

Evaluating a case for Revisionism in contemporary Forest Schooling  
in England. A qualitative study of contemporary Forest School  
practices.

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## Abstract

This study investigates the development of the Forest School [FS] movement in education. Tokenistic uses of the FS approach have emerged (McCree, 2019) causing the pedagogical principles, child-centred and play-based learning, to become diluted (Leather, 2018). The movement's alignment with mainstream education has been important for gaining interest and acceptance of the approach. However, this has come at a cost of its pedagogical principles and influenced instrumental practice. Therefore, this research analyses a case for revisionism in the FS approach. Taking inspiration from the revisionist Froebelians, whose ability to adapt to modern practices, through revising and strengthening the original Froebelian principles, secured a more authentic continuation of the Froebelian kindergarten approach. Thus, there is much the FS movement can learn from the progression of the Froebelian kindergarten movement.

A systematic historical exploration of the two movements in England, through reviewing literature, demonstrated two recurring themes in the progression of the approaches. The two themes, instrumental perspectives and revisionist perspectives, informed the development of the thesis's conceptual framework, *The Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens*, as the study's original contribution to knowledge. Interrogation of the critical lens, as an analytic tool to explore the development of FS, was applied to the discussion of the study's empirical data. The study uses an interpretivist, constructivist approach to qualitative methods including interviews and participant observations with four FS practitioners.

The study found that relationships between FS practitioners and their settings of employment was influential in their negotiation between instrumental and revisionist perspectives in FS pedagogy. Revisionist perspectives underpinned the practitioners' understanding of FS pedagogy, however, instrumental perspectives underpinned practice. The research found that the practitioners actively engaged in softening the impact of instrumental perspectives on children's learning experiences to maintain the FS pedagogical principles in practice.

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## **Glossary**

BERA - British Educational Research Association

CETL – Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning

CREC – Centre for Research in Early Childhood

DfE – Department for Education

EDS – Education for Sustainable Development

ELG – Early Learning Goals

EYA – Early Years Alliance

EYFS – Early Years Foundation Stage

FS – Forest School

FSA – Forest School Association

GLD - Good Level of Development

MH – Mental Health

PVI – Private, voluntary, or independent

UNESCO – United Nations Education, Scientific and Cultural Organisation

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

This research explores the Forest School approach within an early years context. Forest School education was originally inspired by a Danish model of outdoor early childhood education and is typically seen as a bottom-up movement in education. The English Forest School (FS) approach has its roots embedded in early years practice (Harris, 2017). Nicholson (2019) has argued that early years practice is under pressure from a downward push of the National Curriculum resulting in what Bradbury (2018) describes as the 'schoolification' of early years education and care. This top-down culture imposed on early years education is in tension with the bottom-up philosophy of Forest Schooling, subjecting FS pedagogy to similar pressures faced by early years practice in mainstream education (Waite and Goodenough, 2018). This research seeks to understand ways in which this tension has influenced the development of the FS approach in England for early years education by evaluating how early years education agendas impact on how FS principles are being adapted and implemented in practice. This study explores FS practitioners' values and ideological beliefs about FS pedagogy and examines how these are reflected in the reality of practitioners' practical management of implementing the FS approach. A central aim of this research is to understand how Forest Schooling has been changed and adapted to establish the approach in English early years education.

In order to understand FS's contextualisation in English mainstream education and its impact on practice, with a particular focus on early years, this study draws on Froebel's Kindergarten Movement as an existing example of an early childhood education model that has been through an equivalent process of change and adaption to FS. The Froebelian Kindergarten movement shares similar pedagogical principles to FS. Themes extrapolated from an analysis of the historical development of Froebel's Kindergarten Movement in Victorian England provides the conceptual framework for a systematic analysis of the development of Forest Schooling in England. Specifically, the concepts of Instrumental and Revisionist perspectives emerged in my chronological analysis of Froebel's Kindergarten Movement and are applied as critical lenses to analyse and interpret primary data I collected from FS practitioners working with young children. The critical lens generated by

this study aims to aid FS practitioners' and FS scholarship's reflections on the change and adaption of FS practice.

This study found FS practitioners to be active in this process of change as they negotiate the balance between ways in which FS pedagogy reflects their values for education, and the realities of implementing the approach within early years education underpinned by a top-down schoolification agenda. This research adopts a reflective stance towards FS practice and FS scholarship. In keeping with this reflective stance, I also went through a process of change and adaption as I began to reflect on my own changing interpretation of the FS approach that underpinned my enquiry as my research unfolded.

### **My Forest School Journey: from idealism to reflection**

My professional understanding and experience of FS comes from within an early years education context. When training to become an early years practitioner, in 2011, I was first introduced to FS through a student exchange program where I carried out work experience in a forest kindergarten in Sweden. This Scandinavian model promoted young children's autonomy and capabilities in a woodland setting and demonstrated to me an alternative pedagogical approach to mainstream early childhood education in England. I was amazed by the Swedish children's independence and inspired by the practitioners' trust in the children which enabled their freedom in play and exploration in nature. On returning to England, to an early years setting based in a classroom with a concrete, fenced playground, I could not forget the alternative approach to educating young children I had witnessed through the Scandinavian model and became engrossed in learning more about the English FS approach.

Around this time, the FS movement was gaining momentum with interest developing nationally. There was a flurry of literature bringing attention to and exploring the many benefits of engaging in the FS approach for children's learning (Waite et al., 2015; Leather, 2018). Excited about the prospect of the FS alternative approach to English education, I soaked up this positive perspective like a FS sponge, only to find out that the reality of practicing FS is much more complex. My first job carrying out FS inspired sessions in a primary school started well, however, under the watchful gaze of the deputy head, my sessions began to look more and more like gardening. I left shortly after a teacher asked me to start taking maths worksheets outdoors and I reluctantly helped children predict the

volume of plant pots. I then took a job in a private day nursery calling itself a FS nursery. Here, I became restricted by risk assessments and under the threat of health and safety, finding myself nervously calling to children, *'Please, don't climb that tree!'*

I wondered whether it was just my unfortunate experience in the settings I had worked in or whether the idea of a 'true' FS, that captured the Scandinavian children's freedom, was beyond reach in English education. To my relief, it became clear it was not just me who had experienced and noticed this tokenistic form of practice. Leather's (2018) article *Forest School: Something lost in Translation* captured some of the frustration I had felt in my experience in practice. A new wave of FS research and literature began to paint a picture of the challenges FS practitioners face in everyday practice and explored the approach through a critical perspective. The notion of the dilution of FS pedagogical principles to accommodate the needs of mainstream settings began to be debated amongst FS scholars which prompted me to conduct this research project.

Bringing FS pedagogy back to its original founding roots was initially the primary focus of the project. I thought if we could *just* remember what sparked our love for FS, we could strengthen the movement going forward. Thus, the idea behind the conceptual framework of this study was developed. However, as the research project evolved so did my understanding of the dilemma of the FS diluted principles. I have come to understand that the purest FS perspective that had informed my initial thinking in this research contributed to the utopian idea of FS (Sackville-Ford, 2019) and could be counterproductive to supporting the development of practice. My time spent with other FS practitioners who shared their approaches to managing their relationships with mainstream settings and shared their lived experiences of the debates underpinning FS literature, supported my revision of the conceptual framework to create the *Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens*. The critical lens is this research's contribution to knowledge and aims to aid FS practitioners, as well as FS literature, to understand the relationship between FS's pedagogical principles and mainstream early years education. The critical lens does not intend to judge the quality of practice, but instead to prompt FS practitioners' continuous reflection of practice and empower their position of change within their relationships with mainstream settings. It is important for the FS movement to evolve beyond an idealised version of FS pedagogy into



an achievable responsive FS approach. I believe reflecting on and learning from the evolution of Froebelian kindergarten movement can support this change.

### **Rationale**

FS offers an alternative pedagogical approach to mainstream education that focuses on child-initiated, experiential learning within a natural environment, often small woodlands. FS is not a strictly prescribed philosophy and appears complex in its varied representations. The key factors described by critical writers in the field, values of individual practitioners depicted in FS research and the principles agreed upon by the Forest School Association [FSA], create a picture of a collective understanding of FS philosophy and pedagogical principles.

FS can be interpreted as a remedy for concerns raised in mainstream education (Devenport, 2019) with the FS movement described as a counter approach to prescriptive curriculum introduction in the 90s (Joyce, 2012). The 'schoolification' of early years education has brought restricted forms of play with the downward push of the national curriculum formalising learning for young children (Bradbury, 2018; Nicholson, 2019). Fane et al. (2020) explored young children's accounts of wellbeing, finding opportunities for children to play and to exercise their agency were important factors for wellbeing. The FS pedagogical principles, underpinned by play-based and child-centred learning, offers children an alternative learning environment that values their autonomy. In Coates and Pimlott-Wilson's (2019) study of children's experiences of FS, children expressed feelings of freedom in the outdoors and found, through learning in play, children engaged in their own learning journeys. Enjoyment in FS plays a crucial part in building children's intrinsic motivation and resilience in learning (McCree et al., 2018) which enables benefits of FS to be transferred into the classroom (Harris, 2017).

With literature boasting the benefits of engaging in FS programs, the approach has gained interest in mainstream education and has moved from an early childhood educational approach to incorporating all sectors of education across early childhood education to adult education. This has meant that more children have been given opportunities to access FS and reap the benefits of engaging with outdoor environments (Knight, 2018). Yet, the FS movement's alignment with mainstream education may have come at a cost. Waite and

Goodenough (2018) state that the alignment of FS with mainstream education has caused the approach to become subjected to mainstream structures and top-down regulation. As a result, early educational agendas, such as the concept of school-readiness and the schoolification of early years practice (Bradbury, 2018), have begun to influence FS pedagogy in the early years context. The variation in the quality of FS practice and the commitment to the approach's pedagogical principles of child-centred and play-based learning has enabled tokenistic use of FS to emerge (McCree, 2019). Consequently, FS programs have become increasingly adult-led with the facilitator role of the adult overemphasised to produce outcomes in young children's learning (Sharma-Brymer et al., 2018) to meet skills valued in neo-liberal education systems (Pimlott-Wilson and Coats, 2019). With the inclusion of mainstream education influencing quality of FS practice, this research questions whether alignment with mainstream education is appropriate for the FS movement. There needs to be a reconsideration of the relationship between dominant discourses in education and FS pedagogy with a way for FS practitioners to communicate FS principles more effectively to education settings. Therefore, a revisionist FS perspective could help build a bridge between mainstream education and the FS approach.

FS is not the first movement to be affected by infiltrating mainstream education. This research analyses and explains how Froebelian principles were also diluted in the Froebelian Kindergarten movement due to the incorporation of Victorian education agendas. Initial adaption to practice, by early Froebelians, were to accommodate the focus of education in developing industrialisation of England and the mass education of the urban poor (Nawrozki, 2006). This led to an instrumental perspective of Froebel's philosophy and to the Froebelian pedagogy to become unrecognisable (Manning, 2005); with methods and outcomes overpowering pedagogical principles. This research raises the concern that an equivalent dilution of FS principles and over prioritisation of outcomes could lead the FS approach down the same path. Fortunately, for the Froebelians, the development of a critical revisionist perspective caused some Froebelians to distance themselves from the instrumental perspective of the early Froebelians. Efforts to revise and strengthen the original principles of the movement with more appropriate modern debate enabled a more authentic interpretation of Froebel's principles to be present in the continuation of the movement. Analysing the revisionist Froebelian perspective can indicate the next steps for

the FS movement and evidence how to revise and communicate principles of FS to prevent further dilution and encourage a more reflective, adaptive response to education agendas.

### **Purpose of research**

It is an interesting time for Forest School [FS] research and literature. Encouraging progression of the FS movement was a barrage of early research into the approach that focused on establishing and then reaffirming the benefits of engaging with FS's child-centred pedagogy and play-based learning outdoors (Waite et al., 2015; Leather, 2018). This was important for increasing awareness of the movement, yet only scratched the surface of the realities of implementing FS. Research has since moved on with the development of a more critical stance. The purpose of my research is to contribute to this critical, reflective discussion by exploring the progression of the FS approach through developing an *Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens*. Instrumental perspectives are characterised in the critical lens as when there is a desire to standardise and marketise FS, and when play is being used as a pedagogical tool to meet education agendas. Revisionist perspectives of the critical lens was inspired by the revisionist Froebelian and their efforts to revise the kindergarten movement's original principles (Bruce, 2011) (see Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework). To develop this study's critical discussion the following research questions were addressed:

*Research question 1:* Are the historical perspectives of instrumentalism and revisionism, evident in the development of the Froebelian Kindergarten movement in England, relevant to analysing modern debate in the FS movement?

*Research question 2:* Do instrumental and revisionist perspectives reflect English FS practitioners' understanding of FS pedagogy and their experiences of implementing the approach within Early Years contexts?

*Research question 3:* Does the development of the instrumental and revisionist critical lens support conceptualisation of FS practitioners' experiences and development of FS pedagogy?

The *Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens* generated by my research and presented in this thesis is an original contribution to knowledge. It was developed through the study's

exploration of literature with the aim of analysing the progression of the English Froebelian Kindergarten movement and the Forest School movement. The review of literature addressed research question 1. The Froebelian approach is sometimes linked to FS due to the approach's roots in early childhood education and its emphasis on child-centred learning through play and use of natural environments. However, this research poses a deeper connection between the two movements. The process of contextualisation of Froebel's kindergarten approach and FS approach, as they were interpreted within English education, highlights similarities in the stages of their progression. These similarities were instrumental and revisionist perspectives of the approaches evident in literature. Hence, the literature review found that challenges faced by the historic Froebelian movement are also represented in the modern development of FS. This led to the development of the study's conceptual framework, the *Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens* (See Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework).

To analyse a case for revisionist perspectives in FS, it was important to understand practitioners' perspectives of FS and their experiences of implementing the approach. The Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens was evident in literature and the purpose of fieldwork was to determine whether the lens is effective in understanding the reality of practitioners' experiences. An interpretivist, constructivist approach was taken to qualitative research to meet research question 2. Research methods included semi-structured and unstructured interviews along with participant observations of practitioners' FS sessions. Three settings were involved in the study with four level 3 trained FS leaders.

Addressing research question 3, the conceptual framework informs the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens which functions as a tentative theory (Ravitch and Carl, 2016) for conceptualising the development of the FS approach and recognising factors impacting FS pedagogy. This research evaluates the case for revisionist FS perspectives in response to the concern of dilution of the FS principles (Leather, 2018) and development of tokenistic uses of the FS approach (McCree, 2019). However, to address research question 3, the Instrumental and Revisionist lens was adapted from the findings from the empirical research of the study. This enabled the lens to be strengthened by FS practitioners' perspectives and reflect their lived experiences.

## **Conceptual framework to Critical Lens**

Taking an interpretivist, constructivist approach to research enables the study to acknowledge the researcher's knowledge and the participants knowledge in developing the research findings (Egbert and Sanden, 2020). Therefore, the conceptual framework, which was constructed through my interpretation of literature, was revised to accommodate the participants' experiences and represent the findings of the study. It is the revised conceptual framework, which is the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens that is this studies contribution to the field of FS research.

The knowledge of the researcher shaping the initial focus of the study was my understanding of the FS approach and my exploration of the literature. The literature focused on the progression of the English Froebelian kindergarten movement and its patterns of development reflected in the progression of the English FS movement. This informed the development of the conceptual framework and the initial ideas behind the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens. The conceptual framework depicts the development of educational approaches as they are introduced to England and contextualised in English education. Instrumentalism in this model is when mainstream education agenda influence the use of play within the approach and encourage a marketised and standardised version of practice. Revisionism captures a shift in perspectives of the approach which critiques instrumental methods and focuses on adapting the original principles of the approach with modern debates surrounding education (see figure 1 for the initial conceptual framework design). The initial conceptual framework drawn from the review of literature shows a linear process of the development of an approach. Although the linear process had reflected the discussions and debates of the literature of FS as the approach developed, it did not fully capture the complexities of the experiences of the participants in this research. It became clear to me that this linear process depicted in the initial conceptual framework was influenced by an idealist review of FS that underpinned my knowledge of the subject going into this research. As titled above, the study does contain a journey from idealism to reflection. Observing participants and listening to their views enabled me to reflect critically on my own previous knowledge and assumptions, which in turn led to strengthening the conceptual framework.

In the spirit of revisionism, building on the participants' contribution of knowledge to the research, the initial conceptual framework was revised to promote a more reflective stance on FS practice. This reflective stance is depicted in the revised conceptual framework that is the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens (see figure 4 for the revised critical lens). In the critical lens, revisionism represents a critical perspective that reflects actively on the relationship between revisionist perspectives and instrumentalist perspectives as well as the relationship between the pioneering principles and revisionist perspectives. This is opposed to the original version of the conceptual framework that depicted revisionist perspectives as an end goal of the linear process of development. Although the original linear conceptual framework was useful in determining the difference between the instrumental and revisionist perspectives of FS and what influences these differences, it positioned the perspectives in a hierarchical order, seemingly placing the revisionist perspective on a pedestal, implying the idea of 'true FS' as a utopian concept of FS that is unachievable (Sackville-ford, 2019). The revised version of the critical lens, places revisionist perspectives in a position of negotiation between instrumental perspectives and the original pedagogical principles of FS. Through understanding the FS practitioners involved in this study and their experiences of developing relationships with settings, the revised critical lens aims to capture their ability to promote a dialogue between education settings' expectations of practice and principles of FS.

The revised framework, the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens, is this study's original contribution to knowledge. It aims to aid practitioners to recognise when their practice is being influenced by education agendas and how this informs an instrumental use of FS. Thus, through understanding the revisionist perspective, practitioners can begin to reflect actively on practice with regard to their understanding of the FS original principles. The lens promotes practitioners' ability to negotiate between instrumental and revisionist perspectives through what the study has learnt from the real and pragmatic negotiations of the practitioners of this study. This research also encourages FS practitioners to think about more appropriate education debates in modern practice that they can use to strengthen and justify their practice. The reframing of the conceptual framework will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 8. The next chapter of this thesis will first explain the initial development of the conceptual framework to aid the reader's understanding of the two

perspectives and the key constructs that underpin the study. This understanding will help the readers see the development of the conceptual framework and evaluate the significance of the revised Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens. However, first this research must define how the study understands the FS approach.

### **What is Forest School? This study's perspective.**

FS is complex in its variation yet as Leather (2018) suggests the understanding behind FS philosophy is key to minimise the dilution of FS principles within these varied and flexible forms of the approach. Waite and Goodenough (2018) make an interesting point as they suggest FS is a localised approach which depends on the *people, place, and activity* involved in the individual program. Thus, following on from Waite and Goodenough's (2018) key components of the approach, this section will introduce this study's perspective of FS philosophy through exploring the concept of the learner and its impact on *people* involved in FS, the role of the environment and how this informs FS use of *place*, and the *activity* of play in FS.

#### *Roots of the Forest School movement*

Scandinavian models of outdoor education are often linked to the founding roots of FS philosophy (Harris, 2017; Leather, 2018). The inspiration for the English concept of FS began when a group of early years lecturers and their students, from Bridgewater College in Somerset, visited a Danish Forest Kindergarten in the early 1990s (O'Brien and Murry, 2007; Joyce, 2012). They began to implement what they had observed in Denmark into their practice in the college's early learning centre and developed the first FS training program (O'Brien and Murry, 2007). The Forest School approach has progressed from its origins of the Scandinavian kindergartens as part of the approach's contextualisation into English culture and education (Knight, 2018). After all, there are differences between English and Scandinavian culture and education systems. However, when focusing on the philosophy and pedagogical principles of FS, I would argue that the approach's Scandinavian influences are still important, particularly within this research's reflection on the early years context of the development of the FS approach. It is the FS approach's concept of the learner and the role of the environment, which separates FS from other English outdoor educational approaches, that can be traced back to the approach's Scandinavian kindergarten roots

(Leather, 2018). Hence, it is crucial for this study to understand how the FS concepts of learner and environment have been influenced by Scandinavian models and how this is reflected in contemporary FS practice.

### *Concept of the learner*

Looking at the Danish Kindergarten model encourages English practitioners to view young learners differently. Williams-Siegfredsen was one of the lecturers who visited the Danish kindergarten and was involved with the Forest School program at Bridgewater College in 1993. She describes how her concept of children's capabilities was challenged in Denmark:

*'I remember seeing a child high up in one of the trees, and I called to a pedagogue [Danish early years practitioner] close by, 'there's a child high in the tree': the pedagogue replied, 'yes, there is'. Horrified, I said, 'but they may fall out!'; 'yes,' said the pedagogue, 'they might, but they don't usually!'* (Williams-Siegfredsen, 2011, p.1)

This passage demonstrates the contrast in Danish and English practitioners' understanding and expectations of children. There is a significant amount of trust in children's judgements and decisions in the scenario Williams-Siegfredsen describes and a lesser need to manage and direct children's activity. This opens a different learning experience for children, an alternative learning experience the English FS approach aims to capture.

The value of children's decisions and trust in their judgment within FS practice affords children autonomy in their direction of learning, which may be a rare luxury in mainstream education. Coates and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) reported that when reflecting on school, some children used words such as 'trapped' and 'stressed'. FS can offer children time away from pressures of school agendas and provide them with freedom of choice (Coates and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). The FS environment offers a wealth of opportunities and resources meaning that children's learning experiences may vary and, given the chance, move beyond the limits of the practitioner's imagination as they follow their individual interest. Tiplady and Menter (2020) stress it is FS's child-led pedagogy that is a critical factor which enables children to 'take what they need' from the range of benefits for engaging in FS programs. However, the concept of an independent, autonomous learner may sit uncomfortably next to practitioners' expectations of their own professional role in children's learning. This may be



perceived as a lack of intervention and control (Maynard, 2007) and may leave practitioners questioning where their position is within the approach.

