had previously struggled to settle in the classroom. Forest School became something to look forward to making the whole school experience different.

Here are some extracts from the responses received.

### <Become interested in nature/ Connected with nature/ Knowledge>

- *"When we are out walking on different forest trails, the kids are more aware of their surroundings and are able to point out a lot of things and are very informative....I have learned so much from them as well!"*
- *"My child will regularly identify and chat about the birds that come into our garden and chat about the trees, leaves and tea he has tried when we go to Killiney Hill or local parks with family and friends. Friends have commented on his knowledge, enthusiasm and curiosity for nature."*
- *"We enjoyed the things she brought home and the stories of the woodland animals and grandmother tree. When we visited Killiney Hill, she would show her older brothers the space in a way that being the youngest, she would not normally get to do with them."*

### <Opening up personality/ changing school experience>

- *"My son really struggled with going to school. Going to Forest School was the only easy day of the week to get him out the door. He has not thrived in a classroom environment and has often found classroom learning a struggle. Forest School has shown him that he can learn and thrive in different ways and it gives him immeasurable confidence."*
- *"Hard to encapsulate here, but there is a noticeable and significant increase in her overall levels of happiness and wellbeing as a result of Forest School. It's eagerly awaited every week, and she is absolutely brimming with enthusiasm each week."*
- *"Forest School has let our son express himself better through movement as he thrives in the natural environment as opposed to spending most time in the classroom."*

### <Learning team building>

- *"One story that showcases the benefits of Forest School for my son involved the camp-building activity. He told us how he worked together with his classmates as a team to construct their campsite. They meticulously planned its layout, gathered materials like fallen branches, leaves, and stones from the forest floor. He beamed with pride as he described how they used their creativity and problem-solving skills to assemble the camp, using natural materials to build a sturdy shelter and seating area. It was clear to us how much he enjoyed exploring the forest, foraging for materials, and working alongside his buddies to bring their vision to life."*

### <Being a leader>

- *"Hearing about my 6<sup>th</sup> class son helping younger classes (rigging up ropes) and helping to jolly them along on the walk to Forest School - really helped with empathy and kind leadership. My daughter trying lots of types of tea and (despite not liking many of them), trying the one next week - demonstrating curiosity and maybe a little resilience!"*

### <Freedom, Sit spot>

- *"My daughter loves to take risks and climb trees and enjoys the freedom to explore and learn her limits. She also sometimes struggles to sit still, but enjoys 'sit spot' where she sits quietly observing nature - a big step forward! Her younger sister is just starting on her Forest School journey but enjoys exploring the forest and being creative with clay."*

### <Confidence>

- *“In winter, my son declared that the 3 of us in his immediate family were going on a night walk up Killiney Hill. He told us exactly what we needed to wear (walking boots, hat, scarf, gloves, coat) and that we each needed a torch, plus a thermos of hot chocolate and 4 cups. He was as organised about it as if he was organising a trek up Everest! And for all of us, it was as exciting and memorable as if we had scaled that Nepalese peak! He was king of Killiney Hill that night. Thoughtful and proud to show us his kingdom. It’s now become one of our family winter traditions. Thank you Forest School!”*

## PARENT WORKSHOP

The parent workshop was held in February 2024 to celebrate ten years of Forest School. Parents shared their experiences and discussed the benefits in person. In the workshop we found out that some parents specifically chose the school for its Forest School program, recognising the importance of Nature Based Learning for their child’s development. There was also a desire expressed by some parents for more frequent Forest School sessions, with suggestions of weekly sessions throughout the year.



## FEEDBACK FROM CHILDREN

To this point, we have reviewed the feedback received from adults, but here we introduce the voices of the children. We would like to share a letter from a past DSP student, the result of the questionnaire conducted with 6<sup>th</sup> class children, a record of an interview with 4<sup>th</sup> class children, and art works done by the Infant classes.

### A LETTER FROM A PAST STUDENT

This letter was written by Laila Mackey. She graduated from DSP in 2020. She had Forest School throughout her primary school years.

*During my 8 years at DSP I had countless wonderful experiences. But none were as impactful as my time spent in Forest School. Friday mornings were undoubtedly a highlight of the week, when the class would gather up in Killiney Hill in the morning, filled with anticipation for what new opportunities were waiting for us that week. One of the most notable things about the whole experience of Forest School was how one Friday was never the same as the last. The leaders and assistants always had new games and activities up their sleeves, making each week unique and exciting for us all.*

*It's hard to pick only a few aspects of Forest School that were my favourite but one thing that instantly stands out when I reflect upon it is the time we spent creating a make-believe world in our base den. Specifically in 4<sup>th</sup> class, I remember turning the whole base area into a 'town'. We had a 'hotel' which consisted of a large gap between two rocks, covered in leaves and branches, a 'spa' made up of a fallen tree trunk and many other 'cafes' and 'businesses'. To any passerby it would look like nothing, it would appear as any other part of the forest, but to us, the possibilities were endless. Forest School allowed us to harness our creativity and imagination in a way you couldn't fully do when confined to a classroom. Even now, 6 years later, when I walk past that area in the forest, I still see it for what we imagined it was. Forest School changed my perceptions of nature and my surroundings and that is one of its benefits I am most grateful for.*

*To this day, I still benefit from my experiences in Forest School. I created closer bonds with my class mates, learned loads about nature and how to do well in it, from making nettle tea to tying different knots, there really was a bit of everything.*

*Forest School was one of the highlights of my time in DSP and I'm so grateful that I was lucky enough to experience it.*

*(Laila Mackey, graduated 2020, written February 2024)*

## FEEDBACK FROM 6<sup>TH</sup> CLASS CHILDREN

Below are the responses of the 6<sup>th</sup> class children to the questionnaires in 2022 and 2024. They were capable of expressing their thoughts and memories, and we tried to capture the children’s perspectives on Forest School.

### Q. WHAT ARE YOUR MEMORIES OF FOREST SCHOOL FROM OTHER YEARS?

This question was asked in order to understand what they remember from past Forest School when they were younger. Many of them answered “nature games”. They liked free play, making base, making tea and helping out the younger classes. The answers were categorised as displayed in Figure 5.5.

