

“Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn.” — Benjamin Franklin

Children learn best when they are active, engaged participants in their learning journey. While traditional classroom teaching remains important, it can limit opportunities for movement, exploration, and meaningful hands-on experiences—factors that are particularly significant for young learners. Growing awareness of the benefits of Outdoor Learning has encouraged educators to make greater use of school grounds, natural spaces, and Forest School pedagogy to support children’s cognitive, social, and emotional development. These approaches help to increase motivation, improve concentration, and deepen learning in ways that are difficult to achieve indoors.

The **Northern Ireland Curriculum (CCEA)** promotes a thematic, child-centred approach, encouraging teachers to connect learning across subjects in relevant and engaging ways. Outdoor Learning fits naturally within this framework because it supports active, inquiry-based learning and provides real-world contexts that make learning meaningful. While outdoor play has long been central to the Foundation Stage curriculum, Forest School extends this by offering structured, purposeful exploration rooted in the natural environment. Through repeated engagement with outdoor spaces, children build independence, resilience, and curiosity—key characteristics the curriculum aims to develop.

One of the most significant advantages of Outdoor Learning is the freedom it gives children to move, explore, and express themselves. The natural environment offers physical and emotional space that is not always available indoors. It allows pupils to take appropriate risks, test ideas, and challenge themselves at their own pace. The open-ended nature of outdoor tasks naturally supports different learning styles, making learning more accessible and inclusive for a wide range of pupils, including those who may feel restricted by the formal expectations of the classroom.

Forest School is a particularly powerful example of child-centred Outdoor Learning. It emphasises exploration, discovery, and practical activity over direct instruction. Sessions are typically child-led and designed to foster confidence, collaboration, and problem-solving skills. Forest School aligns strongly with the Northern Ireland Curriculum’s aims, helping children grow as individuals, contributors to society, and responsible participants in the economy and environment.

1. To Be Individuals

A fundamental aim of the Northern Ireland Curriculum is to support children in becoming independent and confident individuals. Forest School promotes this through activities that encourage decision-making, self-directed learning, and personal

challenge. Children choose their own tasks, follow their interests, and reflect on their achievements. This freedom builds resilience, intrinsic motivation, and self-belief. Because every child approaches learning differently, Forest School provides a flexible environment where each child can develop in a way that suits their needs and personality.

2. Contributors to Society

Forest School helps children develop a sense of responsibility and awareness of their role within the community. Activities such as litter collection, habitat protection, or planting encourage pupils to consider the impact of human behaviour on the natural world. Working collaboratively teaches children how to communicate, compromise, and support others. These experiences build empathy and cooperation, qualities that help pupils become positive and active contributors to society.

3. Contributors to the Economy and Environment

Forest School also nurtures practical skills and attitudes that support future economic participation. Many activities involve using tools, building structures, or solving physical challenges—all of which develop fine and gross motor skills, problem-solving abilities, and teamwork. These are skills valued in later life and in the workplace. Forest School also cultivates environmental awareness by teaching children how natural systems work and how human behaviour affects them. Encouraging sustainable thinking from an early age helps children grow into environmentally responsible adults.

4. Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities (TSPC)

The Thinking Skills and Personal Capabilities framework is strongly supported through Forest School practice. Outdoor learning naturally encourages critical thinking, predicting, planning, risk assessment, and reflection. Tasks such as den building, trail making, or creating natural art require creativity, resilience, and adaptability. Because outcomes are open-ended, children learn to solve problems independently or in groups, negotiate roles, and evaluate their approaches. These skills transfer easily to classroom learning and everyday life.

5. Personal Development and Mutual Understanding (PDMU)

Outdoor Learning significantly benefits emotional wellbeing. Natural environments have been shown to reduce stress, improve mood, and increase focus. Forest School

sessions encourage cooperation, communication, and trust-building. Children who may struggle with confidence or behaviour indoors often flourish in outdoor settings, where movement and sensory engagement help regulate emotions. Through shared experiences and teamwork, pupils develop empathy, understanding, and strong relationships with peers.

6. Communication and Literacy

The outdoor environment supports rich language development. Children naturally describe what they observe, discuss plans, ask questions, and negotiate with peers. Teachers model specific language related to nature, shape, size, weather, and scientific concepts. Through storytelling, imaginative play, and collaborative tasks, pupils practise speaking and listening in meaningful ways. These authentic opportunities strengthen vocabulary, oral fluency, and confidence in communication.

7. Mathematics and Numeracy

Forest School provides engaging contexts for mathematical thinking. Children measure sticks, estimate distances, compare shapes, count natural materials, and explore patterns found in nature. Because these experiences are practical and relevant, mathematical concepts become easier to understand and remember. The regular use of mathematical vocabulary in real-life situations supports confidence and reinforces classroom learning.

8. The Arts

The outdoors stimulates creativity and imagination. Children create sculptures using natural objects, compose rhythms with found materials, and participate in drama or movement activities in open spaces. Working outdoors reduces performance anxiety and encourages experimentation. This enhances creative thinking and supports artistic development across the curriculum.

9. Physical Development

Outdoor Learning strengthens children's physical health through movement, balance, strength, and coordination. Activities such as climbing, digging, carrying, and running promote gross motor skills, while knot tying and tool use develop fine motor control. Being in fresh air and natural light also supports emotional regulation, concentration, and overall wellbeing.

Conclusion

Forest School and Outdoor Learning play a vital role in supporting the aims of the Northern Ireland Curriculum. Through hands-on exploration and meaningful interaction with the natural environment, children develop academically, socially, physically, and emotionally. These approaches provide rich, memorable learning experiences that help pupils grow as confident, capable, and responsible individuals.

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