The learner's autonomy is important in FS pedagogy yet the social aspects of the approach, in which the learner interacts with the FS practitioners and peers in the group, also plays an integral part in the FS learning experience. Forest Schooling is often placed within a social-constructivist paradigm (O'Brien and Murray, 2007; Knight, 2018; Leather, 2018) which provides a foundation for practitioners to reflect on their role within FS. Helping children's transition from the expected routines of mainstream settings into the FS alternative learning environment is important (Coates and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). Sessions initially may be adult-led. However, as a child's confidence grows, the adult's role should decrease to encourage children to become intrinsically motivated (McCree et al., 2018). Hence, the role of the FS practitioner is to enable guided participation (Rogoff, 2008) and scaffold children's learning experiences; further placing FS within social-constructivist approach. It is important to maintain respect of children's agency in their learning, thus the success of a FS program may depend on skilled outdoor practitioners (McCree et al., 2018). Get the balance between autonomous and social learning wrong and it may result in the FS principles becoming diluted with negative consequences for children's freedom and choice.

FS practitioners must engage with the complex concept of the learner within the FS approach. The value on active and interactive learners is also featured in principles three and six of the Forest School Association [FSA] agreed principles, as FS practitioners are encouraged to promote children's independence and creativity within a community of learning and development (FSA, n.d). This encourages children, as well as the FS practitioners, to take on radical roles within the approach where the traditional relationship between authoritative adult and directed learners are levelled (Sackville-Ford, 2019). This supports the value of both children's and practitioners' engagement in the FS community of learning and development in a collaborative way. However, the FS approach has become increasingly embedded in mainstream schooling (Waite and Goodenough, 2018) which has impact on how the concept of the learner is enacted upon within FS programs. The alignment of the FS approach with mainstream education agendas may bring with it tensions between traditional and radical roles of practitioners and children (Sackville-ford, 2019) along with tokenistic practices overwhelming FS principles (McCree, 2019). If the FS

concept of the learner is not valued and children's freedom within the approach is restricted, this will impact the key principles of FS including the importance of explorative learning and opportunities for play.

### *A space for play*

The FSA recognises play as an 'integral part of the Forest School learning process' (FSA, n.d.). Child-initiated play is central to FS social-constructivist approach as adults are encouraged to follow children's interests in play and facilitate their learning within play (Harris, 2017; Knight, 2018). Play can aid the shift in hierarchy in children's and adults' relationships in FS. As children see adults playing and learning alongside them, they begin to perceive their teachers differently (Coates and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019), thus breaking down barriers created by traditional roles in education. Leather (2018) also suggests play adds an additional dimension to contemporary outdoor learning and is a defining feature for FS. However, despite the value FS gives to play, it can be a challenging concept in practice.

Play can be a difficult concept within FS pedagogy as it is a complex phenomenon in early years education. The purpose behind play is constantly debated in early years education, particularly with regard to the school readiness agenda (See Chapter 4: The Perfect Storm). Adult-directed purposes have been privileged over child-initiated play to meet demands on outcomes (Wood and Hedges, 2016). Nicholson's (2019) research into children's transitions to primary school found that early years teachers felt they needed to adapt their pedagogy prematurely to prepare children for formal learning in Key Stage 1. Hence, the freedom within play, which FS can offer children, provides children with a vital opportunity for learning and development. The FS environment can offer a welcome break from the structures of assessment and outcomes within mainstream education which may aid opportunities for informal, child-initiated play. FS can be understood as a separate, radical pedagogical space (Sackville-Ford, 2019) in which methods of learning and assessment can be reconsidered.

Play can also be a concept that is challenged in FS pedagogy despite the approach's roots in early years. Leather (2018) suggests that the concept of child-initiated play within FS practice challenges orthodoxy in English outdoor education and argues for a model of play within FS pedagogy. Waite and Goodenough (2018) questioned Leather's pedagogical

theory of play and its appropriateness to FS as an approach for all ages. Leather (2018) states that play is central to the discussion of FS pedagogy which is often missing. The notion of play in FS literature is interpreted through, and even hidden behind, labels such as *experiential* and *explorative* learning. Along with Leather and other key authors that suggest play is essential for FS pedagogy (Knight, 2018), this study will regard play as a key activity in FS. It is important that the FS approach does not forget its founding roots in early years practice inspired by international models of forest kindergartens and not allow the expansion to an all-ages approach influence the use of play in early years FS provision.

### *The role of the natural environment*

English FS's Scandinavian roots in forest kindergartens are not only important in challenging the English concept of the learner or creating the FS approach's foundations through a pedagogy of play, but essential for understanding the subtle differences the natural environment plays in FS compared to other English outdoor educational approaches. Outdoor educational approaches, such as adventure education, use the natural environment as an appropriate setting to master certain skills, for example rock climbing and mountaineering (Ogilvie, 2013). While others, such as bushcraft, use the environment as a library of abundant resources (Ogilvie, 2013). The FS approach's connection to nature runs much deeper as it aims to develop long-term environmentally sustainable attitudes of practitioners and children through creating a relationship between the learner and nature (FSA, n.d). Mycock (2020) suggests that FS practice could be perceived as an alternative pedagogical response to the 27<sup>th</sup> Anthropocene, the human-influenced geologic time period. FS demonstrates a potential move away from colonial ideas of conquering, using and mastering nature towards a philosophy concerned with our connection to nature. This difference in perspectives towards nature reflects Scandinavian influences on the FS approach.

Scandinavian culture values the importance of natural environments for a healthy lifestyle, which influences their approach to outdoor education. Friluftsliv is a Scandinavian lifestyle philosophy, which translates to free air life, and encourages freedom in nature and connectedness with land (Leather, 2018). Friluftsliv influences Danish outdoor education to focus on a more holistic approach to development, where quality of life and health are considered (Andkjaer, 2012). The environment is viewed as a special place where the

session is concerned with being in the moment and focusing on the process of learning rather than the effectiveness of an activity to produce a product or objective (Andkjaer, 2012). This reflects English FS's focus on child-initiated learning, where through creating a separate pedagogical space in FS, children are given the freedom to play and explore their own path to learning (Coates and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019) rather than being led through a highly structured program of objectives. Leather (2018) indicates how Friluftsliv supports experiential learning as it aids a sensual intimacy between land and people. FS provides children with the opportunity not to just learn about the natural environment but to learn through and with the natural environment, to experience the natural world as a living thing and understand it as another world that is not just human-driven (Mycock, 2020). The Scandinavian influences of FS may indicate why the FS approach is more focused on personal experiences of participants and their connection to nature than other English outdoor educational approaches.

However, the appropriateness of the philosophy of Friluftsliv underpinning FS pedagogy is questioned in the approach's development in England. Waite and Goodenough (2018), argue it does not reflect the English cultural norms. Friluftsliv is a Scandinavian lifestyle philosophy and creates a home-like approach in practice (Waite and Goodenough, 2018); yet this is not a lifestyle English children are familiar with. Traditional English approaches to outdoor education originate with British colonial, imperialistic ideals of nature and rooted in militaristic and nationalistic ideas (Joyce, 2012; Leather, 2018). The Hahnian perspective was influential in English traditional outdoor education focusing on character building experiences designed to encourage self-confrontation and self-formation (Ogilvie, 2013). English cultural norms of education and physical activity are often still rooted in Victorian values with the emphasis on the authoritative roles of the teacher and this is reflected in titles given, such as Outdoor Activity Instructor or Scout Leader (Leather, 2018). This does not seem to fit the FS approach of holistic, child-centred development and its value of play and experiential learning with nature. Joyce (2012) suggest FS is not like traditional English approaches, such as the Scout movement and Kibbo Kift, as it is not political or militaristic. Joyce (2012) draws stronger connections between FS pedagogy and the pedagogy of Skogmulle, a Swedish early years outdoor education movement, that focuses on teaching children to respect the environment and each other. Therefore, if the FS approach sets itself

apart from English education norms with its alternative approach influenced by Scandinavian models of outdoor education, the FS approach must question its connection to English norms in outdoor education and cultural expectations of learning in nature.

The Scandinavian understanding of nature appears more fitting when exploring FS principles of developing the whole unique child through personal, child-initiated experiences and learning with nature. Although many FS scholars do not go as far as to connect FS with Friluftsliv, there is a sense of a spiritual side to practice that being in the outdoors introduces to FS philosophy which is not present in traditional English outdoor educational approaches. For instance, Horrocks (2019) describes the typical activity of sitting around the fire in FS sessions as provoking innate, instinctive responses from children of awe and wonder in nature. O'Brien and Murray (2007) also describe the FS approach as an inspirational process, engaging all the senses, to aid children's learning whilst connecting to nature. The natural environment plays an important part in the FS approach which encourages practitioners and children to develop a deeper understanding and sympathetic connection to nature that creates opportunities for learning.

### **Froebel and Forest School: similarities and differences**

The pedagogical principles of Froebel's philosophy share many similarities with the ideas behind the FS approach. Both approaches conceptualise the learner as active and social by promoting agency of learning through play and exploration whilst acknowledging the adult's role as a facilitator; FS achieves this through its social-constructivist approach (Knight, 2018) whilst Froebelians focus on an interactionalist approach (Bruce, 2021). Both approaches value children's connection to nature and the importance of observing children's learning in natural environments (Harris, 2021). Like the FS approach, Froebel included wild environments in his kindergarten play, yet also added the use of more structured gardens to children's learning, whereas the FS approach focuses on woodlands and unstructured natural spaces. However, it is not this study's intention to suggest that the two approaches are the same. There are differences in the thinking that underpins the principles and the ways in which the movements were pioneered.

The Froebelian Kindergarten Movement began with Froebel as a clear pioneer with a defined philosophical stance rooted in German Romanticism (Manning, 2005). Though

Froebel's philosophy was introduced in England after his death, there were numerous texts documenting his ideas (Lilley, 1967), there was a model of his kindergartens before it was banned in Prussia in 1851 (Bruce, 2021) and a small number of his followers who moved to England with the aims of kick starting the movement (Read, 2006). Whereas, for the FS approach, there is a consensus across literature that FS was inspired by Scandinavian forest kindergartens (Knight, 2013; Harris, 2017; Leather, 2018) and that the original beginnings of the concept in England came from Bridgewater college and their development of an FS program (O'Brien and Murry, 2007; Joyce, 2012). Yet it is difficult to tell how influential Bridgewater college was in the development of FS as interest in the approach grew quickly and nationally (Leather, 2018; Knight, 2018) with private organisations creating their own FS programs that spread the movement across the country. FS does not have a single pioneer but rather a collective of texts, training programs and practices that developed over time creating a shared understanding of the approach as the movement matured. Yet both movements were introduced to England as international models of education, valuing child-centred and play-based learning outdoors, to be interpreted and contextualised in the English education system.

Both movements began as bottom-up movements with practitioners leading the course of change. For the Froebelians, the few Froebel followers in England created small, privatised kindergartens, and developed support through establishing a community of Froebelian kindergarten teachers to slowly gain influence on mainstream education (Read, 2006). This later developed into creating the Froebel Society in 1875 (Nawrozki, 2006). Similarly, the FS movement has gained influence through establishing a joint identity through the development of the Forest School Association with individual practitioners influencing change as they integrate their practice into mainstream settings (Knight, 2018). It is the similarities of the movements as they were and still are interpreted within the English education systems that this study is focused on.

As both movements began to be contextualised in English education, they progress through similar stages of instrumental and revisionist perspectives of their child-centred and play-based learning principles. This progression conjures up similarities in the challenges faced by the Froebelian kindergartens and FS approach. Therefore, drawing on these parallels between Froebelian kindergartens and FS provided a critical lens which informed the

conceptual framework. The Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens, detailed in Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework, is used to analyse modern FS pedagogy through practitioner accounts and observations of practice.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has introduced the key concepts underpinning this study. The development of the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens forms the conceptual framework of the study and original contribution to knowledge. This is applied to the discussion of data to understand the effectiveness of the critical lens and whether it reflects practitioners' experience of implementing FS. Waite and Goodenough (2018) suggest that FS is a localised approach which variation in practice depends on the *people, space* and the *activity*. Following from this, this chapter has introduced the study's perspective of the FS approach through exploring the concept of the *learner*, the role of the *environment* and the use of *play* to understand the underpinning philosophy of FS in English early years practice. It is important to acknowledge the differences, as well as the similarities, of the FS and Froebelian approaches as it is not this study's intention to state that they are the same. However, exploring the development of the two movements together can indicate the next steps for the FS movement.

The concept of the learner in FS brings with it radical roles of the people involved in FS programs. The learner is regarded as autonomous yet both interactive and active within a social-constructivist approach to learning. FS practitioners must learn to strike a balance between taking a step back and facilitating children's interests within their individual learning, particularly within the activity of learning through play. Play in FS enable children the opportunity to gain from a range of benefits associated with FS programs (Coates and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). Yet play is a complex phenomenon in early years education, thus its challenges ripple down through to FS practice. The importance given to play in the FS approach stems from its roots in Scandinavian forest kindergartens (Knight, 2013) as well as its engagement in the natural environment as a crucial factor in FS use of place. The Scandinavian influence of FS's role of the environment challenges traditional English outdoor education norms (Leather, 2018; Mycock, 2020) with its emphasis on connection to nature, play and child-initiated learning in nature. Despite the Scandinavian influences in FS pedagogical principles, it is inevitable that the FS approach will further develop its

understanding of the learner and the use of environment as the approach progresses within English culture and education.

However, this has caused some concerns as FS principles are said to be becoming diluted within the approach's alignment with mainstream education (Leather, 2018). Therefore, it is crucial there is an understanding of the philosophy that has inspired the approach and its pedagogical principles. If the approach progresses too hastily, we run the risk of severing the approach from its origins and losing sight of why the FS approach was important.

Therefore, this study poses a case for developing a revisionist perspective of FS. Revisionist perspectives emphasise the importance of reconnecting to original principles, yet strengthening them with modern practice. This thesis argues that a revisionist critique of the influence of instrumentalism on FS shines a light on how instrumentalism influences and potentially weakens the pedagogical principles of FS.

### **Outline of thesis**

The introduction, Chapter 1, sets out a critical overview of the FS approach and a rationale for the study. This section will detail the structure of the thesis and what can be expected in the following chapters.

Chapter 2, introduces the study's conceptual framework, *Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens*. The development of the critical lens was sparked by the study's review of literature. This chapter explores how this study defines instrumental and revisionist perspectives and how this links to literature explored in the following chapters. This chapter focuses on the initial ideas underpinning the development of the critical lens and will explore the revision of the structure of the critical lens following data analysis.

Chapter 3 explores the *Development of the Froebelian Kindergarten Movement*. Through literature, the chapter analyses key milestones in the progression of the movement in England and uses instrumental and revisionist perspectives that inform discussion of the literature.

Chapter 4, *Development of the Forest School Movement*, mirrors the structure of Chapter 3. This is to highlight similarities in the progression of the two movements. This chapter explores instrumental and revisionist perspectives of FS developing in literature.



Chapter 5 outlines the *Methodology* of the research. The chapter justifies the interpretivist, constructivist approaches adopted by the study. Here I also present an honest account of the challenges the study faced during the global pandemic due to Covid-19. The chapter explores the choice to use semi-structured and unstructured interviews alongside participant observations. Ethics of the study and methods of data analysis are also featured.

Chapter 6 focuses on *Practitioners' perspectives of the Forest School approach* and *Practitioners' experience of implementing the Forest School approach*. To gain an understanding of practitioner perspectives, this chapter presents data collected in interviews. This uncovers how practitioners describe their role in FS pedagogy and how they view the progression of the FS movement. The chapter also presents data from observations of the practitioners' FS sessions, highlighting how practitioners navigate expectations of their settings and their own values in the approach in practice. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the findings from the data presentation with regard to the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens.

Chapter 7 presents findings and discussions of data regarding *Forest School practitioners' relationships with settings and how they negotiate tensions in practice*. This chapter explores the relationship the practitioners share with their settings of employment and how this influences revisionist and instrumental perspectives of FS.

Chapter 8, *Revising the Instrumental and Revisionist Critical Lens*, discusses how the key findings of the data analysis of this study have informed the revision of the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens which is this study's original contribution to knowledge. Learning from the FS practitioners who took part in this study, this chapter discusses how their accounts have been used to strengthen the lens towards a reflective model for FS practice.

Chapter 9 concludes the thesis. This chapter explores how the study has addressed the research questions. Responding to the research findings, the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens is reviewed, and its revision summarised in this chapter. Implications for literature and practice are discussed, along with limitations of the study.

## Chapter 2

### Conceptual Framework

*A conceptual framework is an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017, p.5)*

In Chapter 1 of this thesis, the rationale highlights an emergence of critical perspectives in FS which explores the impact of the recent, rapid growth of the FS movement and the current challenges FS practitioners face. This shift in published literature, away from reiterating the proposed benefits of FS to deeper evaluations of its pedagogy and practice, inspired this research. Leather (2018) suggests the swift development of FS has influenced the dilution of FS principles with a lack of understanding of the underpinning philosophy and commodification of the approach. Other authors have conceptualised FS in efforts to understand the approach and this thesis draws from conceptualisations Waite and Goodenough's (2018) notion of place, people and activity and McCree's (2019) concept of Full Fat, Lite and Ultra Lite FS. The conceptual framework set out in this chapter contributes to the discussion of conceptualising FS by exploring reasons that influence quality in provision. This matters to the debate of the dilution of FS principles by determining a framework that can aid discussion in understanding the progression of FS approach. This framework is the *Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens*.

Like many doctoral research projects, this thesis started with a historical exploration of the topic, looking at pivotal moments of the topic and underpinning ideas. A timeline was created (See Appendix 1) to present a visual representation of the historical exploration that maps out key events. Egbert and Sanden (2020) state that individual perspectives and values inform the development of conceptual frameworks. My previous knowledge of Friedrich Froebel as a pioneer for outdoor and play-based early childhood education became a starting point for the timeline and to the historical exploration of FS. This served to develop an underpinning understanding of the use of child-centred and play-based learning in England to inform how early education responded to the introduction of FS. Originally an exercise to develop my understanding of the topic, this grew to contribute to the main influence of this conceptual framework and secured the decision to use the Froebelian Kindergarten movement as a critical lens for analysing the growth of the FS movement.

Ravitch and Carl explain conceptual frameworks can ‘function as a tentative theory’ and ‘create core constructs that produce deeper...understanding of the topic’ (2016, p.39). Two recurring themes became apparent from my combined, systematic examination of the historical development of Froebel’s kindergarten in England and the development of FS in England. I have labelled these themes as ‘Instrumental’ and ‘Revisionist’ perspectives. The reasoning behind this is explored throughout the thesis; but in brief, the instrumental perspective refers to when pedagogy is standardised to meet education agendas with play becoming a pedagogical tool, and the revisionist perspective refers to when original principles of the movement are revised with criticality and strengthened using modern education initiatives. The recurring themes of Instrumentalism and Revisionism started to influence my thinking in this research and informed the development of the critical lens. They shaped my understanding of the similarities between the development of the Froebelian and FS movements and structured my analysis of literature.

Therefore, this study poses early theorising, using the tentative theory of the conceptual framework, the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens, which was devised through critical reading of secondary sources, as set out in the literature review. This study has critically interrogated the perspectives framing the critical lens as a conceptual framework to understand their relevance and efficiency in analysing the FS approach. This interrogation of instrumental and revisionist perspectives and the relevance to the findings from the empirical data led to the revision of the critical lens (See Chapter 8: Revising the Instrumental and Revisionist Critical Lens).

### **Purpose of the chapter**

The revised critical lens is this study’s original contribution to knowledge, however, it is still important in this thesis, for clarity of the progression of the concepts, to demonstrate to the reader the thinking that underpinned the development of this original contribution to knowledge. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the key constructs that inform the conceptual framework through detailing the initial linear representation of the conceptual framework that was first developed through analysing the literature. The linear representation is not this study’s original contribution to knowledge but is helpful for demonstrating the clear differences between instrumental and revisionist perspectives. Whereas the revised Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens, strengthened

by the empirical data, represents the complex interactions and negotiations between the two perspectives FS practitioners experience. The purpose of this chapter is to set out what this study means by instrumental and revisionist perspectives, explore the literature that informed the conceptual framework and the construction of these key concepts, and detail the initial ideas and structure of the conceptual framework before its revision.

### Visual representation of the initial Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens

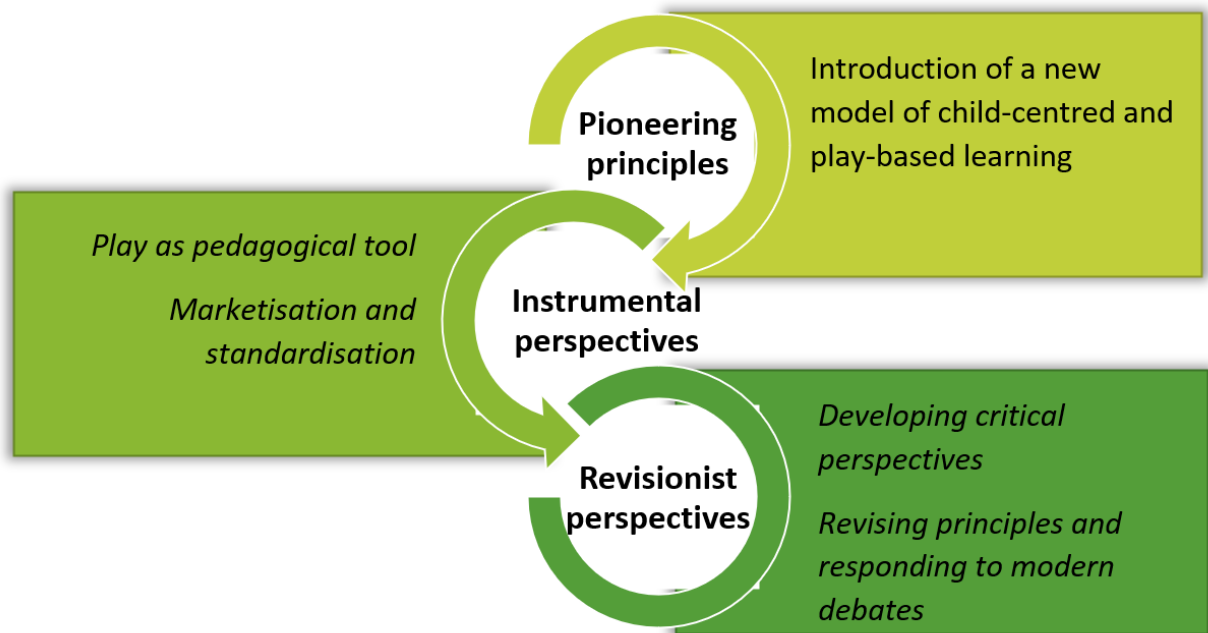


Figure 1. Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens

### Pioneering principles

The conceptual framework begins with a pioneering model of child-centred and play-based learning. For the Froebelians, this was Friedrich Froebel's philosophy of early childhood education and the introduction of his approach brought to England by his followers after his death in 1852 (See Chapter 3: *Who was Fredrich Froebel?*). The FS approach may not have a single pioneer like the Froebelians. However, research does suggest that the approach was first used by Bridgwater college after a group of early years students and lecturers visited a forest kindergarten in Denmark. Thus, pioneering principles can be drawn from early interpretations of Scandinavian forest kindergarten practice and early research exploring the use of FS practice in England.