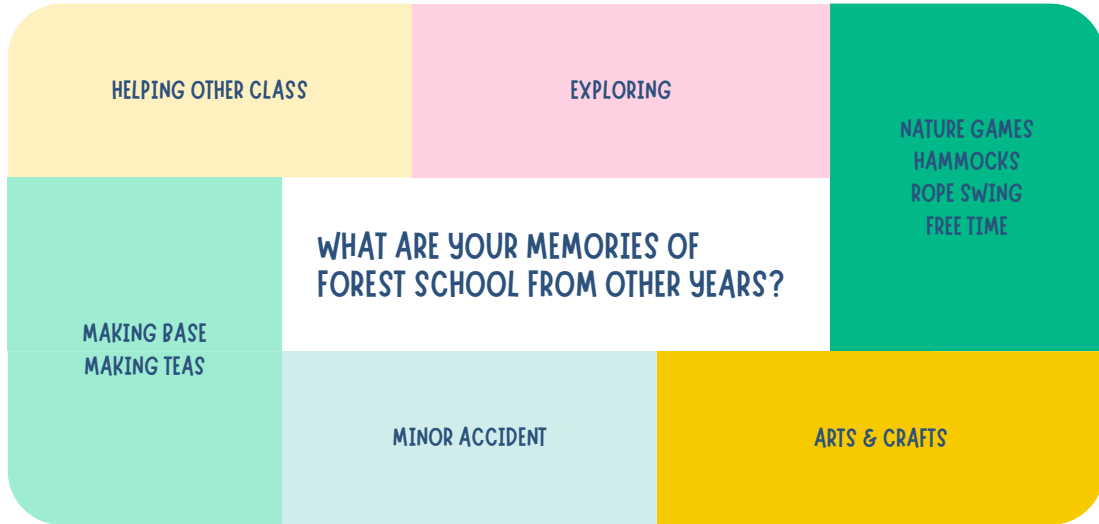


Figure 5.5 Categorised answers to the question “What are your memories of Forest School from other years?” (6<sup>th</sup> class questionnaire, 2024).

Following are some individual answers:

- “My favorite memory of Forest School was in junior and seniors because I had the best group and I made my own little house that was in the tree. My favorite part of Forest School was this year when I was helping out the junior infants.”
- “I remember in fourth we found the best place to build a base and then over the few weeks we built the best base. My favorite memory is when you get to go free (free play) because you get to explore the base camp.”
- “I remember a dog ate my sandwich and we held a funeral for it.”
- “My memories are when we put the tea in and Liz taught us about leaves. And my favorite part of the session was helping the (younger) kids because it was fun.”
- “My memories are mainly of playing games. My favorite part is free time and the reason why it’s because we can do whatever we feel like.”

### Q. DESCRIBE YOUR FAVORITE LOCATION IN BASECAMP AND WHY YOU LIKE IT.

From the answers of this question, we can see how the children made a special attachment and made a connection to the place.

### <Den>

- *"In my den. Because it feels like home."*
- *"I like the base with the den tree and the fallen trees. Open sunlight can enter, there are fun trees to climb and a great view of Killiney and Bray and the sea."*
- *"In the 5<sup>th</sup> class, we made a cool den and it was really fun and I learned loads."*



### <Tree>

- *"I like the triangle of trees because I can lie in it and when I look up I see a bird nest. It's so peaceful. I love it."*
- *"I liked a tree that was overgrown and had fungi on it. I liked finding out what else was on it."*
- *"The top of a tree overlooking the entire base camp. It is relaxing up there and beautiful. I enjoyed climbing up and sitting up there. I made sure to be safe and careful as well."*



<Log>

- “I love the log in my base camp. It is an amazing spot to relax and do art.”

<Rocks>

- “I liked to sit on rocks and talk with my friends.”
- “My favourite location in Forest camp was when the forest base camps had rocks or a lot of exploring space.”



<Other places they named>

- “I liked the ‘penthouse’ because there are holes and bumps like chairs and there is a big tree to climb and it’s sheltered.”
- “I liked going to the ‘apartments’. It was a base camp with loads of little bases camps in it. I liked it because I felt free.”
- “The ‘apartment suites’. My friend and I found a really big awesome secret base.”
- “I liked the little hill. I don’t really know why.”

Q. WHAT DID YOU LIKE DOING ON YOUR OWN IN NATURE? HOW DID IT FEEL?

The answers to this question shows how Forest School fosters every child’s interests and curiosity. Some children liked physical activities such as climbing trees, making dens or exploring, and some other children loved spending time listening to bird songs and making nature tea. Figure 5.6 shows activities they did on their own in nature and how they felt about these activities.



Figure 5.6 6<sup>th</sup> class children’ answers to “What did you like doing on your own in nature? How did it feel?”

Here are some answers:

- *"I like climbing trees, getting into a comfortable spot and sitting down listening to nature. Seeing birds really calms me down and takes my mind off things that might be worrying me or stressing me at that time."*
- *"I like exploring and climbing in silence so I can be with my thoughts. It's relaxing and very enjoyable."*
- *"I liked climbing trees because I felt more connected with nature."*
- *"I like to sit down and drink tea and relax. It helps me to focus and think. It is a great practice and I like it because we always have the option to do it."*



**Q. WHAT DO YOU LIKE DOING WITH THE CHILDREN IN YOUR GROUP? HOW DID IT FEEL?**

For this question, many children answered that they enjoyed playing nature games with their classmates. The Forest School gives the opportunity to mix with different children and make new friendships. Figure 5.7 shows the activities they did with other children and how they felt about these activities.



Figure 5.7 6<sup>th</sup> class childrens' answers to "What do you like doing with the children in your group? How did it feel?".