Like Froebel's kindergartens, FS was inspired by an international model of child-centred and play-based learning brought to England. As both movements are introduced and undergo a process of contextualisation in English education norms, this conceptual framework is shaped by the parallel patterns of instrumentalism and revisionism that emerged from my systematic study of Froebel's kindergartens and FS in England (See Appendix 1).

### **Instrumental perspectives**

Instrumental reasoning focuses on quantities; what can be measured and replicated for maximising efficiency of systems (Gibson, 2011). This results in instrumental rationality often relying on context-free language (Gibson, 2011) which leads to standardisation of education systems. Instrumentalism is heavily criticised as a useful but blind way of thinking (McGuign, 2006, p.171) which robs education of imagination (Loyal, 2020). Following this study's conceptual framework, the instrumental perspective presents a challenging time for the development of the two movements.

Influential instrumentalist thinker, Max Weber (1864-1920) described instrumental reasoning in society as a 'iron cage', something that is 'irresistible' and 'unavoidable' (cited in Gibson, 2011, p.704). This suggests that instrumentalism is a stage which each movement must navigate as it begins to infiltrate mainstream education settings. There is a child-centred concept of learning within instrumental education, yet it does not reflect the notion of the autonomous child valued in the Froebelian or FS movements. In instrumentalist thinking, the child is considered as material to be conditioned and shaped to expected outcomes of education (Sosnowska, 2020). Instrumentalists' focus on procedures (Gibson, 2011) provides *irresistible*, simplified structures to educational practice which prioritises outcomes as an *unavoidable* method for measuring efficiency and profit in the marketplace logic of education (Sosnowska, 2020). Gibson (2011) argues that this emphasis on procedures disconnects action from its purpose which he questions whether purpose is even considered relevant in instrumental thinking. Hence, when the two movements experience instrumental perspectives, the principles of the approach, such as child-centred practice, become removed or disjointed to fall in line with the procedures of mainstream education.

For the Froebelians, industrialisation and the promotion of children as future workers encouraged the use of instrumental perspectives in their approach. Gibson (2011) suggests that instrumentalism began because of a shift in educational focus from religious and moral education towards technical skills to support the growth of industry. The early Froebelians responded to this shift in education focus, using *play as a pedagogical tool*, to include industrial training in some kindergarten practices. Standardised forms of kindergarten practice began to feature in elementary schools as an extracurricular subject (Read, 2003). This standardised form of practice became marketable as Froebel's educational toys, known as gifts, became available to buy. The purpose of Froebel's philosophy became lost. His principles in practice unrecognisable (Manning, 2005). The instrumental perspective of the early Froebelian methods enabled the movement to infiltrate mainstream education, yet at a cost of the movement's original principles and educational ethos.

Chapter 4 of this thesis, *Growth of the Forest School Movement*, indicates that FS is suffering the same fate. Whereas the early Froebelian movement felt the pressure of the industrial revolution, FS in England is forced to respond to the pressure of neo-liberal education agendas. Neo-liberalism's governance emphasises standards and measures of performance (Moss and Roberts-Holmes, 2021), linking to instrumental reliance on quantities (Gibson, 2011). Moss and Roberts-Holmes (2021) description of neo-liberalism's irresistible pressure to measure performance reflects Weber's notion of the unavoidable iron cage of instrumentalism. This creates pressure to measure the development of children's skills in FS sessions in order to validate investing into the approach. Therefore, FS practitioners can be drawn towards standardising their practice through more adult-led provision and activities to ensure progression (Waite and Davis, 2007). This in turn affects the adult's role in learning and the concept of play in FS.

#### *Play as pedagogical tool*

*Instrumentalism implies looking upon both school subjects and humans as instruments, as tools or means for reaching another goal or end (Varkoy, 2007, p.37)*

This conceptual framework indicates play being used as a pedagogical tool by both movements to meet educational agendas. Gibson (2011) explores the importance of the development of skills in instrumental concepts of education. Skills become an easy way to

measure the success of education systems. However, instrumental procedures remain underpinned by context free language, as a result, the development of skills becomes devoid of purpose (Gibson, 2011). Consequently, for the two movements, play becomes a way to promote skills valued by education agendas, yet removed from the principles that encourage freedom in play, it loses its' purpose. Play merely becomes a tool for adults to manipulate outcomes rather than the child's method of exploration and learning.

The Froebelian movement offers a prime example of how instrumental perspectives can influence the use of play within an approach. The early Froebelians misinterpretation of Froebel's concept of play enabled them to strengthen the use of his gifts and occupations, education toys and activities, to appeal to mass education and industrialisation. Olson (2002) argues that Froebel's play was never free and was part of a scientific scheme to produce little workers. Olson reflects on the instrumental perspective of the early Froebelian methods which focused on play as a way of developing children's skills through industrial training (Wiggin and Smith, 1896). The instrumental underpinning of this use of play meant that emphasis was placed on the development of skills but using context-free language. The focus of industrial training became devoid of Froebel's principles and concept of the active learner described in his philosophy. Like instrumental instruction, in which the purpose is viewed as irrelevant (Gibson, 2011), Froebel's purpose behind play was forgotten in the quest to infiltrate mainstream education and satisfy industrial demands in education. This reflects FS and its alignment with mainstream structures of education and how this leaves behind the purpose of free play.

In neo-liberalism's image of the child, they appear deficient and needing to be readied to become (Moss and Robert-Homes, 2021). This further implies that children are passive in play and instils the importance of the adult's role. This also influences the school readiness agenda in early years education resulting in the push-down of school curricula in early years practice (Sims, 2017). The 'schoolification' of early years practice (Bradbury, 2018) influences the *schoolification* of FS in early years contexts. The literature review explores the downward pressures to justify FS practice through measuring progression of skills and the lack of understanding in the importance of learning through free play (Waite and Davis, 2007, Whincup et al., 2021). The emphasis of tracking and planning for children's learning in FS appeals to the instrumental nature of 'datafication' in early years provision (Bradbury,

2018). This pressure leads to FS programs to become highly adult-led with little free play (Waite and Davis, 2007). Consequently, taking ownership of play from the children and placing play as a pedagogical tool for the adult's validation in practice.

### *Standardisation and marketisation*

Within the literature review, both FS movement and the Froebelian movement begin to standardise and marketise their approach to maintain the growth of the approaches in mainstream education. Gibson (2011) states instrumentalism is 'inescapably' connected to normative agendas. Through standardisation, instrumental notions of maintaining the status quo (Loyal, 2020) appeals to the underpinning normative agendas. Weber states 'Man is dominated by the making of money' (cited in Gibson, 2011, p.703). As the movements begin to standardise their approaches, this creates a marketable model of their practice. Thus, standardisation and marketisation begin a pivotal moment for the growth of the movements.

Neo-liberalism places market metrics and practice into all aspects of life and, in terms of education, the child becomes human capital (Moss and Robert-Holmes, 2021). Education becomes a product with educational settings held accountable for its efficiency (Sims, 2017). The neo-liberal image of educational settings is pictured as a business, competing in the marketplace. One way a setting can stand out in the market is to invest in an approach like FS. FS becomes a badge of honour for settings (Connolly and Haughton, 2015) with educational setting representing consumers of FS (Kemp, 2020). As consumers, settings hold FS practitioners accountable to demonstrate progress in children's learning to ensure their time and money is contributing to the efficiency of their educational setting. So, FS must bend to the instrumental, normative agenda of the setting's neo-liberal underpinning values. Therefore, standardising practice to incorporate mainstream curricula goals and structures can justify practice to settings as consumers, but also FS accountability to the instrumental skills the approach advertises. This has led to the marketisation of private FS programs that provide FS practitioners with a pre-planned structure of how to achieve the skills and track learning (Whincup et al., 2021). However, developing standardised and marketable models of FS, this approach limits the concept of the unique learner and the unpredictability of autonomous learning in free play.



Froebelians underwent the same dilemma as they hindered Froebel's child-centred and play-based pedagogy to create standardised and marketable versions of kindergarten methods. Procedures are important to instrumental thinking, yet this is carried out without concern for the purpose of the procedures, but with an interest in replication (Gibson, 2011). Early Froebelian began to standardise the use of Froebel's gifts by focusing on Froebel's complex descriptions of how to use the educational toys to create simplified and authoritative kindergarten manuals (Brehony, 2000). This enabled practice to be replicated with ease and integrated into mainstream settings. This became a marketable approach as Manning (2005) suggests there began an interest in 'all things kindergarten'. However, this standardised and marketised form of kindergarten split opinions of Froebelians as the lack of Froebel's philosophy underpinning practice was concerning to some Froebelians.

Some Froebelians began to question the instrumental use of the kindergarten methods and suggest that Froebel himself would not recognise his own pedagogy (Manning, 2005). Therefore, the revisionist Froebelians began to criticise this form of practice and sought to reinstate Froebel's principles. As for FS practice, Sims (2017) calls for educators to engage in active resistance against neo-liberal influences in current education. Reflecting this, Moss and Roberts-Holmes (2021) argue for urgency in strengthening critical thinking by educators to refuse subjectivities neo-liberalism imposes on education. Therefore, taking example from the revisionist Froebelians, this framework poses a response to neo-liberal influences of the instrumental perspective of FS through the development of revisionist FS thinking.

### **Revisionist perspectives**

The word revisionism can conjure up some very controversial understandings of the term. This study cannot ignore the negative concertation stirred by the word revisionism in history and the perspective of rewriting history for unmoral reasons. This is just one understanding of revisionism and to that there are many other uses of the word. Mark (1979), writing on American revisionist history, stresses that revisionist's dominant concerns in the present, influences their inquiry into the past, thus shapes their findings of the past. Mark (1979) highlights this as problematic if the revisionists' aims are to distort history. In contrast, Blumberg and Lederman (2021), writing of revisionist reporting, suggests their reports of other's beliefs can be strengthened with their own background information in the present. When I first came across the term, it was in the context of the Froebelian Kindergarten

movement. The origins of the term 'revisionist Froebelians' is unclear; however, it is often linked to the works of Professor Kevin Brehony (2000). In his chapter *English Revisionist Froebelians and the Schooling of the Urban Poor*, he describes a change in the Froebelian movement in the 1920s towards a more critical perspective of the early Froebelian methods (Brehony, 2000). He is cited by Tina Bruce (2020) as depicting a time when Froebelian's focus shifted towards the principles of the approach over prescribed practice.

Within the context of the Froebelian approach, revisionists are painted as visionaries of the Froebelian Kindergarten movement. Their focus was to *revise* the principles of Froebel's philosophy to prevent his approach becoming misused by orthodox, early English Froebelians with their rigid methods. Reflecting on Mark's (1979) notion of revisionism, the revisionist Froebelians' dominant concern in practice was the lack of autonomy in children's learning. This influenced their inquiry into Froebel's writings in search of examples to reference his advocacy of freedom in children's learning, in which they found many. Complementing Blumberg and Lederman (2020), the revisionist Froebelians strengthened Froebel's beliefs by revisiting his fundamental guiding principles (Bruce, 2020) and bringing them into the twentieth century thinking. In chapter that sparked my interest in the term revisionism, *Froebel Today*, Bruce writes:

*Froebelians are not by nature revolutionary in spirit. They are pioneering, and thanks to the example set by the revisionist Froebelians, embrace the need for change when it arises.* (Bruce, 2011, p.61)

The key point Bruce (2011) makes in this chapter is the reflective nature of the revisionists and their constant efforts to 're-examine' and 're-evaluate' Froebel's principles to strengthen them. It is this reflective notion of revisionists that this conceptual framework aims to capture and promote in FS practice. Therefore, the conceptual frameworks key constructs of a revisionist perspective are *Developing critical perspectives* and *Revising principles and responding to modern debates*.

### *Developing critical perspectives*

Developing critical awareness of practice is the first step to triggering revisionist perspectives. This demonstrates the beginning of recognising and problematising instrumental perspectives of practice. For the revisionist Froebelians, this meant distancing

themselves from the early, orthodox Froebelians through reflecting critically on their methods and highlighting the distortion of Froebel's words and principles. This revisionist critical perspective on practice is emerging in FS literature discussed in Chapter 4, the *Growth of the FS movement*. Books like *Critical perspectives of Forest School* explore contemporary issues in FS practice, such as McCree's (2019) concept of FS lite and Ultra Lite. There has been recent interest in research exploring the dilemma of FS diluted principles (Knight, 2018; Waite and Goodenough, 2018) sparked by Leather's (2018) article, *A critique of "Forest School" or something lost in translation*. This shift in the focus of research in FS demonstrates an ideal concept of the use of FS by highlighting practice deemed as tokenistic.

Like the revisionists Froebelians creating distance between them and orthodox methods, this expresses a need in FS literature to separate quality practice from practice not meeting the FS principles. Thus, the FS identity with its ideal concept of practice must be strengthened. Hall and Gay (1996) state identities are formed from historical explorations of the subject and the process of defining what is different and ideas to exclude as no longer fit. The revisionist Froebelians re-established Froebelian identity through reinstating Froebel's pedagogical principles within philosophy and diminishing the importance placed on his methods (Bruce, 2011). Therefore, complementing the development of critical perspectives is the need to go back to the original principles that influenced the movement and solidate them in modern practice.

#### *Revising principles and responding to modern debates*

Revising the principles of an approach to strengthen its' identity, Hall and Gay (1996) explain it is not just going back to the roots, but understanding them again in the new context of the present. It was not enough for the Froebelians to cast aside the early, orthodox Froebelian methods and simply reiterate Froebel's writings. They needed to place them in the context of modern education.

In the turn of the twentieth century education was undergoing major shifts with the introduction of more scientific perspectives of child development and concerns of public health, particularly for the urban poor (Brehony, 2000; Nawrozki, 2006). Froebelians responded well to this through placing Froebel within the scientific models with revisionist

Else Murrey (1914) arguing for Froebel as a pioneer in Modern Psychology, and later Susan Isaac's merging Froebel's principles with her psychoanalysis background in practice (Drummond, 2000). Reflecting the 'open air' movement promoting the children's health of the urban poor, McMillan also used Froebel's philosophy to develop camp schools in inner city communities to promote children's health (Brehony, 2000). Unlike the open air movement which took children out of the city, McMillan concentrated on working within their communities, building relations with parents and supporting their understanding of health.

FS literature is also showing evidence of the approach's response to modern debates in current education practice. The highly debated topic of school readiness in early childhood education poses the concern of rushing childhood and the early introduction of formal learning to young children (Nicholson, 2019). Interest is growing towards promoting a need for *Slow pedagogy* in early years education to counter the fast pace of learning in mainstream education (Clark, 2020). There are indications of FS research also exploring this topic of slowing down the learning process. For instance, Tiplady and Menter (2020) advocate for the *scenic route* in children's attainment through FS's promotion of self-motivation and time to learn. However, the link to the slow pedagogy movement and FS could be made clear to establish deeper connections. The FSA is promoting the 'nature premium' campaign that aims to establish links with FS as a method of intervention for concerns caused by the long-term effects of covid-19 (Nature Premium, n.d). This is part of a green recovery (Nature Premium, n.d). The FSA has also encouraged its members to view the FS approach as a response to sustainable education. This links to the UNESCO Education for Sustainable Development [ESD] program released for 2023 (UNESCO, 2022). Links to FS and modern debates are still developing and could establish reasons for mainstream education to support the movement without FS having to bend to neo-liberal agendas.

Putting the principles of the movement within the context of modern debate opens a dialogue with mainstream education. It provides a reason for interest in the movement whilst staying reflective and true to the original principles. It is important to maintain the reflective, critical perspective of practice valued in revisionist perspectives to ensure this dialogue does not result in mainstream education influencing the principles, thus creating and going back to an instrumental perspective of practice. Instead, this dialogue should be

cautious in placing its' principles in modern debate to ensure its relevance to modern reality in education, but also inspire change and reflection amongst dominant discourses in education.

### **How will the Conceptual Framework be used?**

The aim of this conceptual framework is to develop key constructs of this study, informing the critical lens, to aid understanding of the progression of FS as well as to help guide the reader through the thesis. Conceptual frameworks create an intentional and systematic process of analysing a topic (Ravitch and Carl, 2016). This process has contributed to the structure of this chapter introducing the concepts of the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens. This systematic process is also used in the following literature review chapters, chapters 3 and 4, *Growth of the Froebelian Movement* and *Growth of the Forest School Movement*. These two chapters mirror each other and follow the structure of the linear presentation of the conceptual framework.

Egbert and Sanden (2020) suggest it is important the conceptual framework of a study translates into each component of the research process. Therefore, language used to develop the key constructs of the critical lens is used to analyse data collected. As discussed earlier, this conceptual framework represents formation of a tentative theory derived from analysis of literature and historical explorations of the two movements. The critical lens will be used to understand and interrogate its relevance in the reality of FS practitioners' experiences.

### **Conclusion**

Ravitch and Riggan (2017) state that the focus of a conceptual framework 'is to ground the study and convince readers of the importance and rigor'. This Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens aided in grounding this research, particularly as challenges occurred during data collection (See Chapter 5: *Storms of my own*). This conceptual framework explores FS using the English Froebelian Kindergarten movement as a critical lens. This chapter has developed key constructs of the study, instrumentalism and revisionism, which are used in the next two chapters to explore the progression of the two educational approaches in detail.

## Chapter 3

### The Growth of the Froebelian Kindergarten Movement

When researching the history of the English perspective of child-centred and play-based learning (see Appendix 1. Historical timeline), Froebel's kindergarten movement stands out as pivotal in English early years history. As this research delved deeper in the development of the Froebelian movement, similarities with the FS approach emerged. Thus, this chapter analyses the development of the Froebelian kindergarten movement in Victorian England to demonstrate its relationship with the later FS approach. This chapter and the following chapter, focusing on the development of the FS movement, mirror the same structures to highlight the parallel patterns of development of the two movements.

This chapter starts by exploring the pioneering ideas that underpinned Froebel's original philosophy and how they were introduced to England after his death. Next, the chapter analyses early English Froebelians' interpretations of his methods. The analysis shows how these early Froebelians developed and applied an instrumentalist perspective to Froebel's approach to ensure the perpetuation of the movement within the English education system. The third section of this chapter explains that, as education agendas changed, the instrumental perspective became obsolete and was replaced by revisionist perspectives by later Froebelians who sought to reclaim and re-establish Froebel's principles to enable continuation of what they considered to be a more authentic Froebelian approach. Investigating the growth of the Froebelian movement provides this study's novel approach to exploring the development of the FS approach, prompting FS to learn from the past.

#### Context of the literature

This chapter of the literature review will explore Froebelian interpretations of Froebel's writings within the structure of the conceptual framework of this research. The review only features Froebel's text indirectly through his followers' perspectives. This is due to this study's focus on how Froebel's words have been used to support conflicting perspectives of his Kindergarten philosophy throughout the movements development in England and is not concerned with evaluating Froebel's philosophy itself. Both modern and historical Froebelian text will be used to explore the development of the approach.

The historical literature captures the differences in which Froebel has been interpreted within the time periods of the literatures' publication in correlation to the development of the kindergarten movement that contribute to the Instrumental and Revisionist perspectives. Baroness von Marenholtz-Bulow features in this literature review as an influential person in the underpinning thinking behind the initial introduction of the approach in England. She studied under Froebel in Germany, and the article used in this review, Baroness von Marenholtz-Bulow (1878) advocates for the continuation of Froebel's kindergartens after its' ban by the Prussian government. Her efforts to ensure the Prussian government were accepting of Froebel's approach led her to focus on Froebel's methods over principles. The focus of methods led to writers such as Wiggin and Smith, who also feature in this review, further promoting the Froebelian methods. Wiggin and Smith's (1896) book, *Froebel Occupations*, provides a guide for carrying out a prescriptive version of Froebel's use of play through occupations which were activities to aid children's learning. Although Wiggin and Smith write from a American perspective, they capture the early Froebelian's pride in the kindergartens success in promoting manual skills for the focus of the growth of industrialisation that underpinned education of the late 1800s. Writing shortly after Wiggin and Smith, Josephine Jarvis (1907) translation of Froebel's work in the book *Friedrich Froebel's Pedagogics of the Kindergarten* illustrates a lesser focus on the 'industrial training' Wiggin and Smith mention, yet Jarvis still advocates for the prescriptive use of methods. The early Froebelian's focus on methods and industry led to the instrumental perspective of the kindergarten movement that this review will explore further. This historical perspective also influences modern writers. The review features Olson's (2002) article *Little Workers of the Kindergarten* which interprets and critically evaluates Froebel's philosophy with this instrumental perspective's influence.

Professor Kevin Brehony (2000) suggests the revisionist Froebelian perspective began to take shape in the early 1900s (See Chapter 2: Conceptual framework, paragraph titled *Revisionist Perspective*). This review includes the book *Froebel as a Pioneer in Modern Psychology* by Elsie Murray (1914), a key revisionist Froebelian, as an example of the shift in perspective. Published only seven years after Jarvis (1907) translation of Froebel's methods, Murray is a stark contrast as she demonstrates the revisionist criticality towards early Froebelian method and promotes Froebel's pedagogical principles that underpin his

philosophy in efforts to modernise the approach. The review also includes text from Irene M. Lilley (1967) as a highly cited source in modern Froebelian scholarship. Lilley's book *Friedrich Froebel: A Selection from His Writings* is her translation of Froebel's text, written much later than Jarvis's (1907) translation, and shows how the revisionist perspective still influenced a focus on principles over method in interpreting Froebel's philosophy that was still strong in the mid-1900s. The revisionist influence is also evident in modern literature featured in this review. The study draws from the writings of Professor Tina Bruce who is a leading Froebelian scholar and promotes the alignment of Froebel's philosophy within contemporary early childhood education. The review also includes journal articles from Dr Jane Read, who previously worked in the Froebel archive and is now a senior lecturer in Early Childhood studies at the University of Roehampton, the home of the Froebel Trust. Their perspective demonstrates the revisionist Froebelians success of ensuring the continuation of the movement and its relevance to modern practice.

As the literature review takes a linear historical exploration of the Froebel kindergarten movement, it was important to include literature that details the progression of the approach. Therefore, the review includes Manning's (2005) journal article *Rediscovering Froebel: A call to Re-examine his Life and Gifts and Joyce's (2012) chapter Born to do: Friedrich Froebel (1782-1852)* to provide information on the narrative and context that underpinned this historical progression of the movement. Nawrotzki's (2006) journal article *Froebel is Dead; Long Live Froebel! The National Froebel Foundation and English Education* is also included in the review as it explores the dilemma faced by the Froebel societies as instrumental and revisionist perspectives clashed. This article provides insight into how Froebelians managed this clash that is relevant to the progression of the FS approach as it moves between instrumental and revisionist perspectives.

## **The Froebelian approach**

### *Who was Fredrich Froebel?*

Fredrich Froebel was a German educationalist who founded the kindergarten in educational practice and created educational toys and activities known as gifts and occupations. The principles behind Froebel's philosophy of education were heavily influenced by Froebel's life



experiences, thus making his approach complex and difficult to understand without the context of his biography.

Froebel was born in 1782 in the Thuringian Forest (Germany) and was raised by his father, a strict Lutheran pastor. His mother passed away when Froebel was 10 months old, and he felt rejected by his stepmother (Bruce, 2021). Later, Froebel championed women as early educators and promoted the importance of a mother's role in children's learning, which Manning (2005) attributes to the absence of a nurturing figure in Froebel's early childhood. Bruce (2021) describes Froebel's childhood as a lonely experience where he spent much of his time alone outdoors. Therefore, Froebel's kindergarten philosophy can be interpreted as providing children with the supportive opportunities he did not receive in his own early childhood. The garden as a place of comfort and exploration became a defining feature of Froebel's kindergarten philosophy. There he placed importance on children's autonomy and the facilitative, supportive role of the adult (Joyce, 2012). The influence of Froebel's religious upbringing is noticed in the spiritual connection to God he makes in children's play (Bruce, 2021). At the age of 10, Froebel was taken in by his uncle, also a Lutheran pastor, who had a more nurturing relationship with him and who supported Froebel in his later studies.

As a young man, Froebel first studied Forestry. This furthered his passion for the outdoors into adulthood, and he described himself as an apprentice to nature (Bruce, 2021). Between 1800 and 1812, Froebel went to study botany and mathematics in Jena, became a full-time education tutor to fund his studies, progressed to study under Pestalozzi, a Swiss pedagogue and education reformer, in his experiment school in Yverdon, and then moved on to study crystallography at Berlin University (Bruce, 2021). This is arguably the most influential period for Froebel in creating his philosophical approach to education. At that time, Jena and Berlin were central to Early German Romanticism thinking (Frank, 2004) which Froebel is often characterised within (Manning, 2005; Bruce, 2021). Frank (2004) explains German Romantics can be described in two ways; as progressive social leaders who promoted liberalism and creativity through a celebration of imagination; or as dark villains who promoted fascism and unsettling structures of just societies. Froebel had ambitious ideas for the kindergarten and its influence on society, yet he did not fit Frank and Millan's latter description. Encouraging children to think for themselves was crucial in the early stages of

developing Froebel's first kindergarten school in Keilhau in 1817 (Bruce, 2021). This emphasis on autonomy consequently led to his method to be banned in 1851 by the Prussian government for promoting progressive ideas and freedom (Joyce, 2012). Froebel's concept of unity, which he focuses on harmony of nature, man and God, was influenced by early German Romanticism (Manning, 2005; Bruce, 2012). To Froebel, the child's first experience of this is through their play, therefore, he placed the learner at the centre of his philosophy.

### *Concept of the learner*

Froebel's studies of forestry and natural sciences influenced the way he constructed the concept of the learner within his educational philosophy. Froebel was interested in the laws of nature and believed children's development was not excluded from this.

*'To young plants and animals we give space and time, knowing that then they will grow correctly according to inherent law... But the human being is regarded as a piece of wax or a lump of clay which can be moulded into any shape we choose. Why is it that we close our minds to the lessons which Nature silently teaches?'* (Froebel cited in Lilley, 1967, p.52)

Froebel did not view children as passive in their education and advocated the importance of encouraging children's natural curiosities and awareness of their innate instincts. Froebel brought attention to the active learning of young children which education did not yet cater for, even exploring the indications of active learning in new-born babies. Froebel took inspiration from Pestalozzi when he visited his school in Yverdun (Bruce, 2021). Pestalozzi's ideas of stages of physical development focussed on a child's current stage of development. Froebel furthered Pestalozzi's theories to include children's intellectual development and also potential for future development in children's actions (Joyce, 2012).

*'That the movements of the young and delicate mind of the child, although as yet so small as to be unnoticeable, are of the most essential consequence to his future life'* (Froebel cited in Murray, 1914 p.6)

Froebel felt that the youngest children's needs were not being met in education, nor at home, thus he began to develop ideas of the kindergarten. Within his kindergarten model,

Froebel placed value in nurturing and facilitating roles for adults, which contrasted the authoritarian model of the time. Froebel's ideas stemmed from a romantic view of the role of the mother in young children's education. This can be interpreted as important to Froebel considering the lack of nurturing parents in his early childhood (Bruce, 2021). In his book *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten* originally published in 1861, Froebel emphasises the mother's ability to appropriately respond to the needs of her children. Influenced by Pestalozzi, observation of children in play became an essential factor for the development of Froebel's kindergarten methods and Froebel would extend his range of child observation through inviting mothers he knew to contribute their observations of their own children in play (Murray, 1914). Although the emphasis of characterising women as instinctual, nurturing mothers may be outdated, it did pave the way for Froebel towards the facilitating adult role in children's learning which enabled a novel relationship between the learner and adult and a different responsibility of education.

*'[T]herefore, education must be permissive and following, guarding and protecting, only; it should neither be direct nor determine nor interfere.'* (Froebel cited in Lilley, 1967, p.51)

Froebel encouraged practitioners of his kindergarten's to take a step back, to observe and respond to children's natural sequences of development. Establishing the learner as active in their endeavours, he urged adults to be permissive, not to interfere, and to let children 'bang and pound' or 'play quietly and thoughtfully to themselves' (Froebel cited in Murray, 1914, p.170). In Froebel's kindergarten, play becomes the means in which young, active learners can express their thoughts and experience their learning. It also becomes a way in which adults can stimulate development, so it was important to Froebel that practitioners understand the deeper meaning behind play.

#### *A space for play*

*'Play at this time is not trivial, it is highly serious and of deep significance'* (Froebel cited in Murray, 1914, p.128)

The concept of play was incredibly important to Froebel. He saw play as a way children experienced and understood the world. Froebel is often misunderstood as he writes of play in the terms of the child's work (Murray, 1914). Play in Froebel's eyes was not something a

child must do, nor should it be dull and controlled. Froebel saw play as an action that should bring joy and freedom for children to express themselves and be creative (Murray, 1914). It is a way for children to develop an understanding of their true nature and develop self-expression further into their adult lives and into work.

*'The means by which a child gains his first ideas of his own nature and life and the nature and life of the cosmos, are his play and playthings.'* (Froebel cited in Murray, 1914, p. 148)

Froebel thought children's inner lives, meaning their thoughts, understandings and consciousness, could be expressed outwardly through their play. Play then acts as a bridge between children's inner worlds and their outer worlds (Drummond, 2000). Children can then experience their outer world such as nature, community and people, through their play. For Froebel explains, 'what man tries to represent or do, that he begins to understand.' (Froebel cited in Murray, 1914, p.50). Therefore, Froebel began to create educational toys as children's playthings to stimulate and extend this bridge of children's understandings. He called the toys gifts and complements them with occupations which were activities to extend the use of gifts (Joyce, 2012). In *Pedagogics of the Kindergarten*, Froebel was very descriptive when explaining how to introduce gifts and occupations to children; even explaining the kinds of noises or songs the mother or nurse should make as they play certain games and do certain movements with the gifts. Yet Froebel is very clear that gifts and occupations should be used as appropriate to the child's development and level of understanding.

*'They [meaning gift and occupation's] show, namely, that they continue to unfold in a progressive course of the development and education of the child in a logical sequence; and yet, as it were in harmony with the growth of the child, ... and in the manner suited to the course and the then existing stage of the child's development.'* (Froebel in Jarvis, 1907, p. 146)

The use of gifts and occupations are complex and demands a firm understanding of Froebel's concept of the learner as active and the role of the adult as following and facilitating. It is well documented through the development of Froebel's kindergarten methods internationally after Froebel's death, that the gifts and occupations had been used

and developed in an adult-directed manner, with negative results on the reputation and purpose of the kindergarten movement (Nawrotzki, 2006: Joyce, 2012: Bruce, 2021). Bruce (2021) understands the Froebelian concept of play as an interactionalist approach. This is helpful when considering the adults' role in play as Froebel warns not to 'interfere' (Froebel cited in Lilley, 1967, p.51). Bruce (2021) suggest play should be seen as in a spirit of conversation between adult and child. The adult can offer play opportunities, using gifts and occupation, just like one would offer a question in conversation. The child has the option to respond to the play like a question offered or may lead the conversation of play themselves.

Within the Froebelian approach, play is important for introducing children to new ideas as well as helping children understand the world around them through their experiences.

Therefore, the environment plays a crucial role in children's learning and Froebel was particularly interested in what nature had to offer children.

#### *The role of the natural environment*

Due to the influence of his former studies of natural sciences and forestry, access to nature was fundamental to Froebel's original philosophy of the kindergarten. Froebel had a romantic view of child development and often drew comparisons with the laws of nature. Hence, his choice of naming kindergartens which translates as garden of/for children (Joyce, 2012). Froebel's outdoor learning includes strong elements of free play and exploration in natural spaces alongside more structured garden designs. Within the garden space, children were given responsibility to care for their own small square plot in which they could plant what they wished. There was also a communal plot which all the children and adults tended together and was seen as an opportunity to learn from each other and gain a sense of unity and community through shared work (Bruce, 2021). Bruce (2021) suggests Froebel intended to promote children's engagement with nature rather than just put children to work in the garden. Froebel was critical of Pestalozzi's over teaching in the garden and wanted children to learn from their own experiences, successful or not, within their own plots of the garden (Bruce, 2021). Nature offered children learning experiences through play as well as opportunities to observe their impact on the world and community through their responsibilities in the garden.

Natural spaces in the kindergarten also enabled a less traditional approach to the relationship and roles between adults and children.

*'Where this sense of nature is still unspoilt, nothing unites teacher and pupil so closely as a common effort to study it's phenomena.'* (Froebel in Lilly 1967– Bruce 2021)

Froebel's concepts of the learner as active and curious and the role of the adult as facilitative is enhanced in the natural environment. The natural environment alone was not enough in Froebel's philosophy. Hence, adults were encouraged to walk alongside, but not lead, children through their learning in nature. As Bruce (2021) states providing children freedom with guidance. Yet it is not just adults that children can learn from in the natural environment. Taoka (2019) suggests Froebel valued children's collaboration with their playmates. Not only do children learn together in the communal garden but also in their free play, particularly with their play in construction. Whether that be play with stones, leaves, constructing dens or forts, Froebel indicated that children often look at each other's work which leads them to cooperation and joining their efforts (Taoka, 2019). This suggests a social-constructivist approach in outdoor learning where children are not only learning through their direct impact within the garden, but also through observing and interacting with others in nature.

### **The English Froebelian Kindergarten Movement**

Unlike the Forest School movement, the Froebelian movement had a definite pioneer. Unfortunately for the Froebelians, Froebel's ideas were complex and his character more so. According to Lilley (1967), Froebel 'delighted in evading the questions of those visitors who came to analyse and label his ideas'. Furthermore, Froebel was not a confident academic writer, preferring to spread the word of his philosophy in personal letters and informal articles. He avoided writing his ideas officially and, as Bruce (2021) puts it, 'in true Froebel style', left his most popular piece of work *The Education of Man* unfinished. Lilley (1967) describes Froebel's writing style as 'verbose' and 'convoluted' and suggests his texts are seldom read in full. Thus, his thoughts can be interpreted in a variety of ways, particularly when translated from the original German language.

After the kindergartens were banned in 1851 by the Prussian government, Froebel passed away in 1852 and his followers were tasked with taking Froebel's complex ideas internationally to countries that would be more accepting of his methods. Baroness von Marenholtz-Bulow was one of his followers and was very influential in the initial development of the movement in England (Bruce, 2021). Marenholtz-Bulow (1878) supported Froebel in the fight to maintain his kindergartens in Prussia before becoming banned and defended his methods against claims of encouraging revolutionary ideas. She claimed:

*'scarcely could a more suitable means be found to prevent the budding of revolutionary thinking, and to direct to the striving for natural organic development, and orderly and legitimate reform, than Froebel's educational method.'* (Marenholtz-Bulow, 1878, p. 249)

Marenholtz-Bulow stayed true to Froebel's original teachings, and it is apparent in her article *Reminiscences of Froebel* published in 1878, that she was passionate about the continuation of the kindergarten methods. Consequently, her writings contributed to an orthodox perspective of Froebel's ideas (Bruce, 2021). Furthermore, Froebel's complex and sometimes difficult to read original text, and alongside influential characters such as Marenholtz-Bulow, Froebel's followers began to interpret and write about the approach in ways that contributed to narrow practices devoid of his philosophical principles (Bruce, 2021). Hence, to ensure acceptance of Froebel's methods, the Froebelian kindergarten became open to the influences of the countries his followers settled in.

### *The perfect storm*

The development of early Froebelian methods in English kindergartens proved effective in working towards the educational aims of the mid-1800s. During this time, debate surrounding education was moving away from methods of teaching through religious societies to free compulsory schooling for the poor (Read, 2006). This created the perfect storm of education that influenced interpretations of Froebel's methods. The first Froebelian kindergarten opened in England in 1854 when children's work was important for society.

*'Independence is more important than education; and if the wages of the child's labour are necessary... it is far better that it should go to work at the earliest age'*  
(Education Commission, 1861 cited in Mcculloch, 2020, p.530)

Not only was children's work important for society, working class families also relied upon children's earnings. When the 1870 Elementary Education Act was introduced, promoting mass education, it was received with tension. The act of 1870 introduced a new concept of childhood in which children were entitled to learn (Bischof, 2020). Mcculloch (2020) touches on the introduction of the 1870 act as the working-class struggle for education which was being influenced by middle class interests. Hence, the industrial developments of England were influencing education. Although the Act enabled the School Boards, responsible for education in local areas, to create bye laws to ensure parents enabled children to attend education, there were many exemptions and the concept of what constitutes education was vague (Mcculloch, 2020). For instance, a child's place of employment could be responsible for providing education.

This shift in educational aims of moral education provided by religious societies to the mass education of the urban poor influenced the way Froebel's philosophy was interpreted in England. As education was to fit children's subsequent working lives, Froebel's gifts and occupations were used to develop manual skills required of the working class to maintain a national lead in manufacturing (Read, 2006). Mass education also needed to be cost effective, therefore, the use of galleried classrooms, capable of holding up to 100 children, was a popular design for infant classrooms in heavy populated areas in England (Read, 2006). This contributed to the instrumental use of Froebel's concepts of play-based learning with early Froebelians using a more didactic and teacher-led approach to gifts and occupations within galleried classrooms.

### **Instrumental perspectives of the Froebelian approach**

For English education, the mid-1800s was a significant time of change and, encouraged by Froebel's desire to change society through education, it was important to his followers that they penetrate and influence state systems (Lilley, 1967). This meant that the Froebelian kindergartens must appeal to the industrialisation of England and the social reforms promoting mass education. By 1870 Froebelian kindergartens began to increase in



popularity and have effect on elementary school methods (Lilley, 1967). For instance, kindergarten methods began to feature on elementary timetabling (Read, 2003). However, instrumental perspectives of Froebel's child-centred and play-based learning promoted interest in the movement through using play as a pedagogical tool and standardising practice.

### *Play as a pedagogical tool*

In the early developments of the English kindergarten method, the use of Froebel's educational toys and activities known as gifts and occupations became central to the movement. When describing the use of his gifts, Froebel states that they should be used in 'harmony with the growth of the child' and in a way that would suit the 'existing stage of the child's development.' (Froebel in Jarvis, 1907, p. 146). Froebel's descriptive explanations of the sequence and way to introduce children to the different stages of play with gifts provided early Froebelians a system in which English kindergartens were developed.

These sequences of gifts and occupations enabled Froebelian kindergartens to meet the demands of English education as well as addressing the kindergarten principles of play-based and child-centred learning. Gifts and occupations were presented to children when seen as developmentally appropriate by the adult (Joyce, 2012); therefore, centring practice on the children's stage of development and enabling learning through play with toys. However, to accommodate large numbers of children, this was carried out by English early Froebelians in a more controlled and structured manner than Froebel had originally intended. In more populated cities, gifts were presented in whole class teaching, rather than individually, in galleried classrooms with children following the direction of the class teacher (Read, 2006). Although, suited to the child's developmental stage as Froebel had stated, this instrumental approach to child-centred learning and play did not address Froebel's concept of the learner as active, nor did it meet Froebel's intention of joy in play.

Yet these core principles of Froebel's philosophy were to be further ignored to promote the kindergarten value in industrial England. Olson (2002, p.359) describes Froebel's concept of play as 'never free play' and accuses Froebel and his methods as forming a scientific scheme to produce precise results with an ultimate aim to produce 'little workers'. The instrumental perspective of Froebel's play-based learning enabled Froebel's gifts to become pedagogical

tools to prepare children for work and were sometimes referred to as industrial training. Wiggin and Smith (1896) writing from an American perspective, although mirroring the English development of the movement, stated the kindergarten industrial training was gaining public attention and boasted:

*'Does not this promise well for the artistic work-man of the future, when a child of five to six years is able to accomplish such results through industrial training?'*

(Wiggin and Smith, 1896, p.22)

The instrumental perspective of the early Froebelians celebrated the kindergarten's contributions to industry. Kindergarten demonstrations were featured alongside the country's leading inventors and engineering marvels in the Philadelphia Exposition of 1876 (Olson, 2002). The inclusion of the kindergarten demonstrations within the industrial exposition indicates the tokenistic and instrumental way in which Froebel's methods were used for serving the technological workforce over moral education which Froebel's principles had intended.

Though, there was some concern amongst Froebelians about the ethics of the movement's alignment with government agendas of industrialisation and a need for a reminder of what the purpose of the kindergarten was. Courthope-Bowen, a significant writer of Froebel methods stated:

*'It must not, however, be supposed that any manual work will do as an occupation... a choice has to be made; and what is chosen has to be adapted to the kindergarten purpose, - the purpose of mental, physical and moral development.'* (cited in Wiggin and Smith, 1896, p.8)

However, in response to Courthope-Bowen, Wiggin and Smith wrote:

*'The aim of the kindergarten, as has been repeatedly said, is to strengthen and develop productive activity'* (1896, p.8)

Thus, there were growing tensions between Froebelians of the use of play as a pedagogical tool to meet education agendas. It was important to Froebel's followers to maintain the growth and influence of the movement into state education (Lilley, 1967). Therefore, the kindergartens needed to be consistent and unified in their approach. In addition to this, the

Elementary Education Act of 1870 was beginning to challenge attitudes towards the purposes of education and the Froebelian movement needed to progress with this change. Hence, standardising practice and establishing the Froebelian label as a professional approach became of utter most importance.

### *Standardisation and marketisation*

The first step to becoming a recognised professional institution was networking and creating a professional community. When Froebel's kindergarten first opened to England in 1854, they were run by his followers, like the Rouge sisters, who opened their own small setting catering for their own children and children of other emigrants from Germany (Read, 2003). By 1873 the Manchester Kindergarten Association was founded, followed by the London Froebel Society in 1875, which was to become the professional body of English Froebelians (Nawrozki, 2006). By this point there was a high number of kindergartens, many run by women with little understanding of Froebel's underpinning philosophy, and opportunities to train as a Froebelian kindergartener was growing quickly (Read, 2003; Nawrozki, 2006). Thus, the Froebel Society needed to consolidate a Froebelian identity and establish standards. To achieve this, Read (2003) explains that the Society began to form training classes, a register for kindergarten teachers and establish a model for the kindergarten. However, practice remained influenced by education agendas of the time with standardising practice contributing to instrumental perspectives of Froebel's concepts of child-centred and play-based learning.

Kindergarten manuals were produced to help standardise practice. The use of gifts and occupations had proved effective towards English education agendas and remained an important focus to early Froebelians. Texts, like *Froebel's Occupations* written by Wiggin and Smith (1896), focused solely on the introduction of gifts and occupations and key followers, such as Baroness von Marenholtz-Bulow stayed unwaveringly true to Froebel's original symbolic teachings and methods (Bruce, 2021). The kindergarten manuals began to simplify Froebel's complex ideas for teachers and led to didactic versions of the kindergarten approach (Brehony, 2000). This contributed to rigid forms of kindergarten practice that lacked the underpinning principles of Froebel's concepts. Trainee kindergarten teachers were beginning to be educated by Froebelians who had little connection to Froebel's original texts and practice, therefore, relied upon the kindergarten manuals for guidance

(Nawrozki, 2006). Consequently, Froebel's gifts and occupations became a defining feature in kindergartens.