Here are some answers:

- *"I liked to draw with my friends even if we weren't talking, it's nice to have the company."*
- *"I really enjoyed making new friends and playing games and having fun."*
- *"I like talking about the forest with others. Playing Eagle eye - it's great for a big group and I like exploring nature because studying the world around me can feel GREAT."*



### Q. HAVE YOU SHARED WHAT YOU LEARNED OR DID IN FOREST SCHOOL WITH YOUR FAMILY OR FRIENDS OUTSIDE OF YOUR GROUP? WHAT AND HOW DID YOU SHARE IT?

Most of the children seemed to share their experience with their family. They brought home what they made in the forest, talked about what they enjoyed, showed their family their base camp or the place they liked, and shared the knowledge they gained such as edible plants and how to make tea with them.

Here are some answers for the question:

- *"I shared what I learned by telling a fun story and not realising how much I'm learning."*
- *"I shared almost everything with my family describing it from start to finish."*
- *"I have shared Forest School with my family. I showed them my base camp and did activities with them. They enjoyed it and so did I. We all had fun and were happy so I think that all families should try it."*
- *"Yes. All my art and what I learned. (What I can eat and names of plants and more)"*
- *"Yes. My tree that I put clay on and stick that I put clay on and sticks to decorate it."*
- *"I have shared it with my parents. What I did and how I did it and if it was something you brought home I showed them as well."*
- *"Yes. I told them what I really enjoyed."*
- *"Yes. I taught different people the things I learnt and what I thought about it."*
- *"Yes I have [shared] with my family and I have brought them to one of my base camp and shared them around."*
- *"Yes, I have, where I was in second class. I was on a walk with my mom and I showed her my base camp."*

## FEEDBACK FROM 6<sup>TH</sup> CLASS CHILDREN ON BEING FOREST SCHOOL ASSISTANT LEADERS FOR THE YOUNGER CLASSES



Since 2023, the 6<sup>th</sup> class children have taken on the role of Forest School assistant leaders for the younger classes such as Junior Infants, Senior Infants or First Class. It has been beneficial for both younger children and the 6<sup>th</sup> class children. In particular, it was a great experience for the 6<sup>th</sup> class children to take on the responsibility to look after the younger children. They learn how to help keep the younger children safe, and provide an environment where they can learn as well as having a fun time.

The 6<sup>th</sup> class had their own block of Forest School sessions in the Winter/Spring time, and the staff taught them about the Forest School principles and how to facilitate the younger children. The 6<sup>th</sup> class children were given support to practise things they have learned from previous years: nature games, nature crafts, how to put up hammocks, etc. They also acquired ways to assist younger children's learning experiences. For example, if the younger children asked questions, instead of answering, they learned to help them to observe and come up with ideas themselves.

Below is some of the feedback from the 6<sup>th</sup> class children.

### Q. IN WHAT PRACTICAL WAYS DID YOU ASSIST THE FOREST SCHOOL LEADER?

The approach each 6<sup>th</sup> class child took was different – as some of them were adept at playing with the younger children, or talking to them. Others seemed more comfortable doing practical tasks or giving orders. In any case, they liked having responsibilities and important roles and spending more time in the forest. Figure 5.8 shows a variety of roles 6<sup>th</sup> class students played as assistant leaders.



Figure 5.8 6<sup>th</sup> class childrens' answers to "In what practical ways did you assist the Forest School leader?".

Here are some answers to the question "In what practical ways did you assist the Forest School leader?"

- 'I talked to them [children] a lot and if they pointed something out, I would ask what does that remind you of?'
- "I helped carry bags, hand out supplies, wash hands and entertain the kids"
- "I kept the children entertained, hand washing, read stories, sorted out problems with the children"
- "Helping them set up stuff and getting the kids under control"
- "Helped all the kids enjoy their time in the forest"

### Q. HOW DID BEING AN ASSISTANT LEADER BENEFIT YOU?

The responses to this question demonstrated that many felt having responsibility made them grow and feel more mature. As they see the differences between them and the younger children, they notice their own capability, being able to look after them and act as a role model or a leader. Forest School gives an opportunity for the 6<sup>th</sup> class children to share what they have learnt and absorbed throughout their school years with the younger children. This shows the Forest School provides another layer of growth for children of all ages. Figure 5.9 shows the benefits the 6<sup>th</sup> class children felt that they had obtained by experiencing being an assistant leader.



Figure 5.9 Answers to the question "How did being an assistant leader benefit you?".

- *“I think being an assistant up at the forest benefited me because I am definitely more confident looking after or playing with the kids. I’ve also become more mature. I feel more fit after walking up then running around after them.”*
- *“It helped me be a better person by being able to find comfort in nature.”*
- *“It helped me feel important and feel like an adult.”*
- *“It made me more mature.”*
- *“It benefited me by teaching me about how younger kids learn.”*

## FEEDBACK FROM 4<sup>TH</sup> CLASS CHILDREN

Here is a record of a short conversation between a Forest School leader (Liz) and the 4<sup>th</sup> class children. The question “What did you notice during your sit spot?” is the question always asked during the closing circle, following a few moments of being quiet in nature. The children are used to this activity as they have been doing it since they were in the infant classes. Their observation skills, and how they express their observations are wonderful.



### Liz - “What did you notice during sit spot?”

- *“I was kind of absorbed in the wilderness because there was loads of grass and those circle plants and a fern. When I listened I could hear the sound moving across the trees. Then the sound was in front of me and it blew a lot and then dissolved – like when a wave breaks, it kind of dissolves in the sand and makes the sound like the sound of the trees. I really like doing Forest School because it was my first time.”*
- *“I notice that I’m going to miss Forest School.”*
- *“When I was in my sit spot this bird kept chirping and chirruping. It was like he was having a conversation with something. He was number 1 of the 5 voices of birds – the happy one.”*
- *“I noticed how the wind can get so rough and the leaves just fall off the trees.”*
- *“I really heard the wind crashing against the trees really hard and you could see all the trees moving together.”*

- *"I noticed how every week I feel like underneath me, under my sit spot got larger and larger and it made me notice more every week and I'm grateful for getting to do this and not having to go to school because learning is boring."*