This contributed to a tokenistic use of Froebel's gifts and occupations as the methods became marketable and popular. As the kindergarten movement flourished in England and internationally, Manning (2005) suggests by 1896 there was a rapid interest in 'all things kindergarten'; resulting in kindergarten gifts and occupations becoming commercially produced. The production of educational toys influenced Froebelians to alter the kindergarten philosophy towards education agendas and into a simplistic form of practice (Manning, 2005). Manning (2005, p.375) argues that 'had [Froebel] lived to see the dogma and didactic routines incorporated into his philosophy by his followers, he would probably have been appalled'. Eventually, this tokenistic approach encouraged the term 'kindergarten to appear on timetables in state schools as simply a time to play and break from more formal learning of the three 'Rs' (Read, 2003).

The standardisation and marketisation of the kindergarten movement enabled the early Froebelians to create a strong identity with the use of gifts and occupations and encouraged the inclusion of Froebel's methods in some state schools. However, this instrumental development of early Froebelian practice came at a cost of Froebel's principles and a loss of meaning behind his methods. Read (2003, p.31) states this was 'the first sowing of the seed of progressive ideas in what was still inhospitable soil'. For some Froebelians, revisionist Froebelians, who were unsatisfied with the instrumental methods of the early Froebelians, something needed to change in their current climate of education for them to bring their concerns forwards and to be taken seriously.

### **The break in the clouds**

Early Froebelian instrumental perspectives proved to be effective towards preparing children for their subsequent working lives. The adult-directed use of Froebel's methods also enabled mass education to be cost effective (Read, 2006). Tensions were rising between revisionist and instrumental perspectives of child-centred and play-based learning amongst Froebelians. The revisionist Froebelians understood the importance of children's free play in learning and the value of Froebel's underpinning principles. Yet, the revisionist Froebelians could not promise such an effective and adult-directed system of kindergarten

education which was seen as successful in meeting the governments education agendas as the early Froebelian methods. Revisionist Froebelians attempts to modify the early Froebelian methods to foster an enthusiasm for education and social advancement were viewed by early Froebelians as diverting the true purpose of education (Read, 2006). However, the purpose behind education was about to change.

In 1898 the 'payment by result' scheme was to come to an end (Nawrozki, 2006), therefore, the way the government funded and measured the effectiveness of schools was changing. This was not just to the relief of Froebelians but of educators of all professional backgrounds. The use of the code of 'payment by result' was seen by some professionals as demoralising and as the Manchester Guardian reported at the time:

*'They [education professionals] believe that the restrictions of the Code and its interference with freedom in teaching not only prevents them from doing all they might do for children, but that its tendency is to make their duties mechanical and their work perfunctory'* (The Manchester Guardian, 1888, p.5)

The less outcome-driven approach in the education system enabled revisionist Froebelians some flexibility from constraints of instrumental learning agendas. Pioneers were able to put forward perspectives of a more individualised concept of child-centred and play-based learning to influence change in early childhood education.

Following the end of 'payment by result' came an influx of more scientific approaches to child development and a rise of a new concept of the child through child psychology. English early Froebelian's instrumentalism was challenged by new ideas about the nature of early childhood and the purposes and methods of education. (Nawrozki, 2006). The rigid early Froebelian methods of industrial training was becoming increasingly unpopular, and Froebel's philosophy came under heavy criticism (Bruce, 2021). It became evident that, to survive, the Froebelian movement needed to adapt.

### **Revisionist perspectives of the Froebelian approach**

Unfortunately, the Froebel Society had created a strong identity and purpose through incorporation of the instrumental interpretation of Froebel's philosophy by the early Froebelians and its own process of standardisation and marketisation of the approach. The

instrumental perspectives of the early Froebelians had created a sinking ship of the movement and the Froebel Society needed to act fast to save their professional recognition. Through examining organisational records and publications of the Froebel Society, Nawrotski (2006) paints a picture of the Froebel Society's attempts to regain recognition at the expense of Froebel's pedagogy. Froebel represented the past and was a liability to the organisation; hence, causing barriers for the Froebel Society's collaboration with other organisations at a time when funding and support for the movement was low (Nawrotski, 2006). Froebel disappeared from the Froebel Society's training curriculum and his name unmentioned in lectures (Nawrotski, 2006). Despite keeping his name, the Froebel Society no longer promoted Froebelian philosophy nor specialised in early childhood education. The Froebel Society ran the risk of becoming meaningless without connection to its pioneering principles.

Nawrotski (2006) describes the Froebel Society's dilemma as they debated constantly as to whether 'To Froebel or not to Froebel'. For some of the Froebelians, Froebel represented a crucial identity present in a long history of practice. Therefore, they began to re-examine Froebel's principles alongside more modern thinking (Lilley, 1967). For the revisionist Froebelians, Froebel's principles were still important yet their critique of his method, particularly the instrumental perspective, needed to be heard. This was to enable them to revise and strengthen his original principles and detach from the distorted kindergarten methods created by early Froebelians.

#### *Developing critical perspectives*

The critical response to Froebel's methods was not a new perspective amongst Froebelians. Breymann, who was Froebel's great niece, opened the Pestalozzi – Froebel House in Germany. She deemed Froebel's gifts as too abstract and modified his methods to provide household occupations for both sexes (Read, 2003). In 1874, she wrote in a letter to her parents:

*'I must confess, I could not believe that these interminable games could really be the chief expression of Froebel's idea. Yes, I must say, there was much that struck me as laughable, it seems to me so narrow'* (Breymann cited in Read, 2003, p.21).

Although, Breymann's school was well established in Germany, her ideas and modification upset English early Froebelians (Read, 2003). However, it was the early Froebelians that were influential in England during this time, thus the English kindergarten movement was not ready to receive her perspective on practice. Yet, her comments signify the discontent growing in the Froebelian movement and the beginnings of change in perspectives amongst Froebel's followers which would underpin the development of revisionism in English Froebelians.

Elsie Murray (1861-1932) was influential in the Froebelian kindergarten movement around the time scientific models of child development were becoming popular and the early Froebelians were facing challenges. As a revisionist Froebelian, she criticised the pretence of kindergarten activities as they did not give children free scope in play (Read, 2006).

*[T]eachers have also found it convenient to disregard Froebel's frequent warnings not to interfere, ... this advice is totally disregarded, and we find prescribed the most formal of object lessons, dealing with the properties of the ball in set questions and answers; only at the end comes "If there is time, the children may be allowed to roll the ball." (Murray, 1914, p.170).*

In this passage, Murray demonstrated how Froebel's core principles have been neglected to ensure the success of the instrumental perspective of Froebel's concept of the active learner and highlights how controlled play had become. Froebel (cited in Lilley, 1967, p.51) reminds practitioners their practice should be 'permissive and following', yet in Murray's statement, only after the child has completed the adult-directed questions, can they play with the object. Froebel's sense of enjoyment in play and curiosity seems to be lost in Murray's explanation of early Froebelian practice (Bruce, 2021). It was important to the revisionist Froebelians to reconnect Froebel's principles to practice, however, this did not occur without challenges.

Murray acknowledged the early Froebelian instrumental perspective and their concerns about free play. She cites Professor O' Shea who warns that 'the Froebelian, being thus reduced to passive watching' (Murray, 1914, p.192). Within the early Froebelian methods the adult had a clear role, a role that was reinforced by the kindergarten manuals. Read (2003) also suggests that the resistance of revisionist Froebelian ideas were based on

mistrust that their methods would be affective; whilst there was a need to be in control of vast numbers of children in classrooms and the demands of accountability established by the effects of 'payment by result'. However, this system was no longer enforced, so the role of the educator throughout England was to change.

By the 1930's, ideas around child development were changing in response to the advancement of psychology and social sciences. Froebel's kindergarten methods and the instrumental interpretation was seen as obsolete along with the dated language Froebel had used (Bruce, 2021). According to Lilley (1967) from this point the formalism of kindergartens was abandoned, and revisionists were able to return to exploring Froebel's principles of the child's nature and relationships. Yet, after the heavy criticism the Froebel Society faced both externally and internally, the revisionists were tasked with the burden of securing the Froebelian reputation.

#### *Revising principles and responding to modern debates*

It was not the revisionist Froebelian intention to rid their practice of Froebel's influence. Their dissatisfaction with the movement rested with the didactic, instrumental interpretation of his methods that had evolved in England after Froebel's death. Revisionists still saw value in Froebel's philosophy and wanted to strengthen and build upon the underpinning principles of his practice. The revisionist perspective of Froebel's child-centred and play-based learning reflected on Froebel's original concept of the learner as active and play as a form of learning through freedom and creativity. However, for the revisionist Froebelians to be taken seriously, detaching themselves from the instrumental, early Froebelian methods was not the only solution. They needed to re-establish Froebelian principles in modern education and debate.

With the inclusion of scientific models for understanding child development, revisionist Froebelians began to look at Froebel's work with a new lens. They began to examine Froebel's work and interpretations which related to scientific, sociological and psychological ideas (Lilley, 1967). Murrey (1914) contributed to this effort with her book titled, *Froebel as a Pioneer in Modern Psychology*. She explains:

*'Froebel's knowledge of child-nature came to him precisely as it comes to the psychologist of the present day, through patient observations of the doings of little*



*children, and thoughtful interpretation of their possible meanings'* (Murray, 1914, p.5).

This paved the way for people like Susan Isaacs (1885-1948) whose work with young children also connected Froebel's concepts of play-based learning with the more scientific models popular at the time. Although she did not label herself as a revisionist Froebelian, the influence of Froebel's principles was evident in her practice as she reflected Froebel's language and understanding in believing children's play acted as a bridge between children's inner and outer worlds, enabling them to make sense of their experiences (Dummond, 2000). However, Isaacs's psychoanalysis background influenced her interpretation of the adult's role in education which contrasted early Froebelians instrumental practice. She did not offer a pedagogical program. Instead, she promoted the use of observation to create an analytical account of the development of children's intellectual and emotional powers (Drummond, 2000). Like Froebel, she also believed activity was essential for learning and gave children a great deal of autonomy and freedom. Yet, Isaac focused on the role of adults as to meet the spontaneous interests of the children and record behaviours; regardless of whether the behaviour was deemed as pleasing to the adult (Drummond, 2000). This may be seen as a more radical approach to Froebel's child-centred and play-based learning. Bruce (2021) explains Froebel's principles of learning as 'freedom with guidance' with an interactionalist approach where play is viewed in the spirit of conversation. In Isaac's practice, this conversation may seem very one sided as she focuses on Froebel's emphasis on observation and to not 'interfere'. Isaac's practice succeeded in bringing Froebel's principles of child-centred and play-based learning into the realms of the scientific model of psychoanalysis. However, Froebel's philosophy was not just about understanding children, but for equipping them for their future lives and improving society.

Margaret McMillan (1860-1931) took modernising Froebel's concepts further than just bringing his work into the scientific realms of education and focused on addressing the needs of the urban poor. As a member of the Froebel Society, she believed education could be used to improve public health and was inspired by Froebel's use of outdoor environments (Joyce, 2012). In early 1900s there was concern of the health of the urban poor which McMillan was to address using Froebel's use of nature. In England, there was

increase interest in a health initiative called the Open-air movement (Joyce, 2012). This enabled unwell children from urban areas to live in the countryside for a recommended number of weeks where they would receive good nutrition, schooling and rest in the fresh air. Incorporating Froebel's principles, McMillan developed a similar approach called Camp Schools. In the Froebelian approach, parents were seen as essential in children's learning. Therefore, McMillan's camps operated in the children's local community to ensure parents had regular contact and education would have an impact on the community (Joyce, 2012). This would address rising criticism that Froebelian use of play in nature, without its industrial link, was removed from children's reality and did not prepare children for their subsequent working lives. Thus, McMillan, as Joyce (2012) explains 'placed a garden in the centre of the slum world that she wanted to improve.' In the early developments of the English Froebelian movement, Froebel's use of the outdoors was neglected, and its value lost amongst the instrumental perspective of learning. McMillan, although operating in urban areas, placed outdoor learning back in the centre of Froebelian practice to meet the growing awareness of children's health and learning.

### **Conclusion: The unlikely pair**

When thinking about the Victorian Froebelian kindergarten movement, images may come to mind of young children sitting in the traditional Victorian stalls, learning to become effective members of an industrial society. In contrast, thoughts of young children playing freely in natural woodlands prompted by the FS movement may conjure up a strikingly different image. So, how can this unlikely pair have anything in common? This study finds that the two movements have similarities that run much deeper than what is seen on face value and concluded there is a great deal the FS movement can learn from the Froebelian movement.

This chapter has explored how the Froebelian kindergarten movement was introduced to England as an international early years education model and how the approach was interpreted and influenced by the English education systems. An instrumental perspective of Froebel's principles was developed at a time where the government was particularly interested in outcomes. This outcome-driven practice encouraged the promotion of industrial training in kindergartens preparing children for work (Wiggin and Smith, 1896). Once again, England has a government interested in outcome-driven agendas that the FS movement must navigate. Following the structure of this chapter, provided by the

Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens, the next chapter will explore how the instrumental perspective of FS is developing and its effect on play as a pedagogical tool and the promotion of strategic standardisation and marketisation of the FS movement.

For the Froebelians, the perfect storm of education and industrialisation of England was lifted with the rise of scientific approaches to child development and the end of the 'payment by result' scheme. This provided a break in the clouds for the revisionist perspective of the Froebelian movement to voice a critical perspective on the instrumental use of Froebel's methods and re-establish Froebel's ideas in modern education and societal issues. The next chapter will investigate the rise of critical perspectives in FS and the increased use of the FS approach to address current issues in education such as the covid-19 pandemic. Although FS literature may hint at a revisionist perspective of FS emerging, the break in the clouds is less clear. The next chapter will explore possibilities that may provide a clearing of the storm for the FS movement.

Although the two movements may be an unlikely pair, analysing the Growth of the Froebelian movement has provided a critical lens to explore the Growth of the FS movement. This will aid understanding of the development of the FS approach and possible anticipation of the next steps for the FS movement.

## Chapter 4

### The Growth of the Forest School Movement

As noted in the previous chapter, the growth of English Froebelian Kindergarten movement and the growth of the FS movement share similarities in the development of their approaches in England. The similar dilemmas faced in this development have informed the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens in which to analyse FS research. Thus, the structure of this chapter mirrors the structure of the previous chapter.

Firstly, this chapter will explore how neoliberal agendas of education and the culture of performativity creates a perfect storm for instrumental perspectives of FS practice to develop. Secondly, the chapter draws from literature of the analysis of the Froebelian kindergarten movement to explore how the FS movement can learn from *lessons from the past*. This section reflects on the instrumental perspective of the Froebelian approach, how this was damaging for the Froebelian movement and how this can inform the development of FS. The chapter investigates the development of revisionist perspectives of FS and how this may respond to tokenistic practices emerging in the FS approach. Finally, the chapter considers the current climate of education and whether it can enable revisionist perspectives of FS to emerge.

#### *Context of Literature*

This chapter explores a range of FS literature and scholarship focusing on childhood studies and early years education. As the FS approach was first introduced in the early 90s to the UK, scholarship into the approach is still developing. Hence, FS literature particularly concerned with early years practice is limited. Therefore, not all FS literature used in this review is focused on early years education and explores the issues facing FS in a general context of the FS movements development. The use of literature of childhood studies and exploring literature on early years policy and professionalism, aids this reviews discussion of practice in an early years context.

Early research into the scholarship of the FS approach, such as O'Brien (2006), Lovell (2009), Close (2012), Ridgers, Knowles and Sayers (2012) and Roe and Aspinall (2011) supports this review's understanding of the initial focus of FS scholarship in exploring the benefits of the

approach. However, these pieces of research do not underpin this review as it aims to explore more current literature that takes a more critical stance of FS pedagogy. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, the article *A critique of Forest School or something lost in translation* by Mark Leather, Associate Professor at Plymouth Marjon University, inspired the critical stance on FS pedagogy this research undertakes. Although Leather talks about the FS movement in general, he does emphasise the early years roots of the approach and the importance of play which is relevant to this study's early years context. To enable a balance of views regarding the development of the FS approach, this review also includes research that respond critically to Leather's article, such as Knight (2018) and Waite and Goodenough (2018). Sara Knight is a key author in FS literature, having written multiple books about FS practice as the approach has developed in the UK and has strong connections with the FSA. Sue Waite, associate Professor at the University of Plymouth, is featured in this research alongside other authors, Goodenough and Davis, as she adds a critical response to the concerns of the dilution of the FS principles highlighted by Leather and reflects Knight's notation of FS's need to be contextualised in English education.

The dilemma of the dilution of FS is explored in the literature review as scholars debate the value of a purest view of FS or the importance of FS's alinement in mainstream education. Literature exploring the impact this has on the quality of practice is featured in the review, such as the book *Critical Issues in Forest School* (2019) with chapters from Sackville-Ford and McCree. Other FS research explored in this review discuss the neoliberal agendas that create tensions in FS practice in primary settings, such as Pimlott-Wilson and Coates (2019), Whincup, Allin and Greer (2021), and Kemp (2020). With a lack of FS research investigating the neo-liberal agendas influencing the FS approach within an early years context, understanding the impact mainstream agendas have on primary education can help shed a light on these tensions emerging in FS practice in early years education and care settings. With school readiness agendas in early years education resulting in the downward push of pressures felt in primary education, tension occurring in FS in primary education may be mirrored in early years education.

Therefore, this review includes scholarship in early years research that explores the impact of neo-liberal agendas on early years professionals and practice. This highlights those tensions related to mainstream education existing in early years practice, therefore, can be

present in the early years context of FS. Articles by Professor Alice Bradbury (2012; 2018), from the University College of London, indicates the impact of measuring performance in early years education has on early years professions and 'schoolification' of early years pedagogy. Also, from the University College of London, Professor Peter Moss and Professor Guy Roberts-Holmes (2022) feature in this review presenting the perspective that calls for change in early years education and a notion to challenge neo-liberal agendas on early years education. This review also includes Dr Phil Nicholson's, of the University of Suffolk, article focusing on the negative impact neo-liberal agendas have on play. These pieces of research create a picture of tensions in early years pedagogy which informs the use of FS in an early years context. This review also contains key authors writing from a childhood studies perspective, such as Prout and James (2014) and Spyrou (2018), to develop the studies understanding of how children are perceived in English education and how that underpins challenges in implementing the FS approach.

### **The Forest School Approach**

The FS approach has grown rapidly since its introduction to England in the early 90s (O'Brien, 2006; Leather, 2018). The increase of interest in the movement appears to be the purpose of early research into the approach as literature focuses on confirming and promoting the benefits of engaging in FS programs. Slade, Lowery and Bland (2013, p. 66) argue FS is an 'invaluable life experience for our children'. Knight (2013) explains that outdoor education was used historically to address societal issues and that FS can be used to address current concerns of obesity, anti-social behaviour and poor social skills amongst children. Much research acknowledges the benefit of physical and social development associated with engaging in FS programs (O'Brien, 2009; Lovell, 2009; Ridgers, Knowles and Sayers, 2012; Knight, 2013). There is also research focusing on the benefits of psychological wellbeing promoted in FS (Knight, 2013) and that children can gain confidence, resilience, opportunities to achieve, awareness and responsibility of themselves (O'Brien and Murray, 2007; Ridgers et al., 2012; Close, 2012). Roe and Aspinall (2011) argued that children expressing poor behaviour can benefit the most from accessing the FS alternative approach to education. Yet, perhaps the most appealing claims of FS benefits to educational settings is the impact this could have on children's learning in the classroom, promoting a desire to learn (Close, 2012) along with improved concentration and self-motivation (O'Brien, 2009).

However, later research suggests that there are inadequacies in early FS research to reinforce the claims of FS benefits (Leather, 2018). Most early FS research is context specific qualitative research, therefore generalising the evidence of FS benefits can be questioned. Hence, Knight (2022) calls for quantitative research to support qualitative claims. However, as a collective body of FS research, the small-scale findings of the benefits of FS have come to support each other's claims over time. Yet, Waite and Goodenough (2018) suggest early FS research has focused on reiterating the FS benefits, but not exploring the realities of implementing the approach.

Furthermore, there were early signs that the reality of implementing FS was more difficult than the outcome focused early research portrayed. Waite and Davis (2007) suggested that FS was in danger of being bent by the performance culture of measurement in education and reported that FS sessions tended to be highly structured to accommodate the schools' pedagogical approaches. Maynard (2007) reflects this as she recorded the tension between early years teachers and FS leaders, describing this as a battle between two dominant discourses. This does not mean that the benefits of FS promoted by early research are not achievable, however, the movement's focus on its up take in mainstream settings has meant it is subject to the context and environment it has submersed itself in. Still, the evidence of early literature supporting the benefits of FS, brought a positive light on the FS approach which was needed to gain momentum of the growing movement.

### **The perfect storm**

Alternative education approaches must weather the storm created by government agendas and English education norms. These storms create the perfect conditions for instrumental perspectives within education approaches to develop. To ensure alignment with mainstream education and increase uptake, alternative education models may bend to the strong winds of the pressures of outcome-driven practice. The current climate of education has a great impact on the implementation of pedagogical approaches such as the FS approach. The Froebelian movement faced government agendas focusing on children's subsequent working lives to contribute to the industrialisation of England (Read, 2006). The FS movement must also face the current government's agendas of creating active citizen workers contributing to economic growth in the face of the digital era (Pimlott-Wilson, 2015; Mitchell, 2018). The English education system is often described as neoliberal

(Bradbury, 2012; Pimlott-Wilson, 2015) with market-orientated agendas informing practice and government policy (Mitchell, 2018). This influences the use of English curricular and the concept of children within education. With the rise of technology, the world is becoming smaller, children are not just becoming citizens but global citizens (Mitchell, 2018). As a result, education systems are becoming competitive, therefore creating a perfect storm for the conditions of instrumental education to develop which FS practitioners must navigate.

### *Concept of the 'free' child*

Childhood is viewed as a social construct in which its understanding is dependant of the society that it has emerged (Hendrick, 2015). In the previous chapter *The Growth of the Froebelian Kindergarten movement*, the study explored a shift in the understanding underpinning childhood towards more scientific models for understanding children, such as developmental psychology, and away from the industrialised purpose of education. In the early 1900s, focus moved away from the needs of industry to the needs of the child with emphasis placed on child-centred pedagogy and the growing importance of child agency (Nawrozki, 2006; Hendrick, 2015). This change in perspective influenced revisionist Froebelians, such as Elise Murray, Margret McMillian and Susan Issacc, to use Froebelian pedagogical principles to promote the importance of children's free play. Ideas surrounding addressing children's needs and supporting agency forms the contemporary social construct of childhood in England (James and Prout, 2014; Spyrou, 2018). Early childhood in England and other western cultures is often viewed through a nostalgic lens as free from stresses of the adult world, free from danger and with freedom to explore and learn in appropriate child space, whether that be in the home, education or care setting.

The use of the term 'need' in early childhood education and care impacts the notion of the free child and how adults enable children's agency. Western cultures position children as something to be kept safe and secure (Boyden, 2014), whilst policy surrounding children focuses on meeting the 'need' of children depicts them as helpless (Woodhead, 2014). This passive positioning of children encourages regulation of their lives and accountability of the adult to address these needs and be responsible for their safety and learning. Even though children's agency is paramount in contemporary childhood studies, often featured and promoted in literature and policy, it is taken for granted as people neglect the regulation and power constraints children experience in their everyday lives (Spyrou, 2018). Adult



decision-making is projected onto children (Woodhead, 2014) and children's agency is directed towards turning children into social actors based on idealised adult actors (Spyrou, 2018). This limits children's freedom to what is viewed as appropriate and not appropriate behaviour and experiences as well as what is safe and unsafe. Adult regulation impacts on how adults enable children to experience the environment around them and what kind of play opportunities children are given access to. If children are viewed as passive and helpless, how can adults trust children to choose their own play experiences and how do adults know the appropriate learning is taking place? The over protectiveness towards children can be perceived along with a need to control children's lives (Boyden, 2014). Children's freedom and agency must then be acted upon within the constraints of adult guidance.

The FS approach challenges this social construction of childhood held in the UK which makes the climate of education a difficult storm for the approach to weather. The FS approach addresses the importance of children's agency and autonomy which is crucial in contemporary education. However, with the emphasis on risky play, even for young learners, FS does not conform to the level of protectiveness and control which may be seen as the norm in more mainstream education settings. Risky play is essential for the FS approach as a way of promoting children's resilience, problem-solving skills and responsibility for their choices (O'Brien and Murray, 2007; Ridgers et al., 2012). Despite FS practitioners' confidence in measuring risks in the FS environment and ensuring the level of risk is proportional to possible gains of engaging in this type of play, risky play can still be a huge barrier for people new to the approach to experience. This reflects Boyden's (2014) notion of the adult's need for control in children's lives and a lack of trust to believe children can make appropriate decisions in play. The power balances between children and adults also differs in FS pedagogy as more emphasis is placed on children's agency to direct their own learning with a less authoritative positioning of adults to facilitate their choices (Maynard, 2008). Therefore, children's agency in FS strays from the 'norm' of the social construction of childhood and the notion of the 'free' child. However, in England, there is a clear direction of learning that is valued in education. This is promoted and enforced by policy and government agendas. This narrow direction of learning influences how FS can be

implemented and indicates the development of instrumental FS practices (See instrumental Forest School below).

### *International competition and school readiness agenda*

International competition between countries and their education system is of interest for the Department of Education and impacts early years practice. Comparing international education is an indication of how successful the education system is in England and as the DfE describes 'vital to Britain's position in the 21<sup>st</sup> century' (2016, p.5). As one of the seven main elements to Educational Excellence Everywhere, the DfE stresses the importance of '[h]igh expectations and a world-leading curriculum for all' (2016, p.20). The EYFS statutory framework is a central part of English early years provision. Striving for a world-leading curriculum has meant the early years curriculum and policy frameworks has undergone many changes and with accountability placed on practitioners to implement this successfully. There is a sense of urgency in the Educational Excellence Everywhere white paper as the DfE states 'other educational systems are improving even faster than we are.' (2016, p.6). The English early years contribution to this urgent improvement and international competitiveness is the preparation of children for school.

School readiness agenda encourages the 'schoolification' of early years provision as non-compulsory, PVI early years settings adopt school-like practices and values (Bradbury, 2018) to ensure children are ready for the transition to school. This promotes the concept of childhood as a state of becoming, not a state of being. James and Prout (2014) argue that childhood is not valued in its present state. It is either valued in a nostalgic sense for what childhood used to be in the past or valued for the future contribution to society that children will provide as adults (James and Prout, 2014). Hendrick (2014) reflects this notion and suggests that children are viewed as investments for the future. The focus of children as future investments that underpins the school readiness agenda, fails to see the value of early years education as an important stage in children's development and views early years education as a mere step in preparation for primary education. The context of the young child as an autonomous, inquisitive learner that is present in their own life is removed from the importance of early years education. This creates a barrier for the FS approach as its pedagogical principles are imbedded in child-centred learning, where more importance is placed on the process of learning, the present state of the child, over the outcomes of

learning experiences. However, school readiness is an important factor in early years provision which is communicated through the Early Years Foundation Stage framework and promotes outcome-driven practice and assessment.

### *A culture of performativity and accountable professionals*

The EYFS framework underwent changes with updates to the statutory framework put into place in September 2021. The aim of the changes was to improve outcomes at age five through making all 17 Early Learning Goals [ELGs] clearer (Standards and Testing Agency, 2020). In doing this, the Department of Education ran the risk of creating a didactic framework that restricts practice and in turn limits the use of creative pedagogies such as FS. The Early Years Alliance [EYA], one of the largest representative early years membership organisations, accused the government's changes as promoting an 'narrow and overly formal approach' which the EYA believe will encourage tick-box approaches to assessment (EYA, n.d). The DfE defends its approach to outcomes and assessment and states it has set 'unapologetically high expectations for all children' (2016, p.8) believing that 'accountability is key to a successful school system' (2014, p.4). The DfE stresses the importance of outcomes rather than methods in the Educational Excellence Everywhere white paper in 2016.

*'[T]his government will rarely dictate how outcomes should be achieved... and will hold them [educational settings] to account for the rigorous, fairly measured outcomes' (DfE, 2016, p.6).*

The paper encourages educational settings' autonomy and freedom in pedagogical choice, as not one method suits all, and suggests that by focusing on outcomes rather than pedagogy, the government can ensure quality across the country (DfE, 2016).

This reflects the neo-liberal underpinnings of this government as neo-liberal systems appear to provide individuals with freedom, yet hold those individuals responsible for their choices (Mitchell, 2018). In neo-liberal systems it is the government's responsibility to incentivize individuals (Mitchell, 2018) and the incentive in the statement above is that practitioners and settings will be held accountable for children's progress and outcomes. A method of holding practitioners and settings accountable is ensuring children achieve the expected ELGs for the EYFS profile. The DfE (2021a) states that the ELG 'should not be used as a

curriculum'. This could indicate that the government is aware of the tick-boxing exercises the ELGs promote in practice. Despite the government's encouragement of pedagogical autonomy in settings, the underpinning emphasis on outcomes and accountability can result in restricted pedagogy and use of the EYFS framework.

With the ever-evolving climate of early years education, creative approaches to pedagogy may present a risk for practitioners (Wood and Hegde, 2016) thus, the ELGs provide a safe choice for early years practitioners to base their practice. Outcomes may be perceived as the fixed, reliable and measurable direction for practitioners' practice which strengthens the instrumental perspective in early years provision. Accountability within education reinforces a culture of performativity where collecting data on children is used to justify quality of practice. Bradbury (2018) argues that the datafication of early years practice accelerates the increasing formalisation of learning for young children. Datafication and schoolification complement each other (Bradbury, 2018), creating a vicious circle of accountability and performativity within early years practice. The DfE's focus on outcomes over methods may potentially offer opportunities for practitioners to develop their own pedagogical style and methods, yet there remains concern over the outcome-driven practice this encourages.

#### *Early years pedagogy: 'an art to a science'*

The government's outcome-driven agenda behind early years policy and curriculum communicates a simplified purpose of education and methods in pedagogy. Developmental psychology informs the dominant discourse in early years education (Wood and Hedge, 2016). Developmental psychology not only has influenced the development of government guidance, but it has become an integral part of early years training; hence, informing early years professionals' unique concept of their specialist professional skills, experience and knowledge (Bradbury, 2012). Developmental psychology's prescribed notions of a child's expected developmental patterns and pace encourages expectations of children's learning against which children's development can be tracked and measured, further adding to the datafication of early years education (Bradbury, 2018). Wood and Hedge (2016) imply that developmental psychology provides scientific evidence of children's development and good practice which may have been intuitively observed and understood previously. The EYA (n.d) mirror Wood and Hedge's concern as they suggest descriptive changes to the ELG may influence early years pedagogy and practice 'from an art to a science.' Yet the scientific

draw of developmental psychology has resulted in a preference within policy and curriculum towards measurable outcomes and sequences of development which the adult can use to steer children's learning. This enables the promotion of an instrumental perspective on pedagogy which reflects the outcome orientated curriculum and assessment communicated by the DfE.

The culture of accountability and performativity, encouraging the schoolification and datafication of early years provision, is exacerbated by the government's neo-liberal agendas and incentives. Supporting this is the preference to the scientific measurement of children's development through the dominant development discourse. This education climate can be problematic for an approach like FS which may not fit the formalised learning approach encouraged by the government. Considering FS as a relatively new approach, which has also been accused of under theorisation, this may put FS in a weak position to stand against the strong winds of the perfect storm of education without bending to its influence.

### **Instrumental perspective of the Forest School approach**

This study characterises instrumental perspectives with the movements attempts to standardise and marketise practice whilst using play as a pedagogical tool to meet government agendas. Brehony states, 'Where a movement is established, an orthodox interpretation is created by those who hold power within it.' (2000, p.183). In this statement, Brehony (2000) is referring to the orthodox interpretation of Froebel's methods by the early Froebelians, resulting in the instrumentalist perspectives of Froebel's approach. For the early Froebelians, those that held power within their time of education was the government and its interest in industrialisation of England. This prompted an instrumental use of play with Froebel's gifts and occupations focusing on 'industrial training' within kindergartens (Read, 2006). The growing interest of the instrumental methods of early Froebelians led to the marketisation of Froebel's gifts and resulted in standardisation of their practice through the development of kindergarten manuals (Nawrotzki, 2006). Brehony's statement can also be applied to the growth of the FS movement.

As a bottom-up movement, those that hold power within the FS approach may not directly be the government. However, its agendas trickle down through education settings who

invest in the approach. Educational settings can be perceived as holding power within their position as consumers of the FS approach (Kemp, 2020). Therefore, settings' demands to demonstrate the value of investing in FS programs can impact pedagogy. FS is subject to top-down regulations making the relationship between FS practitioners and education settings a crucial factor in the quality of practice (McCree, 2019). McCree (2019) explains FS practitioners and educational settings go through a process of *conflict, collaboration* and *congruence* impacting on the degree in which the FS principles are implemented. FS practitioners can often find themselves stuck in conflict with settings, resulting in tokenistic practices which McCree (2019) refers to as FS Lite. Working together in congruence to achieve Full Fat FS (McCree, 2019), where all FS principles are implemented, can be difficult as FS's alignment with mainstream education means that it has become subject to its structural influences (Waite and Goodenough, 2018). Consequently, FS with young children is subject to the 'schoolification' of early years education (Bradbury, 2018). FS practitioners can exercise freedom with their creative approach to pedagogy, yet this freedom is held with accountability for children's progress within the neo-liberal education system (Waite and Goodenough, 2018). This has a great impact on FS practice, particularly regarding how the FS practitioners and educational settings view and implement the play-based approach of FS.

### *Play as a pedagogical tool*

Play in the FS approach can be a difficult element in practice with tensions emerging between the mainstream use of play and the FS concept of child-centred play. In current education, play is subject to policy guidance resulting in increasingly adult-directed play, particularly as children get older and near the end of the Foundation stage (DfE, 2021). The school readiness agenda, resulting in the downward push of the National Curriculum influencing early years practice (Nicholson, 2019) establishes ELG, and Good Level of Development [GLD] data, as a defining measurement of successful early years provision. As a result, for FS to infiltrate mainstream education settings, the approach must offer a way in which to achieve curriculum goals; therefore, play becomes a pedagogical tool.

The difference in pedagogical style between FS and mainstream education can cause tensions in practice. This influences perspectives and expectations behind the delivery of FS provision, with a disconnection of the importance of free play in FS. Maynard (2007)

documented this tension between early years teachers and FS leaders. Maynard (2007) found that the FS leaders felt their approach was disrespected by the teachers' intervention and in contrast, the early years teachers expressed frustration of a lack of control in FS and unnecessary risk in play. There is an underlying understanding from mainstream practitioners engaging in FS that child-centred learning in FS is 'just playing' (Whincup, Allin and Greer, 2021). Even the children themselves struggle to frame unformalised learning in FS sessions (Pimlott-Wilson and Coats, 2019) with some expressing they felt they were learning when engaged in activities planned by the FS practitioner, not while engaging in play (Waite and Davis, 2007). The lack of understanding of the value of child-centred, play-based learning FS practitioners face encourages the need for them to justify their approach within performativity agendas in education. There may also be unspoken or explicit downward pressures from senior management, or owners of private settings, to evidence progress through tracking and planning (Whincup et al., 2021), demonstrating addressing the influence of datafication in early years education (Bradbury, 2018). Ensuring curriculum links through planning is established as good practice in early years provision, however, may contrast with the FS *concept of the learner* and FS as a *space for play* (see Chapter 1). Therefore, literature suggests ensuring FS remains a valued approach in mainstream education, the approach must bend to the winds of the *perfect storm* of English education.

The purpose behind play in FS has begun to be altered to exaggerate the curriculum benefits of engaging in FS programs. This may be the *schoolification* of FS as, although FS is often considered contrasting with mainstream education, the benefits of FS are promoted to develop skills valued in neo-liberal education systems (Pimlott-Wilson and Coats, 2019), including, problem solving skills, leadership skills and a desire to learn (Close, 2012). These can be viewed as a 'buy-in' for schools (Coats and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). FS has been used to complement classroom learning through delivering the curriculum in an alternative way (Kemp, 2020). The use of FS to complement curriculum and support mainstream agendas signifies the submissive application of FS pedagogy against the dominant discourse in education settings. Play then moves away from the concept of free play and child-initiated to child-centred through delivering FS to meet children's needs through curriculum planning. Thus, FS can be influenced to become highly structured to justify practice with little time for free play (Waite and Davis, 2007). Play then becomes a tool in which FS

practitioners can introduce adult-led ideas and integrate curriculum agendas. However, this raises the issue of whether this meets the FS pedagogical principles and can be regarded as quality FS practice.

Structured and planned play has enabled the FS approach to meet curriculum demands and align with mainstream education. The instrumental perspective of play in FS and the focus on benefits of engaging in FS programs for educational settings has encouraged the growth of the FS movement. This appears to be at a cost of the FS principles, encouraging tokenistic practice with play distorted by education agendas. It is important that the approach develops into an approach of quality (McCree, 2019). Therefore, there was a need to define the FS approach through standardisation.

### *Standardisation and marketisation*

The FS approach has grown rapidly with the success of the movement meaning the approach has the potential for financial gain of organisations advertising 'Forest Schooling'. Commercial organisations have marketed their own versions of FS (Knight, 2018) with high-cost programs aimed at tracking and structuring development of children's skills (Whincup et al., 2021). These independent FS programs used to structure and track learning in FS mirrors the development of Froebelian kindergarten manuals in the initial steps of marketising the kindergarten methods. The marketable use of FS programs strengthens the instrumental perspective and use of play as a pedagogical tool as educational settings buy into programs to justify and validate their FS practice. These types of programs can provide a helpful structure for settings in the early stages of setting up their FS provision, however, the variation between programs and possible tokenistic use could be problematic for the FS movement.

Standardising practice with a professional body became a way to deal with the lack of a clear identity as the FS movement gained momentum. As explained previously in Chapter 1, the FS approach is not a prescribed philosophical model, but rather consists of a collective understanding of the philosophy through shared, and sometimes conflicting, interpretations. This has contributed to the identity crisis of the FS approach resulting in tokenistic practices (McCree, 2019) which may not be prevented until there is a central governance (Knight, 2018). The Forest School Association [FSA] was created in an effort to



standardise what Connolly and Haughton (2015) describe as FS's fragmented market. FSA state that they are the professional body for FS and are responsible for developing curriculum content for approved FS training and endorsing approved FS trainers, leaders and settings using quality FS provision (FSA, n.d.). FSA promotes a model of FS through developing the six FS principles and creating criteria for good practice (FSA, n.d.).

The standardisation of FS through the development of FSA is welcomed by some influential authors of FS and criticised by others. Knight (2018) commends the FSA principles suggesting they remain broad to enable opportunities for the extensive range of FS practices and is 'surprised that it is criticised for commodifying that thing we call Forest School.' (p.21). In contrast, Leather (2018) argues that a national model for FS transforms the educational philosophy into a product to market and sell along with the commercialisation of training programs and creating a place for FS in the marketisation of education. Although the creation of FSA may limit the impact of individual tokenistic FS programs in the market of FS, it has also enabled FS to become a recognisable label with accreditation which has in turn impacted on how FS is perceived.

There is growing concern that the FS approach is becoming a badge of honour that educational settings wear proudly regardless of whether they commit to the FS principles. The success in marketisation of FS has meant that the FS approach has become a recognisable and desirable 'brand' (McCree, 2019) which has led to the market dominance of FS amongst other outdoor educational approaches (Leather, 2018). Whincup et al. (2021) suggest that the FS school approach has become the 'national model' for outdoor education. This has meant that outdoor provision has been mislabelled as FS practice which may be better linked with other outdoor educational approaches (McCree, 2019). Educational settings have been encouraged to invest in creative pedagogical approaches, such as FS, in response to the OFSTED shift in focus to the quality of practice instead of outcomes (Kemp, 2020) and the competition between schools and amongst private nurseries (Connolly and Haughton, 2015). Thus, FS is used as a badge (Connolly and Haughton, 2015; Whincup et al., 2021) to promote educational settings regardless of their level of commitment to the approach.

The instrumental perspective has enabled the FS movement to align successfully with mainstream educational settings and the schoolification of FS has aided the growth of the

movement in England. Play in FS can be used as a tool to meet curriculum goals and the benefits of FS complementing educational agendas. It is evident that FS is becoming a recognisable approach which is going through a process of standardising practice to maintain quality. However, the concept of standardising FS and using play to address curriculum demands is problematic for the future of FS as it struggles to maintain its defining pedagogical principles. Looking back at the Froebelian Kindergarten movement and its development of an instrumental perspective may uncover potential warning signs for the FS movement to consider.

### **Lessons from the past**

The instrumental perspective within the development of educational movements is crucial to the growth and continuation of the approach, yet also may contribute to the quick rise and fall of the movement. Using instrumental perspectives, the movement can gain attention for its efforts to address mainstream agendas. However, as the early Froebelians found, the hype of the movement can quickly get out of control, resulting in a disregard for the underpinning principles of the approach and at the cost of the true, original purpose which sparked the movement initially. There comes a point where participants in the movement begin to question its development and consider its purpose for the future continuation of practice. The Froebel Society began to question 'whether to Froebel or not to Froebel.' (Nawrotzki, 2006). They debated freeing themselves from the tarnished Froebel name and strengthen their society with allegiance to mainstream education societies, or whether they needed to strip back the movement to the core Froebel philosophies and revise his principles (Lilley, 1967). Thus, amongst instrumental development of a movement, a dilemma rises and a choice between mainstream alignment and purest principles must be debated.

The FS approach is now encountering this dilemma as literature begins to question whether to *school or not to school*. The culture of performativity and neo-liberal agendas of education create tensions for authentic FS provision with a strong adherence to the FS principles becoming an obstacle for the suitability of the movement in the current English curriculum-based education system (Waite and Goodenough, 2018). The use of the instrumental perspective has led to questions of whether 'bespoke', or made to fit, FS provision should be discouraged (Whincup et al., 2021), particularly as it has enabled more

children access to outdoor provision (Knight, 2018). There is the question of whether *Full Fat FS* is achievable. As McCree (2019) warns that the tokenistic approach to FS practice is affecting how the approach is understood, it could be argued that the hierarchical description of the pure *Full Fat FS* is also hindering the use of the approach. This may spin a negative light on the experience of FS practitioners as they strive for an approach that is difficult to justify in a neo-liberal education system and clashes with the English culture norms of outdoor education described by Leather (2018). Kemp (2020) directly explores the dilemma of choice between mainstream integration of FS provision and maintaining purest FS principles, concluding that the integration of FS approach requires a mutually transformational relationship between education settings and FS leaders. Hence, the flexibility of the FS approach and conscious effort of FS leaders to adapt principles to their individual context (Kemp, 2020) could be a crucial element for the cultural embedding needed for the long-term normalisation of FS (Knight, 2018).

*'After all, even FS lite is a start in a journey and may be the only way to enact the slow cultural change it can take in order to get Full Fat FS.'* (McCree, 2019, p.18).

McCree's statement reflects Read's (2003) statement referring to the tension faced by Froebelians and their instrumental perspective; 'the first sowing of the seed of progressive ideas in what was still inhospitable soil'. The current climate of education may be inhospitable soil to plant the seed of FS, however, it is clear in McCree's writing that this tokenistic practice is a first step in practice with the aim of becoming Full Fat FS. The FS movement needs to take this step with caution. The Froebelians alignment with mainstream agendas led to the total disengagement with Froebel and his original pioneering principles of play and child-centred learning as the Froebel Society removed his teaching in training programs and as Manning (2005) suggests 'threw the baby out with the bath water.' When the educational agendas changed, with the end of payment by result, Froebelian kindergartens were considered outdated and meaningless with heavy criticism coming from both outside and within the Froebel Society (Nawrotzki, 2006). Membership of the Society fell sharply along with the Froebelian reputation. It was the revisionist Froebelians who revised and reconnected with Froebel's original principles that helped rebuild the Froebelian kindergarten movement in England (Lilley, 1967). Hence, this study urges FS practitioners to learn from the past.