### Liz – "Are you learning here?"

- *"I'm learning new things here which are more exciting."*

### Liz – "What did you learn here?"

- *"How to make arrows, tying knots, fire jumping and it's amazing that you can build random stuff with bits from the forest."*
- *"We learnt how to make wild teas."*
- *"I think it's more fun than learning at school because you do more and you have a choice what to make and you use a lot of all the subjects when you are doing stuff and it's really fun."*

### Liz – "What subjects did you learn here?"


- *"We learnt about nature, art, and science, because throwing the arrows, getting the feathers and holding the rope thing when you let go is science."*
- *"Measuring – that's maths!"*
- *"It is like a giant project because a few weeks in we were making games and you had to use your mind for that."*
- *"I think I learnt geography because I saw most things in a new perspective in the forest. By looking at the forest now I can see how you could build something out of something like a bush or a rock."*

## FEEDBACK FROM YOUNGER CHILDREN

It is more challenging to capture feedback from younger children in written form. A class teacher asked Senior Infants to draw and/or write the experience they had for each activity. 2<sup>nd</sup> class children wrote their memories and an adult scribed a response from other Senior Infant children. As can be seen below, they love sharing their experiences through drawing and writing, and the direct experience of Forest School enhances their desire to express themselves.

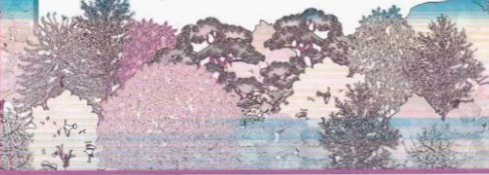


### Sit Spot Janie E




During my sit spot I

my sit spot was fun  
it was exciting  
I like the birds  
I like the noise




### Tasting wild teas




My favourite tea was


I like stickybark tea  
it was good I love  
Forest School I love  
my base camp it is big  
elderflower, sticky barks, pine needle, elderflower, bramble leaf




### Aradh Climbing trees




I clim lots and lots of  
trees.

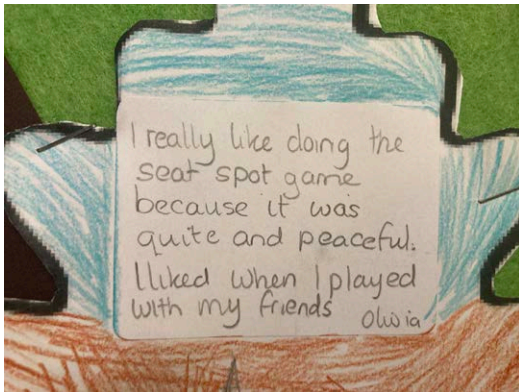


### Aradh Making bug hotels

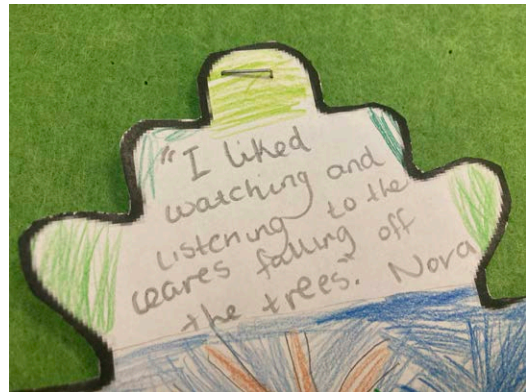


Fal appl  
Plastic cup  
Mud  
plants  
leaves  
sticks

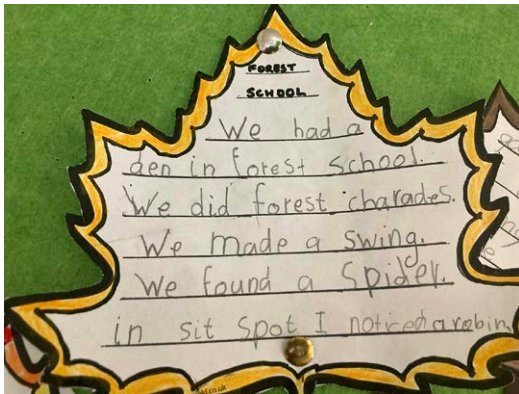




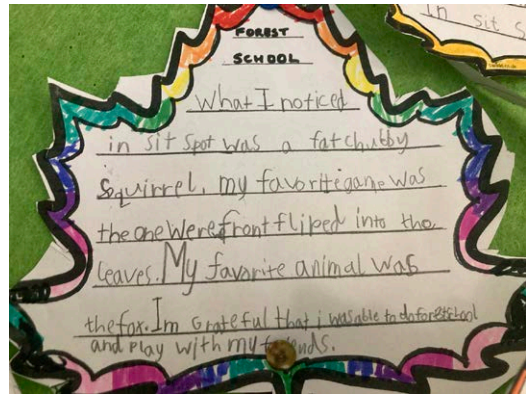
I really like doing the sit spot game because it was quiet and peaceful. I liked when I played with my friends. (Senior Infants)



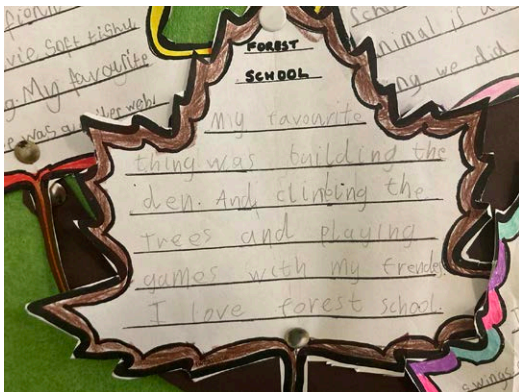
I like watching and listening to the leaves falling off the trees. (Senior Infants)



We had a den in Forest School. We did forest charades. We made a swing. We found a spider. In sit spot I noticed a robin. (2<sup>nd</sup> class)



What I noticed in sit spot was a fat, chubby squirrel. My favourite game was the one where I front flipped into the leaves. My favourite animal was the fox. I'm grateful that I was able to do Forest School and play with my friends. (2<sup>nd</sup> class)



My favourite thing was building the den. And climbing trees and playing games with my friends. I love Forest School. (2<sup>nd</sup> class)



2<sup>nd</sup> class memories celebrating 10 years of Forest School



## 6. THE BENEFITS OF FOREST SCHOOL IN PRIMARY EDUCATION



## CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

Based on 10 years of experience, observation, and feedback from staff, parents and the children, in this chapter we discuss the benefits of having Forest School in primary schools.

1. Nature connection for every child
2. Experiencing different ways of learning
3. Increasing wellbeing
4. Fostering holistic growth
5. Ripple effects in the community

### 1. NATURE CONNECTION FOR EVERY CHILD

One of the most important benefits of having Forest School in the school curriculum is that every child gets the opportunity to be exposed to nature regularly. One teacher noted that Forest School was particularly valuable for children who didn't often spend time outdoors in their normal life.

As Richard Louv warned in his book "*Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children From Nature-Deficit Disorder*"<sup>11</sup>, fewer and fewer children have the experience of playing in nature in their childhood, and the school could provide the opportunity to connect with nature for every child.

The children developed respect and awe for the living things surrounding them, by hearing stories, through their own imaginary play, or by discovering the beauty of them. Small children loved the letters exchanged with a grandmother tree, and they remembered what the grandmother tree told them, such as how little robins make nests or what a wood mouse eats at night. Through these experiences, the children feel close to other living creatures.

Throughout the regular sessions, the children also developed an attachment and connection with a particular place or natural objects and kept coming back to the places even when they got older. They remember the feeling of excitement hiding in the den they created, the smell of fresh leaves, the feel of bark, the blue sky through the branches, the warmth and the taste of nature teas they made, the sounds of birds or leaves rustling in the wind. These memories of surrounding nature attached to their senses are so important if we want them to look after our planet earth and to be willing to act to remedy the many environmental problems we are facing.

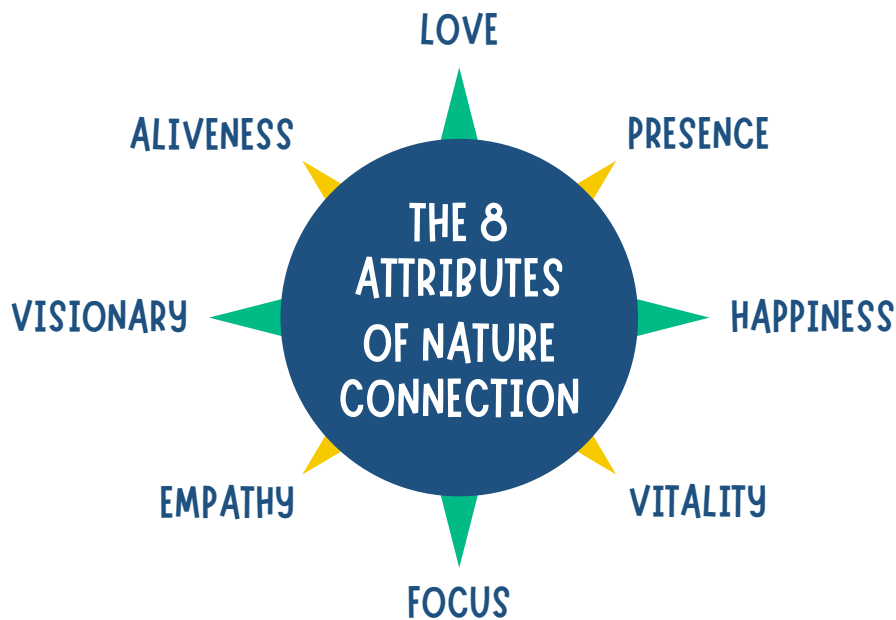
As Sobel (1996)<sup>12</sup> states, "If we want children to flourish, to be truly empowered, we must first allow them to love the earth before we ask them to save it". We believe that Forest School in primary schools can give all the children the experience of nature connection in that very important stage of their lives.

11 Louv, R. (2010) *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*, Atlantic Books, London.

12 Sobel, D. (1996). *Beyond ecophobia*, Great Barrington: The Orion Society.

According to Young et al. (2008)<sup>13</sup>, attributes exhibited by people who have experienced the benefits of nature connection are:

6. **Happiness:** childlike wonder, curiosity and innocent joy,
7. **Vitality:** a feeling of an abundance of energy in the body,
8. **Focus:** Capacity to listen to others unconditionally and mentoring,
9. **Empathy:** for people and other living beings,
10. **Visionary:** A deep ethic born of conscious awareness of our interdependence with all others resulting in a commitment to service to others, the future generations, conservation, sustainability and regenerative living principles,
11. **Aliveness:** Increased sense of gratitude and appreciation for life itself,
12. **Love:** Greater capacity for understanding, compassion and forgiveness, and
13. **Presence:** Access to greater creativity and a quiet mind.



<sup>13</sup> Young, J., McGown E. and Haas, E. (2008) *Coyote's Guide to Connecting with Nature*. Shelton, WA: OwlLink Media.

## 2. EXPERIENCING DIFFERENT WAYS OF LEARNING

In the new *Irish Primary Curriculum Framework*, outdoor learning is recognised as an essential component of holistic education. It aligns with the key goals of the curriculum, such as fostering experiential learning, connecting children with their environment, and supporting wellbeing and physical development.

We observed that some elements of Forest School have positive effects on the children's learning attitudes. Many parents were surprised by how much knowledge their children attained through Forest School. The children were proud of knowing which plants were edible, which plants were poisonous, which creatures might live in particular habitats, or when these creatures might come out of the ground. They learn about plants through their senses - taste, touch, smell, or the shape or colour of them - and these experiences enrich their knowledge, attaching to them their own memories and stories.

Children never cease to be fascinated by the mystery in nature when they are allowed to spend enough time there. We observed that the children in infant classes spent long periods digging holes in the ground or cracking chestnuts, wanting to know what would come out. Forest School gave the children freedom to follow their own curiosity without any judgement as long as they kept themselves and the surrounding nature safe and happy. They are encouraged to experiment and observe. In this environment, children learn so much without noticing they are learning.