Although Kemp (2020) reports on the transformational relationship between mainstream and FS as a positive action of growth, McCree's (2019) notion that this is a step in the right direction and not the ultimate goal should be heard. It was the lack of identity and principles that damaged the Froebelian kindergarten movement. Hence, it is important that FS maintains a sense of this as it continues to infiltrate mainstream settings. The FS movement must have a strong sense of identity to navigate this growth into mainstream education. The FS movement needs to ensure that practice influences mainstream settings' culture and understanding of FS, and not the other way round, with educational settings shaping the development of the FS movement. Therefore, the FS movement needs to develop a strong sense of the purpose of FS and a clear understanding of the philosophy that inspires FS's alternative pedagogy. This may indicate the importance of revisiting the development of the FS approach and analysing this away from the dependence of aligning the movement to mainstream schooling.

### **Revisionist perspectives of the Forest School approach**

Re-establishing a strong FS identity through strengthening and revising the FS principles is crucial in challenging tokenistic practices and enabling the continuation of the FS movement. Identities are formed from historical understandings of a concept (Hall and Gay, 1996). Hall and Gay (1996) suggest it is not important to return to the roots of an identity, but to come to terms with the roots and begin a process of marking what is different and exclude ideas which no longer fit. For the revisionist perspective of FS, exploring how the FS principles can be used to aid modern debates will strengthen the movements growth in the future. However, this needs to be achieved by acknowledging factors that strengthen the instrumental perspectives and being critical of practice that hinders the FS philosophy.

#### *Developing critical perspectives*

Research is moving away from re-affirming the benefits of FS provision to questioning this focus of outcomes. There are claims that the FS approach is under theorised (Leather, 2018) and its concepts simplified and institutionalised (Sharma-Brymer, Brymer and Davids, 2018). The emphasis on the development of 'soft' skills valued by neo-liberal education within FS outcomes (Pimlott-Wilson and Coats, 2019) has led to performativity and curriculum driven practice (Wait and Goodenough, 2018). The success of FS alignment with mainstream

education has fatally altered the difference in practice that sparked the uptake of the approach in educational settings (Waite and Goodenough, 2018). This has enabled instrumental perspectives of FS to emerge where play is used as a pedagogical tool to meet educational agendas. Resulting in tokenistic practices where pedagogical principles of FS are not acted on (McCree, 2019). Smith et al. (2017) questions early FS research and its focus on the benefits of engaging in FS programs by suggesting more robust, methodological measurements are needed to support claims. Surely if FS practice has been heavily influenced by mainstream agendas and a tokenistic, instrumental perspective of FS pedagogy is put in place, the benefits of FS provision will also be affected. Therefore, FS research must move forward from focusing on benefits to strengthening the FS identity through beginning a process of excluding and criticising concepts and practice that do not complement the FS philosophy.

In recent FS literature the importance of reinstating FS child-centred pedagogy and the role practitioners play in learning appears to be becoming more prominent. The practitioner's role in learning as the facilitator has become overemphasised (Sharma-Brymer et al., 2018). This pressurises FS practitioners to facilitate certain outcomes for FS sessions which leads to the instrumental perspective of FS, resulting in the principle of child-initiated learning to be neglected. According to Waite and Goodenough (2018) it is important in FS practice to allow children's agency and self-regulation. It is important that children are given the time and space to become self-motivated (Waite and Goodenough, 2018) as FS should aim to create a culture of self-direction (McCree et al., 2018). Giving children agency empowers them to either amplify the influence of the FS experience by fully engaging with activities and situations presented, or simply limit this exposure so that they experience learning in their own way within the space. This child-led pedagogy of FS is crucial to offer children opportunities to 'take what they need' from FS provision (Tiplady and Mentor, 2020) and access a variety of possible outcomes or learning and customise their experience.

However, in foregrounding children's agency, it may be difficult for FS leaders to understand their role and they may run the risk of becoming a passive observer in children's endeavours. The social constructivist paradigm of FS (Knight, 2018) offers the adults a place in scaffolding children's learning. Still, FS practitioners need to be aware of the balance of

relational hierarchies in FS (Coats and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). FS differs from more traditional constructions of the role of educators, moving them from positions of authority to that of a shared pedagogy between adult and child (Blackham, Cocks and Bunce, 2021). Blackham et al. (2021) suggests both FS practitioners and children, as equal participants, can develop through negotiation of the 'norms' of individual FS programs, hence, creating a unique learning community for each group. With the emphasis on child-initiated learning and the social co-construction of the FS experience, this leads this research to question whether alignment with mainstream education and curriculum-driven practice is really in the best interests of the FS movement.

This question is apparent in FS literature as there is an emerging emphasis on moving away from mainstream education. FS can be viewed as a remedy for what is perceived as wrong in English education (Devenport, 2019), hence, creating a space away from education agendas through separating the pedagogical approaches is important to FS (McCree et al., 2018; Blackham et al, 2021). Coats and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) suggest that, despite being separate, the two pedagogical approaches of mainstream education and FS can work to complement each other with children benefiting from accessing the different pedagogical styles. However, some literature takes FS separation from mainstream education further. FS can be viewed as a response to the increase in government intervention in education (Joyce, 2012). Sackville-Ford (2019) argues that FS has the potential to become a radical, progressivist approach to education, creating communities of resistance to dominant discourses. Waite and Goodenough (2018) also suggest FS is a call for freedom and it requires an alternative culture and behaviour to mainstream education in practice. The FS environment can be viewed as an opportunity for de-schooling learning spaces where neo-liberal power relations can be challenged (Cudworth and Lumber, 2021) and where unschooling can enable the pursuit of autonomous and child-led pedagogy (Blackham et al., 2021). The focus on separating FS from mainstream education may be an active rejection from practitioners of dominant discourses or may be a way to limit the impact of education agendas on FS programs. The growing awareness of tokenistic practices in FS due to the alignment of mainstream education appears to have triggered a response in FS literature.

However, for FS to become radical and progressivist, addressing education agendas with caution, FS needs to be implemented in its purest sense with complete engagement with FS pedagogical principles. As explored in the *Learning from the Past* section of this chapter, this can be problematic for FS leaders creating a dilemma of choice between the ideology of FS and the reality of implementing the principles in the current education climate. Sackville-Ford (2018) acknowledges this may be a utopian concept of FS and the irony of utopia is that it is never reached. Yet, when considering the development of identity according to Hall and Gay (1996) it is a process of becoming, not being. A utopian concept can be viewed as a journey, not a destination (Fielding and Moss, 2011). Thus, separating FS from mainstream agendas, reinstating the importance of child-centred learning, and acting on critical perspectives of FS literature and practice is still developing within the revisionist perspective of FS. An important step for the revisionist perspective is, not just reforming the identity of the movement, but ensuring the movement can continue. Therefore, aligning with relevant educational debates, over mainstream agendas, may help strengthen recognition for its identity.

#### *Revising principles and responding to modern debates*

It may seem near impossible for this radical, alternative approach to pedagogy to survive the storm of the current education climate and maintain its principles. There must also be a way for the movement to progress with hopeful practice and re-establish its reputation after the rise of critical perspectives. If the FS movement was to continue its development away from pressures of curriculum driven practice and education outcomes, there needs to be a draw for settings to continue to invest in the approach. The Froebelians were able to strengthen the revisionist perspective of Froebel's kindergartens by moving away from education agendas towards modern debates gaining momentum at the time. For instance, McMillan's practice focused on the rising concerns of the health of the urban poor (Joyce, 2012) and Murray (1914) sought to align Froebel's philosophy with modern developmental psychology growing in popularity. This strategy of alignment with modern debates over outcomes could enable continuation of the FS approach and is becoming evident in the focus of research in the field.

The global pandemic, responding to the international concern of the spread of Covid-19, brought questions about the purpose of education and what children need from adults throughout the crisis and after in order to adjust to the new norm as we emerged from the pandemic. Cameron and Moss (2020) saw the global pandemic as a time for transformation in early years education and a chance to break free of neo-liberalism. In their book *Transforming Early Childhood in England*, they suggest numerous ways education can be developed, including Professor Clark's (2020) notion of slow pedagogies. Clark (2020) makes a case for slowing down meaning-making processes in knowledge development to counter the fast-food model of learning and clock-based practices of early years education. Slow pedagogy promotes playful, unscripted learning that allows time to revisit and linger on experiences. FS child-centred, play-based pedagogy and its' principles of programs taking place over an extended period (FSA, n.d) complements slow pedagogies. Recent FS research, such as Tiplady and Mentor (2020), Coats and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) and McCree et al. (2018), also advocate allowing children time to develop self-motivation and learn in a playful, unscripted manner in FS. Thus, the slow pedagogy education movement is a possible initiative that FS pedagogy could align with that may aid FS's relationship with education settings that is reflective of FS pedagogical principles.

Research exploring the global pandemic is continuously evolving with a focus on the impact on children nationally and globally. Although not all the research discussed in this paragraph focuses on early childhood (Mind, 2021; Bingham et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2021), they support an understanding of children's general experiences in the pandemic and depict early research into its effect on children's lives. Okely et al. (2021) and CREC (2021) explore early childhood experiences which helps the literature to connect to the pandemic's impact on young children. The charity organisation Mind (2021) found in a survey of children in the UK, 18 percent of children experienced mental distress for the first time during the first lockdown period. While 68 percent of children, already diagnosed with Mental Health [MH], said their MH worsened during lockdown periods (Mind, 2021). Children's daily lives were interrupted with the closure of schools and playgrounds along with limited contact with family and friends during social restrictions. A report on young children's voices during the Covid-19 pandemic, funded by the Froebel Trust, found that children expressed a deep sense of loss of their nursery and wider community friendships (CREC, 2021). Although



children settled in well upon returning to nursery settings, practitioners noticed differences in play; with children demonstrating more interest in focused, solitary play or in small intimate groups (CREC, 2021). Studies suggest children's activity largely decreased during the pandemic (Bingham et al., 2021) with a significant increase of children's time spent engaged in sedentary screen time activities with less than a quarter of children meeting the World Health Organisation guideline (Okely et al., 2021). There is concern of the long-term effects of children's experiences during the pandemic on their health and well-being with research calling for interventions to facilitate recovery (Jackson et al., 2021; Bingham et al., 2021; Okely et al., 2021).

Time spent outdoors during social restrictions, for those with access, became a coping strategy for some. This brought acknowledgement of outdoor spaces for the promotion of wellbeing and the notion of the FS approach as a method of recovery from the crisis. Jackson et al. (2021) reported that children engaged in outdoor play or nature-based activities experienced smaller declines of wellbeing than children without access. Mind (2021) also report that 75 percent of children said time outdoors helped them cope. Emerging research has called specifically for outdoor spaces to be used as an intervention for the long-term effects covid -19 and supporting MH during future crisis (Jackson et al., 2021; Korman, 2021; Okely et al., 2021). This has not gone unnoticed by the FSA who are campaigning for the 'Nature Premium' to enable education settings access to funding for children's regular experiences in nature (Nature Premium, n.d). This takes inspiration from the current 'sports premium' funding education settings have access to. The campaign website directly addresses the impacts on children's mental and physical health during the pandemic supported with the Chair of the FSA, Sarah Lawfull, promoting Nature Premium as 'part of the green recovery.' (Nature Premium, n.d). This campaign is ongoing yet shows the FSA's efforts to align with modern debate and concern after the global pandemic.

There are concerns focusing on children's disconnection from nature and the impact this can have on their attitude towards the natural world (Louv, 2005; O'Brien, 2009; Knight, 2013; Harris, 2021). Reconnecting children with nature is something the FS community is keen to address. Harris's (2021) study exploring practitioners' perceptions, found building children's relationship with nature was a fundamental part of FS practice. Yet, it is not just FS that is focused on developing children's attitudes towards nature, therefore there are

opportunities for the FS movement to align with complementing initiatives. For instance, UNESCO's education sector has issued a program for 2023 promoting Education of Sustainable Development [EDS] (UNESCO, 2022).

Research calls for environmental education which fosters children's emotional wellbeing with hopeful practices that inspire positive images of the future (Bark, Sanson and Hoorn, 2018; Baker, Clayton and Braggs, 2020). Inspiring FS practitioners' awareness of children's feelings towards climate change and creating supportive practices for responsible environmental education was the focus of the FSA Conference 2021 entitled 'Sustainable Forest School – Climate of Hope' (Harding, 2021). The FS approach also prides itself on empowering children through its child-centred approach and its focus on improving children's well-being. Older children expressed frustration of adult inaction towards climate change (Brake et al., 2018), however, FS may provide children, even in early childhood, with a sense of ability to think of their own actions as the benefits of FS programs are said to include motivating children and building a sense of awareness and responsibility of themselves (O'Brien, 2006; Close, 2012). FS may also address children's reconnection to nature as the regular visits and interaction with nature, used in quality FS programs, helps create a relationship with nature and a sense of ownership of their FS space (Smith et al., 2017; Harris, 2021). Thus, moving environmental education away from purely knowledge-based teaching to one that addresses children's emotional connection and response to the crisis in climate change.

The revisionist perspective of FS looks to reinstate child-initiated learning and child agency through re-examining FS's position in mainstream education. Arguing for FS to be viewed as a separate and alternative approach to mainstream education may be problematic for the continuation of the FS movement as educational settings need to be able to justify investing in the approach. The alignment of FS with modern debates focusing on slow pedagogies, the growing concern of children's MH and wellbeing after the pandemic and sustainable education may provide settings with justification of FS practice. However, the government is yet to respond to these modern debates and continues to focus on educational outcomes, particularly on how the pandemic has impacted on attainment in schools. Therefore, the perfect storm of education rages on.

## Waiting for the break in the clouds

The current education climate can be difficult for creative approaches like FS to navigate. The neo-liberal agenda of education encourages a focus of outcome-driven practice, the importance of school readiness (Bradbury, 2018) and a downward push of the National Curriculum influencing early years provision (Nicholson, 2017). It is clear, in the instrumental perspectives of FS, that this agenda has an impact on the implementation of the approach resulting in tokenistic practice of FS (McCree, 2019) and the marketisation of the approach (Leather, 2018; Kemp, 2020). This can be a difficult hurdle for the revisionist perspective of FS to overcome, leading to the concept of an authentic FS to be a utopian ideal (Sackville-Ford, 2019). Looking back at the past, the revisionist Froebelians were fortunate that the purpose of education began to shift, a break in the clouds within the education climate of their time, which in turn enabled them to accommodate modern debates as they strengthened the revisionist perspectives of the movement (see Chapter 3: *Revising principles and responding to modern debates*). For the FS approach, the growing concern of children's mental health (Mind, 2021) and the long-term effects of the Covid-19 pandemic (Jackson et al., 2021) may lead education professionals to question the purpose of education and provide a light of hope between the clouds which have not yet broken. However, a shift in education agendas does not seem close on the horizon, yet there are hints within government documents that there is another side to the outcome-driven practice that it appears to emphasise. This can be used to support creative approaches like FS.

There are tensions between the practitioners' apparent pedagogical autonomy and the governments use of outcomes which may impact on practitioners' decisions in practice and reflections on their professional roles. Bradbury (2012) suggests the introduction of the EYFSP symbolises the imposition of the neo-liberal concept of accountability into English early years education and this encouraged 'cynical' compliance from practitioners. Nicholson (2017) also suggests that the reliance and focus on educational objectives has resulted in professional expertise and judgment being suppressed. Due to high accountability within education, ensuring children make progress towards outcomes, using adult-led activities and teaching, demonstrates the level of impact early years practitioners have on learning. Therefore, measuring their impact on learning influences their perceived

performance as professionals. This could potentially strengthen an instrumental perspective in early years practitioners' use of play within FS practice. However, in contrast to the adult-led teaching instructed to achieve the areas of learning and development in the EYFS, in the 2020 handbook of the *Early Years Foundation Stage Profile* practitioners are also instructed:

*'To accurately assess CETL [the Characteristics of Effective Teaching and Learning], practitioners need to observe learning that children have initiated rather than only focusing on what children do when prompted'* (DfE, 2020a, p.12).

This suggests that child-initiated play is valued by the DfE with regard to the CETL. The focus of the CETL is on pedagogical principles of early years provision as it prompts practitioners to reflect on the different ways children learn actively within their practice (DfE, 2021). The CETL supports FS pedagogy as it promotes playing and exploring along with active learning. This can be used to strengthen the revisionist perspective of FS in early years provision. In Slade et al. (2013) study, a framework supporting links to the CETL of the 2012 EYFS framework was used to encourage settings to see the value in investing in visits to FS. However, the influence the CETL have in shaping the EYFS profile in current practice is weakening with the greater emphasis on Early Learning Goals [ELG] and Good Level of Development [GLD]. Thus, a framework directed at CETLs may have less impact for early years settings today.

There is still tension between the DfE's perspective of child-initiated play and learning informing the CETL's pedagogical principles of early years provision and the adult-directed teaching emphasised as essential for progress in the areas of learning and development which inform the ELG. Wood and Hedge (2016) imply that the demands for evidence-based practice in early years practice and assessment may contribute to adult-directed planning and purposes within play being privileged over the child's interests and natural course of development. Through this evidence-based practice lays the instrumental perspective of child-led and play-based approaches to pedagogy which in turn impact on the use of FS.

Nevertheless, the DfE is not unaware of how performativity impacts practice. To address this, the DfE changed how assessments are used in early years settings in the 2021 framework. With the DfE's changes, they aimed to reduce workload of practitioners through removing statutory moderation processes and changing levels of achievement in the ELG.

The DfE maintains that the EYFSP is to inform a professional dialogue between reception and Key Stage one and 'should not be used as an accountability measure for schools or teachers' (2020, p23). The DfE (2020) acknowledge that statutory moderation encourages the perception that the EYFSP as a high accountability assessment for teachers. Therefore, the DfE (2020) removed the statutory duty for Local Authorities to externally moderate the EYFSP. The DfE also stated that 'The ELGs are a specific end-point assessment and **should not be used as a curriculum**. [Bold included in document]' (2020, p.13). These changes give the impression that the DfE is attempting to discourage outcome-driven practice influenced by measures of performativity. This may address issues of suppressed professional judgement raised by Nicholson (2017) and Bradbury (2012). In addition to this, the DfE (2020) removed the 'exceeding' judgment of achievement in ELGs as 'expected' can be viewed as GLD. The previous EYFSP measured children's achievement through 'emerging', 'expected' to 'exceeding' (DfE, 2020a). By removing exceeding, the DfE intends to encourage practitioners to focus on children who are predicted 'emerging'. Not pushing children beyond their expected level of development may allow for more time for unmeasurable aspects of practice such as care and child-initiated play. If the DfE continues to encourage practitioners to move away from practice driven by performativity, there may be room for a revisionist perspective of FS in mainstream education. However, there is still a hidden agenda which prioritises measurable outcomes amongst government policy documents which may have influenced the early years practitioners' response to the EYFS reforms.

The government's changes to external moderation was not well received by early years professionals in the government's consultation (DfE, 2020). The Early Years Alliance (EYA), one of the largest representatives for early years professionals, did not support the removal of external moderation as they did not believe this contributed to an unnecessary workload for practitioners. Within the government consultation with early years practitioners, the DfE states:

*'A consistent view was that it is important to retain external moderation to ensure consistency of judgements across all schools and other approaches to moderation should be conducted alongside, and not as an alternative to, an external check.'*  
(2020, p. 23).

The DfE's explanation for the removal of the external moderation processes may be perceived as encouraging less outcome-driven practice and lessening the influence of performativity for practitioners. After all, performativity is thought to have a negative impact on practice and oppress practitioners' professional judgement (Nicolson, 2017). However, the practitioners' response to the government's consultation suggests they wanted moderation; both external and internal. The concept of accountability may have changed how practitioners see their professionalism and justify their work. Bradbury (2012) argues that the EYFSP is used by some practitioners to evidence their professional status and show their competence. The government removed external moderation despite practitioners' feedback. This reaction of the early years professional community demonstrates the importance placed on assessment, not just in their practice for method of measuring children's progress, but for also measuring and justifying their own professional success.

The DfE's small attempts to decrease the impact of performativity driven by external moderation and their encouragement of child-led activities promoting CETL seems overshadowed by a concept of professional status created through justification of practice by meeting outcomes. This is apparent in FS literature as teachers involved in FS programs struggle to separate themselves with mainstream education expectations of their role (Maynard, 2007) and some FS practitioners actively seeking to merge the approach with curriculum goals through investing in independent FS programs tailored for this (Whincup et al., 2021). As discussed earlier, in learning from the past section, FS may be a seed planted in inhospitable soil. To extend this analogy, the perfect storm of the educational climate may not be the ideal environment to grow the seed of FS, thus practitioners need to be attentive. Paying attention to hints in the DfE's documents supporting child-initiated learning and less outcome-driven practice is important for FS practitioners to help create a more encouraging micro-climate for their FS practice. However, if roles in education remain reliant on meeting mainstream agendas of performativity, growing a seed of revisionist perspectives of a radical FS will be difficult. This research aims to find out if this response to education prevents FS from moving forward from instrumental perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

The FS movement and the Froebelian kindergarten movement have developed from the bottom-up with practitioners promoting child-centred and play-based learning using the

natural environment. The current climate of education presents many barriers for the FS movement to progress in the same way educational agendas of industrialisation presented challenges for the Froebelian kindergarten. Yet the revisionist Froebelians were able to secure the continuation of Froebel's philosophy, thus can provide a useful lens to explore how the FS movement can progress.