Many activities in Forest School can be related to school subjects. They learn directions by the movement of the sun throughout the day. Counting acorns, or problem-solving while building dens can be related to mathematics, making ink from oak galls or curly dandelion stems when soaking them in water involve learning elements of chemistry and biology. Learning plant names or songs in Irish links with Gaeilge. Stories and place names help us connect to our Irish heritage and history. One of the teachers noted that "*Forest School provided opportunities for reading and writing, which they weren't interested in before.*" Some other teachers were surprised by the amount of vocabulary and the rich expressions that the children used following Forest School sessions.

Forest School also allows the children to learn by moving their bodies. Some children learn better through movement or open spaces rather than sitting on chairs and reading from books. Teachers are able to recognise these children and see how well they respond to sensory-based learning, meaning they can then better support them in the classroom.

Forest School in primary schools can demonstrate to children different ways of learning, and in our experience, has changed their attitude to learning for those who never thought "learning is fun".

## 3. INCREASING WELLBEING AT SCHOOL AND AT HOME

Many studies show that Forest School has a positive effect on the wellbeing of children, as they get fresh air, lots of physical movement and free time, no pressure from being judged and they have a choice in what they want to do.<sup>14</sup> As can be seen in the feedback, many children felt happy and content in Forest School. They also learnt how to make themselves calm through "Sit Spot" - being quiet and looking at the leaves swaying gently in the breeze or listening to bird songs. As they have learnt to share what they noticed during the "Sit Spot" every session in the closing circle, they seem to be able to better internalise how they felt, and their bodies know nature has a healing effect. As one of the teachers mentioned, this technique can be introduced in the classroom, as well as in movement breaks between classes.

14 E.g. Tiplady, LSE & Menter H. (2021) *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 21- 2, Taylor & Francis.

Having a place where the children feel free to be themselves with classmates and teachers can help the children develop confidence and gain self-esteem in the classroom. As one of the teachers mentioned, “aspects of personality that may not be evident in the classroom emerge during Forest School sessions (A teacher, 2024). We hear stories about children who were quiet or were struggling in the classroom, coming out of their shells when they started Forest School. It provides opportunities for the children, who struggle to show leadership in the context of the classroom, to develop these skills in an environment that feels natural to them.

Some teachers and parents also mentioned that the small groups allow the children to mix with children who they don't normally mix with, and to speak out in the group without feeling anxiety. Many parents stated that the children look forward to Fridays, and that helps them to get through the week.

## 4. FOSTERING HOLISTIC GROWTH FOR EVERY CHILD

Research has identified that Forest School gives children the opportunity for holistic growth (physical, emotional, intellectual, social, cultural and spiritual), the development of their emotional intelligence, risk management skills, and mental resilience.<sup>15</sup>

Because there is such a wide range of activities in Forest School, there is the opportunity for growth for each child. As one of the teachers expressed, “Forest School allows children to thrive in different ways: even high-performing children experience setbacks, fostering resilience. Struggling students find opportunities for success.”

For example, children can encounter different levels of physical challenge in the woods. In one of the sessions, a group of children played by jumping off a bank into a leaf pit, each child chose the height from which they jumped according to their confidence. When confident children helped the others, we observed the possibility for growth for both children. Children are always able to choose the level of challenges they take on - when they are walking or running on uneven ground, climbing up trees, climbing hills, trying to catch leaves or climbing across rope bridges.

Nature arts and crafts in Forest School don't have 'right' answers in either process or outcome. Children who love making crafts can spend as much time as they want to make a lovely piece of art using clay and limitless natural objects on the ground. Those who are not confident at using their imagination have the opportunity to try being creative without feeling pressure. For some children, an activity of making a creature out of clay provides the potential to improve fine motor skills, while for other children, the meaning of this activity can be in discovering natural materials to use and noticing the different colours of leaves.

6<sup>th</sup> class children learnt how to look after smaller children, and how to be a leader. Some children are naturally good at caring for younger children, but others learnt to prioritise younger children's needs over their own through their experience.

During Forest School, we observed many interesting interactions between the children. When a couple of children were building a den, or a “cafe”, or “apartment”, they needed to set their own rules or goals, try to solve problems and negotiate with or help each other to make it work. Even when they were choosing which nature game to play, they talked, listened to other children's opinions, and decided amongst themselves. They also listened to other children's feelings in the closing circle at the end of every session, and had the opportunity to imagine and observe other creatures' lives. Sometimes they encounter death or sickness in nature too, and share their feelings about this with their classmates. Through these processes, the children gain social skills and develop emotional intelligence.

<sup>15</sup> E.g. O'Brien, L. (2009) Learning outdoors: the Forest School approach, *International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education*, Volume 37, 45-60.

## 5. RIPPLE EFFECTS OF FOREST SCHOOL IN THE WHOLE COMMUNITY

When the children are excited about things, they want to share their experience with their family. The children spread the awe, knowledge, skills and love of nature to their surroundings - we call this the ripple effect of Forest School.

For some families, Forest School changed their weekend walk on Killiney Hill or in other places. The children demonstrated to their family a deeper knowledge of nature and how enjoyable just spending time there can be.

*“When we were out in nature as a family, he began to really notice nature in a new way, pointing out an interesting spider or moon on family walks, making crafts out of reeds, and wanting to explore and seek out adventure more than before. The change was very striking, the forest really had become his happy place and he wanted to share this with others (Parent, 2024)”*

*“Every time we go to Killiney Hill, our children pass on information about something they have learned there. They will bring us to the areas where their base camp is. Even outside of Killiney Hill, they have gained an understanding that we are just the visitors to the area - nature doesn’t belong to us and we have to protect it. It has made them protective and respectful of nature. They will only pick up sticks already on the ground - no leaves to be pulled from trees (Parent, 2024).”*

In this way, the introduction of Forest School in primary schools has the potential to change the relationship between nature and people in the whole community.

## OUR HOPE

Our hope is for all children in Ireland and overseas to have the opportunity to lead their play and learning in nature as an integral part of their education and healthy development. Why is this so important? Cree and Robb (2021)<sup>15</sup> use the phrase “a natural blueprint” to explain it. If we wish our children to look after our planet, it is fundamental that they have experience of just being in nature and enjoying it when they are young. As they get older, they start to develop their understanding of nature and learn how they can affect positive change. From this base of deep care for the world, they are more likely to act in ways that benefit the earth and influence society - shaping a future where both people and the planet thrive in harmony with nature.



“The natural blueprint regarding human interaction with nature at stage of development” (Cree and Robb, 2021, pp.271)

16 Cree, J. and Robb, M. (2021). *The Essential Guide to Forest School and Nature Pedagogy*. Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon.

## POSTSCRIPT – YUUKI BLAKENEY

The first time I encountered DSP Forest School was in Autumn 2015, when I was walking on Killiney Hill. I heard the sound of children’s voices during school hours, and wondered why that would be. I looked in the woodland, and saw children running around, climbing trees, making dens, and being busy looking for things. One of the children found something very exciting, ran up to a teacher, and said “Look what I found!” and the teacher, as excited as he was, said “Oh really, what did you find? Tell me what you found!!”

That moment, I knew that was exactly what I dreamed of doing. I went up to the teacher and asked “What are you doing?” and she said “Forest School!” She told me that they were children from Dalkey School Project and if I was interested, there was a Forest School training course starting the following week. I signed up straight away, and my forest school journey began.

Six years later, I was lucky enough to get a place in DSP for my own child. I then started to get involved in Forest School every Friday as a parent volunteer, and worked closely with the teacher, Jenny, who had first introduced Forest School to me.

As can be seen in my observation in chapter 4, the Forest School with the Senior Infants was like magic. Jenny, Liz and all the DSP staff created an atmosphere in the woods that made it safe and comfortable for the children to be themselves. There was so much learning happening every moment, and when you saw the children’s shining eyes, the importance of this activity could not be denied.

As human beings - as a species evolved on this planet earth, we need to be exposed to nature as we grow up. Children are born with the instinct to be fascinated by the beauty of nature, to have a fear of the unknown, and to have curiosity to find out what is around them, and also with a desire to try new things with their hands and body and the ability to learn from their experiences of that.

Children of this generation are more exposed to digital devices or are busy attending structured classes even after school hours. Forest School provides the opportunity for children to do what they need to do in their childhood - being free, connected to their senses and immersed in nature and to feel through their skin that we are part of it. If we want to enhance our children’s ability to understand themselves and the world, why not bring them to nature more often?

I can’t say how grateful I am that we had leaders like Jenny and Liz with the passion to bring Forest School to our school, and to the staff and volunteers in DSP who have made it possible to run these activities throughout the years. Starting something new can be challenging, but continuing it can be even harder. I feel so privileged to be part of the 10 Years celebration. The time feels right to share some of this rich experience with those outside our school - and to encourage the inclusion of more Forest School in the Primary curriculum in Ireland and overseas!

### **Yuuki Blakeney**

A parent in DSP, Ecologist, A founder of Sense of Wonder Forest School



# GRATITUDE

Gratitude is a core practice in Forest School and we really want to thank so many people.

Thank you, Miriam Hurley, for your support throughout, for being willing to look for solutions rather than focus on the problem. Thank you for your style of collaborative leadership that allowed something like Forest School to evolve and thrive. Thank you for editing both the small details and helping restructure things to make more sense in the big picture.

Thank you, Liz McMahon, for your practicality, creativity, love of nature, and your amazing ability to share that with children. Thank you for writing your blog for ten years which we have drawn on a lot in writing this book.

Thank you, Sarah Sheeran, for thinking big, and your myriad skills of design and communication, bringing people together to make this book and the Scaip project into what it is becoming.

Thank you, Jordana Gomez, for making this into a beautiful book. It's such a gift to be able to create something beautiful from such raw ingredients.

Thank you to the staff of DSP. Thank you for giving this a go, for pushing through on the colder days, for playing games, working together and continuing to support Forest School for the children. You are an amazing, creative and collaborative community.

Thank you to every volunteer we've had. This would not have been possible without you. We appreciate the time you took from your day and how you supported the children in their learning and play.

Thank you to the parents of DSP. Without you, the pilot project might not have developed into a school wide program. Without you organising lifts, turning up for parent sessions, getting your children the right gear and being enthusiastic, we wouldn't have been able to continue this program for ten years.

Thank you to John Blakeney, Avril Wilson-Rankin, Fiona Craven, Rachel Carson, Siobhán Sleeman, Aedamair Grace, Amber Godwin and Francis Sheeran for your comments on initial drafts. We are very grateful to you for giving your time to this project.

Thank you to DLRCoCo and the Killiney Hill Park team who care for the beautiful place where we get to be and learn with nature.

Thank you to all the children who have joined us in the forest. You have taught us every session through your observation, curiosity, awe, wonder, and playfulness.

Finally, we are grateful for the natural world we are part of. Thank you for being here and helping us feel good and learn joyfully, for giving us questions and resources to create with, and for places to play and wonder and awe.

Yuuki Blakeney & Jenny Dungan



## THE SCAIP PROJECT

This book is part of the Scaip Project. The project was started by a group of staff, parents and Forest School Leaders from within the Dalkey School Project N.S. community in 2024. DSP was celebrating 10 years of providing Forest School to its students and the group wanted to create a space where this learning could be shared with other schools across Ireland and the world. “Scaip” is the Gaelic word for scatter, and the project aims to scatter the “Forest School seed” grown in DSP far and wide.

The goal of the Scaip Project is for all children in Ireland to have the opportunity to lead their play and learning in nature as an integral part of their education and healthy development.

The project team includes Jennifer Dungan, Yuuki Blakeney, Sarah Sheeran and Liz Mc Mahon.

Accompanying this book is a website featuring a video documentary about DSP Forest School, teacher resources and up-to-date information about further training opportunities for those interested in Nature Based Learning and Forest School.

For more information see [www.naturebasedlearning.ie](http://www.naturebasedlearning.ie)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

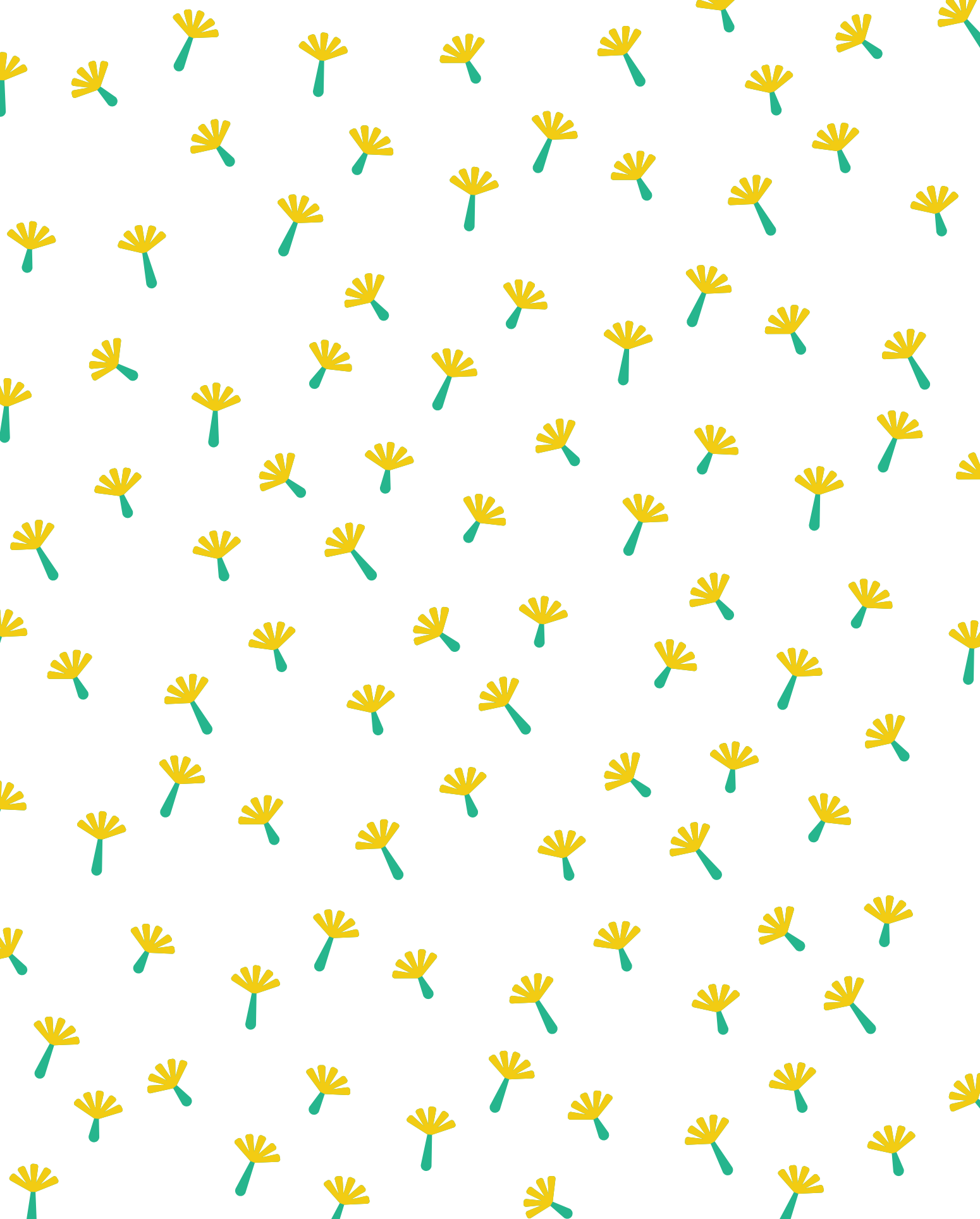
### YUUKI BLAKENEY (IWATA)

Yuuki previously worked as an environmental consultant in Tokyo, worked as a researcher, and published papers on the ecological and cultural value of the natural environment. In 2015 she qualified as a Level 3 Forest School leader and founded Sense of Wonder Forest School. She has also served as Chairperson of DSP Parent Teacher Association. She currently works with a number of school and community groups to deliver Forest School programmes in Dublin and teaches in the Dublin School for Japanese children.

### JENNIFER DUNGAN

A primary teacher for over 20 years, Jenny introduced Forest School to DSP in 2015 and has been collaboratively developing it ever since. She has become a leading facilitator in Nature Based Learning in Ireland and delivers training for new Forest School leaders through the QQI Level 6 Forest School Leadership course with Environmental Education Centre, Brigit’s Garden. She also works with teachers to develop confidence and competence in Nature Based Learning. Her background includes community facilitation, gardening, foraging and using creativity to learn about our interconnected world and how to make it a better place for all. She is a founding member of the Irish Forest School Association.










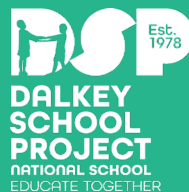
# Forest Fridays

## HOW ONE PRIMARY SCHOOL MADE FOREST SCHOOL HAPPEN

Forest Fridays shares the story of how, over the past ten years, Forest School has become a part of life in one Dublin school - Dalkey School Project. Teacher Jennifer Dungan shares a wealth of knowledge and experience in bringing the Forest School approach to the Irish Primary Curriculum. Forest School Leader Yuuki Blakeney has transformed hours of observations and interviews into a compelling and inspiring story.

This book is a must-read for any principal, teacher, Forest School Leader or parent who wants to learn first-hand how incredible the Forest School approach can be. It includes:

-  How Forest School fits within the Irish primary curriculum and supports cross-curricular learning
-  How sessions are planned using a nature-centric model
-  What Forest School looks like in practice - an in-depth observation of a series of sessions for different age-groups
-  Feedback from school staff, parents and children who have seen Forest School have a transformative effect
-  The benefits of Forest School - including why it supports improved well-being and learning outcomes for children



An Roinn Oideachais  
Department of Education