For the FS approach, it must weather the storm of a neo-liberal education system. The culture of performativity and the schoolification of early years practice promoted by the downward push of the National Curriculum (Bradbury, 2018) has influenced the implementation of FS with young children. FS practitioners also are operating in a high accountability system which measures and validates professional practice through the achievement of curriculum outcomes. FS research and practice has become subject to mainstream education structures (Waite and Goodenough, 2018) and flies dangerously close to becoming another performance-oriented system (Sharma-Brymer et al., 2018). This promotes the schoolification of FS as it seeks to satisfy skills demanded by neoliberal agendas (Pimlott-Wilson and Coates, 2019). This has enabled the development of the instrumental perspective of the FS approach as play is used as a pedagogical tool to meet demands of the performance culture with FS practice standardised to ensure quality provision and encourage uptake of the approach through marketisation. This perspective of FS has developed recognition for the approach as a suitable outdoor education model for education settings (Waite and Goodenough, 2018) and has enabled the cultural conceptualisation of FS in English education (Knight, 2018). Yet, this stage of a movement's development should be taken with caution as tokenistic practice and a loss of original principles can be damaging for the continuation of the approach as the Froebelian Kindergarten movement experienced.

The revisionist Froebelians were able to rebuild their movements integrity through revising Froebel's original principles and aligning them with modern education debates. There are indications that a revisionist perspective of FS is developing within FS research. The rise in critical perspectives acknowledges the development of tokenistic practices and questions the alignment of FS with mainstream education. A more radical notion of FS is indicated in literature where FS is described as an opportunity for de-schooling learning spaces (Blackham et al, 2021; Cudworth and Lumber, 2021) and there is an emphasis on re-

instating the FS principles of child-led and autonomous learning. Furthermore, the FS movement must respond to modern education debates to ensure the approach does not become a trend that will become outdated; like the early Froebelian orthodox kindergarten methods which were rejected with the rise of developmental psychology (Nawrotzki, 2006). The FSA has made efforts to address concerns of children's mental health and wellbeing in regards to long term effects of covid-19 and eco-anxiety. However, the Revisionist Froebelians were fortunate to be supported by a shift in education agendas which strengthened their new ideas. The FS movement is still waiting for a break in the clouds of the current climate of education. It is evident the revisionist perspectives of FS are developing with FS literature, yet it is unclear whether this has influence on the reality of implementing FS principles within the English performance-driven education system. This study will explore this within the data analysis of this research.

This chapter of the study has explored the growth of the FS movement and has highlighted, similarities of development of the movement with the growth of the Froebelian Kindergarten movement. The following chapter will discuss the methodology of this research which was used in this study to understand the conceptual framework in relation to the realities of practitioners' experiences.



## Chapter 5

### Methodology

This study uses an interpretivist, constructivist approach to qualitative research using interviews and participant observations. The research question 2 was designed to enable an exploration of practitioners' views of the FS approach as well as document their experiences in practice. The conceptual framework, developed from the literature, provides instrumental and revisionist perspectives with which to critically examine FS approaches. Using research question 2 to prompt the study's exploration of practitioners' experience revealed whether instrumentalism and / or revisionism are evident in their practice. Rich, qualitative data was collected from practitioners' regarding their perceptions of their approaches to FS. Attempting to conduct empirical research during widespread flooding followed by a global pandemic necessitated flexibility in the research design, yet ensuring it remain grounded by the conceptual framework.

#### Storms of my own

The original methodology for the research were two ethnographically inspired in-depth case studies. Research was to be conducted at intervals over the course of a year to enable the study to paint a detailed picture of the FS approach and how it was implemented in early years settings. Participant observation, semi-structured and unstructured interviews supported with photo elicitation were to be used. I was in conversation with three FS settings who were interested in participating in research and things were looking good. However, just like the Froebelian movement and FS movement, this research would have to endure its' own *perfect storm* which forced the research approach and methods to adapt as flexibility in data collection became the most crucial element in active research of this study.

Autumn 2019 through to winter 2020, the start of the data collection process, was a challenging time for FS practitioners in Yorkshire. From October to February, the UK experienced persistent wet weather, severe flooding and strong winds caused by a procession of storms including storm Lorenzo, Brenden, Dennis and finally storm Ciara which reportedly West Yorkshire was amongst the areas 'most affected' (Met Office, n.d.). The unpredictable weather conditions made ensuring a constant flow of business for independent, free-lance FS Leaders incredibly difficult. This included two of the potential

participant FS settings. For them, this meant cancellations of sessions due to flooding of areas, unsafe dead wood in woodlands and a lack of interest of parents as consumers due to wet weather. This created barriers for FS practitioners committing to ethnography style research, due to the long time scale, aside the challenge of securing work. Consequently, securing a date to commence participant observations was difficult and two of the potential settings lost interest and contact. However, one FS leader, who had the security of being permanently employed by a nursery setting, remained interested. So, research began with setting 1 with a few unfortunate occurrences of cancelled sessions due to high winds by the nursery owner's request. With relief, research was underway with the hope of brighter weather bringing the opportunity to approach new potential settings in Spring 2020.

The weather did brighten into a glorious Spring in 2020. At the same time, the UK was placed under social restrictions due to the global pandemic of the Coronavirus (Johnson, 2020). Schools, along with other public places, were closed making research in person inappropriate. Like most empirical researchers, my methods needed to adjust to online data collection. Therefore, I sought ethical approval to change to online interviews with a hope of conducting participant observations, over a shorter time period, once restrictions were lifted. Through purposive sampling, potential research participants were sent information and invitations to participate through email, yet this gained little interest from FS practitioners with no commitment to participate. As social restrictions continued, it was clear that the research methods needed to be further adapted to include a less invasive, time consuming method than online interviews.

Hence, ethical approval for an online questionnaire was given with an opportunity for participants to express further interest in involvement of the study at the end of the questionnaire. The online questionnaires were sent out through convenience sampling through online social media pages used by FS practitioners. The questionnaire was also promoted at two online conferences in which I presented the conceptual framework of the study in 2021. Respondents came slowly with one local FS practitioner expressing interest in further involvement into the study.

I took a three-month interruption of study which the university provided postgraduate researchers whose research was affected by the pandemic. This enabled me to come back to the empirical research when social restrictions had eased and follow up the interest of

the local FS practitioner questionnaire respondent. This respondent became the study's setting 3 with two FS practitioners at the setting interested in participation. A second setting was also secured through connections through the university. As opportunities to carry out research in person were established, the questionnaires were not used, nor analysed, and are not featured in this research.

This chapter will further discuss the methods used within the three settings. This study depended on pragmatic choices about the research approach and methods to ensure progress, yet it was essential that the study remained grounded by its research questions and conceptual framework. Thus, these needed to be carefully considered throughout the changes to ensure credibility of the study.

### **Research Design**

Flexibility in research design was not without its challenges. What started off as an inductive, interpretative approach to qualitative research demanded re-shaping due to the interruption in field work. During social restrictions, time away from fieldwork prompted the focus on the literature review and much thought was invested on developing and implementing the conceptual framework. This was after conducting empirical research in setting 1, and before settings 2 and 3 were considered. The linear development of deductive and inductive research was therefore not applicable to my research (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013). In inductive research concepts develop from the themes and patterns observed within the empirical data (Gray, 2014). Setting 1 influenced the development of the conceptual framework up to a point, but the majority of this study's fieldwork happened after the conceptual framework had been developed from my systematic study of the Froebelian and FS literature. For deductive research, concepts are determined prior to conducting empirical research which moves towards hypothesis testing (Gray, 2014). This study's conceptual framework was established through my detailed analysis of the literature reviewed. The conceptual framework, which provides a structure of the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens, influenced the thematic data analysis through informing the code manual. Therefore, a more responsive and reflective approach to research was needed.

Research questions 1 and 3 indicate an interest in the patterns of the historical development of FS and early years pedagogy and the creation of a critical lens to analyse FS

principles and development. Ling and Ling (2017) suggest research designed to contribute to an understanding of consistencies of patterns may fall within positivist or neo-positivist paradigms. On the surface, language used in the research questions may indicate the use of a neo-positivist approach, yet closer interrogation of how the research was developed, with fieldwork informing theory and theory informing fieldwork, an interpretative/constructivist approach is apparent. The initial interpretative approach, interested in the human interaction with the phenomena (Egbert and Sanden, 2020), remained present throughout the research process. Yet this research cannot ignore the researcher's knowledge and contribution to the construction of understanding from the study. The constructivist approach complements interpretive perspectives, focusing on participants' interaction with phenomena, while also emphasising the interaction between participants and researcher in creating findings (Egbert and Sanden, 2020). The use of unstructured interviews enables participants to lead data collection with their own individual take on how their perspective would be recorded (see the *realities of unstructured interviews* section below). Both interpretive and constructivist approaches acknowledge the concept of reality as multi-layered and there is not a singular truth (Egbert and Sanden, 2020). Therefore, this study needed to adopt an approach that supports the interaction between researcher, participants and data to develop an understanding over knowledge.

The circular-spiral pattern of the abductive approach was the best fit for this study (Schwartz-Shea and Dvora, 2013). Unlike inductive reasoning, abductive research acknowledges previous knowledge of the researcher and describes research as an interactive process (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013); thus, complementing the constructivist approach. Rinehart (2020) suggests abductive analysis is a 'back and forth process' between fieldwork and theory in which a backward mapping of new knowledge must be used to indicate the researcher's path. (See Appendix 2 for spiral mapping of theory and fieldwork interactions). However, abductive reasoning does not require meaning to be context-specific, therefore, pairing this approach with an interpretive paradigm is essential for the design of this study. In positivist research, the researcher is detached from the social implication of research (Ling and Ling, 2017). This is not the case for this study due to my close interactions with participants during fieldwork. The small scale of data collection deters this study from broad, sweeping statements of generalisations and maintains the

context-specific analysis. Interpretivist study provides the evidenced perspective of the research and its interpretations of a phenomena rather than definitive knowledge (Ling and Ling, 2017). Thus, the critical lens of the conceptual framework guides the study and reader through the interpretation and construction of understanding developed abductively by the research through this study.

## **Data Gathering**

### Positionality

Throughout data gathering, and throughout the research design process, reflexivity and positionality of the researcher is important. Acknowledging my constructivist, interpretivist approach, this study cannot suggest that I, as the researcher, am unaffected by social processes (Hammersly and Atkinson, 2007; Grey, 2014). Reflexivity demands self-critique and disclosure of what a researcher brings to research and is required due to the interactionist nature of qualitative methods (McGregor, 2018). Soedirgo and Glas (2020) argue that reflexivity requires more than assumptions of narrow self-conceptions and should be a commitment to continual reflection. They call for researchers to record and document their reflections and relationship between themselves and their participants through the data collection process (Soedirgo and Glas, 2020). Thus, Appendix 3 shows a record of my reflections on first meeting the participants, visiting them for the first observation period and the last observation period, documenting how my interactions developed throughout the study with participants. Soedirgo and Glas (2020) also support three interrelated ways of interrogating positionality which I have fostered for reflection.

Firstly, researchers must carry out reflections on their own positionality (Soedirgo and Glas, 2020). Due to my professional background in early years practice, I bring my own perception and understanding of working within an early years educational context. In my experience of implementing outdoor learning and FS inspired practice, I encountered many barriers to practice in mainstream settings. As described in Chapter 1, FS can be open to many interpretations, and just like other FS practitioners, I have my own concept of FS which is rooted in my experience of Forest Kindergartens in Sweden (See Chapter 1: *My Forest School Journey: from idealism to reflection*). My perspective of FS before conducting and learning from this research could be interpreted as a purist, utopian perspective (Sackville-

Ford, 2018). My purist understanding of FS, paired with the rise of critical perspectives of FS explored in the literature review, meant that awareness of the potential impact of my bias was reflected on in the construction of research questions and data collection methods. It was important to remain neutral and enable the practitioners' voices to be heard and help shape research findings. Research question 2 places importance on practitioner perspectives of FS and how they value learning in FS. This participant focused, not researcher focused, enquiry underpins the use of semi-structured and unstructured interviews which enable practitioners to address research question 2 naturally in their narratives, whilst checking and restricting researcher influence.

Secondly, researchers should reflect on how others are likely to perceive them (Soedirgo and Glas, 2020). McGregor (2018) suggests there is a dynamic of power between researcher and participant. Participants might regard researchers as 'expert academics' intent on forming judgements about participants and their practices, even though researchers do not frame themselves in this way. To avoid this misconception about the purpose of my research, and to mitigate against the power dynamic between myself as the researcher and the participants, it was important to arrange an informal meeting or chat over the phone. This enabled rapport to develop between us before participants decided to commit to research. During my time with participants, choosing to wear outdoor clothing, which I had worn in my own practice with children outdoors, may have enabled participants to connect with me as a fellow practitioner rather than a formal researcher. Also, an element that may have decreased this power dynamic, yet created assumptions of its own, was my position as an early career researcher. Being younger than the participants may have encouraged assumptions of naivety or inexperience. Hence, on initial meeting, discussing my background, as well as their own, may have helped build rapport but also an understanding of my position as a practitioner.

Thirdly, researchers must reflect on assumptions made throughout the study (Soedirgo and Glas, 2020). Looking at Appendix 3 at participant interactions, the power dynamic towards me as the researcher did not seem to be apparent in setting 1 and 3. Setting 1 interactions appeared very friendly and informal with the initial meeting held in her home. A conscious effort to maintain a professional relationship was required and an ethical stance of only using information recorded in official data collection was ensured. Setting 2 took a very

formal approach to the initial meeting and showed me around the school and grounds as someone may show round an inspector. The power dynamic of ‘expert’ researcher may have been in play as the participant would ask for my opinion and advice on practice she described. I was very aware of what knowledge I shared with this participant as I did not want to interfere with the naturalism of the case (Gray, 2014). This relationship relaxed over the first observation period. My own bias of FS practice was also reflected on when deciding to research setting 3 as I feared it may not meet my concept of FS as it was a holiday club. However, despite the program appearing tokenistic, participants involved were very critically aware of FS practice and provided an interesting insight for the study.

### Process

Clarity of the process of data collection can aid clarity of positionality as well as strengthen reliability of the study (Gray, 2014). The settings were chosen through both convenience and purposive sampling. Research needed to be conducted on settings in my local area, for easy access for observations, and participants needed to be working with young children. This restricted the number of settings suitable for research, influencing the difficulties approaching participants as explained above in *Storms of my own*, yet maintained validity of research through purposive sampling (Gray, 2014). Convenience sampling was also applied as contact with settings were made through university connections, participants indicating interest via the questionnaire and through networking with local FS practitioners who passed on details. The settings involved in the study are described below;

	Setting 1	Setting 2	Setting 3
Type of organisation	Private Day Nursery	Primary School with Early Years unit	Charitable community project running holiday clubs
Participants involved	Susie, Level 3 qualified FS Leader	Holly, Level 3 qualified FS Leader	Lilly, Level 3 qualified FS Leader and Maya, Level 3 qualified FS Leader

Figure 2. Settings involved in study

The process of collecting data was as follows:

- Once consent forms were signed, a **semi-structured interview** was conducted.

- After the initial interview was recorded, **participant observations of six FS sessions** were carried out creating the first observation block.
- After the last session of the observation block had finished, **an unstructured interview**, focusing on participants' perspectives of observed sessions, was conducted.
- Later in the year, **a second participant observation block** of six sessions was conducted.
- After the last session of the second observation block was recorded, **a second unstructured interview** with participants concluded data gathering.

The first point of contact with participants was made either over the phone or by email in which I introduced myself and the research project. This was followed by an informal chat over the phone or in person to provide more information and enable participants the opportunity to ask questions before deciding to get involved. It also enabled me to decide if the setting was suitable for addressing the research questions and build rapport with participants. The next point of contact, after consent forms were signed by participants and the settings/organisation owner/leader, a semi-structured interview was held. Henn, Weinstein and Ford (2006) explain good rapport is needed for unstructured interviews. Unstructured interviews were held later on when participants felt more comfortable in my presence after time spent with them during observation periods.

### Semi-structured interviews

Using interviews was essential for meeting this study's interpretivist, constructivist approach. Developing an understanding of practitioner perspectives through their own narrative was important to this research. The decision to use two different interview techniques, semi-structured and unstructured, enabled the study to gather data which was both prompted by the researcher to ensure research questions were met, but also enabled participants control of what they wanted to share. The two approaches to interviews were used to consider participants' experience whilst participating in research with awareness of developing rapport with participants and building their confidence in the research process.



### *Developing semi-structured interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were the first stage of the process of primary data collection and were arranged after the initial informal meeting held with participants. This interview technique was used as a gentle, yet guided, introduction to participating in research. This enabled participants to become more comfortable with the interview process, rather than throwing them straight into unstructured, open-ended interviews before rapport was built (Gray, 2014). A choice not to use a formal, structured quantitative style to interviewing was made to decrease unequal power relations between researcher and participant, highlighted to be an area of concern in positionality (Henn, Weinstein and Foad, 2009). Semi-structured interviews were also relevant at this stage of research as observations of practice had not yet happened. Thus, the interview would rely on the participants' account, lessening the 'interviewer effect' (Gray, 2014), as bias and assumptions made about practice observed could not interfere with the framing of questions.

Gray (2014) states to maintain validity data collection must measure what was intended to measure. With semi-structured interviews, I had some control over the topics discussed and could pre-plan questions carefully to prevent bias. To strengthen validity of data collected in semi-structured interviews, interview questions (See Appendix 4 for interview questions) were constructed with the research questions in mind to ensure topics explored were relevant. The semi-structured interviews ensured the background of the FS practitioners was recorded and an initial understanding of their perspective was recorded to address research question 2. This initial understanding was developed further throughout data collection.

### Participant observation

For the participant observations, six sessions were observed per observation block. Two observation blocks were carried out with setting 1 and 2. Each observation was a half-day session. However, due to the timing of field work and covid-19 restrictions, one observation block was carried out for setting 3. Each session in setting 3 was half a day and six sessions over the course of three days concluded one observation block. The purpose of observations was to gather further contextual and qualitative data to triangulate with the data collected through interviews. This triangulation strengthened the internal validity of

the research as practitioner accounts recorded in interviews could be supported or challenged with data in observations (Gray, 2014). Time spent observing the settings also helped develop good rapport with participants and enabled field notes to capture a detailed record of the settings' culture of FS practice (Grey, 2014). This provided evidence to address research question 2 as the observations focused on the structure of FS sessions and how practitioners implemented the pedagogical principles.

The use of observation in this study enabled data to be gathered that is not reliant on the participants' narrative which, although represents their truth, can be influenced by their own biases (Gray, 2014). To gain an understanding of the realities of FS practitioners' use of FS pedagogical principles and to feel what it is like to be in their FS sessions, participant observations were used as an observation method which enables the researcher to gain a perspective of reality from the standing-point of the participant (Jorgensen, 2020). Taking on a marginal role as volunteer/helper, not only felt comfortable for myself as an early years practitioner, but provided a less obstructive observation method (Jorgensen, 2020). This contributed to the building of good rapport with participants as it broke down some barriers of being formally observed.

However, my role as researcher in the settings needed to be clarified before observations could be conducted. This was to ensure, as far as possible, that as the researcher, I did not influence practice observed and could maintain an etic and analytical stance (Gray, 2014). The boundaries of my role as volunteer/helper during observations were discussed before signing consent forms and was agreed that I would shadow participants during observation sessions and follow their instructions. Keeping this distance was difficult at times as on occasion participants would ask for my opinion on an activity or event that occurred in the observed sessions. Jorgensen (2020) argues that the relationship and interaction within participant observation is a strength of the approach and describes the approach as using human abilities in social context. Yet, there needs to be a disciplined and systematic application of these human abilities that keep in mind the professional purposes of observation. Therefore, maintaining field notes provided a record of my observations and thoughts which helped develop a reflexive stance whilst checking researcher input in sessions.

### *Recording participant observations*

Throughout the participant observations I recorded my notes in a pocket-sized notebook. These notes were written in brief to serve as a reminder for writing up my researcher diary after each observed session. Some of the notes contained direct small samples of speech to convey the feel of interactions between staff and children. The researcher diary was typed up on the day or the immediate day after to ensure accuracy. Although it was time consuming to record observations as a descriptive narrative, it did provide detailed examples of the structure of sessions and general atmosphere of the groups. When typed onto word documents, setting 1's research diary totalled 21 pages, setting 2 was 24 pages and setting 3 was 9 pages. Yin (2014) suggests recording sufficient evidence when the researcher is participating is difficult. This was challenging when interacting with young children in play to maintain focus on note taking, yet, as Jorgensen (2020) indicates, maintaining a disciplined application of observation helped.

Having a clear focus in observations enabled disciplined note taking. The primary focus of observations was the participants' role as a FS Leaders in FS sessions. This meant paying attention to how the FS leaders interacted with children and supporting staff, where they positioned themselves when the session was underway and how they structured the sessions. I also took notes of when they photographed children which may have been events they decided to discuss in interviews. A critique of observations is that it can be focused on what the researcher believes to be important (Grey, 2014). This study is positioned within constructivism, therefore, the researcher is not passive in the construction of truth. Consequently, in observations, researchers are an important instrument in qualitative research and their account in field notes needs to be honest and accurate (McGregor, 2018). To help ensure this, participants were given the opportunity to review observation transcripts and reminded that they could view the notebook during observations for accuracy and to deter researcher bias. None of the participants took the opportunity to read the notebook. Participants from setting 1 and 2 expressed interest in reading the transcripts of their first observation block. Therefore, printed copies were provided, and they were encouraged to come to me if they had any questions. However, they did not comment on the content.

## Unstructured interviews

Semi-structured pre-planned questions contributing to validity of data was not an option in unstructured interviews, hence a different approach was needed. Unstructured interviews were used to increase participant voice within the research ensuring research question 2, focusing on practitioners' perspective and experiences of FS, was met. Unstructured interviews were held after each observation period. This allowed time for a rapport to develop between researcher and participant which is crucial to the unstructured interview process (Gray, 2014). Rapport built and the use of unstructured interviews enabled the participants to talk freely about the shared experience of FS sessions I had participated in during observations. The approach to unstructured interviews was a non-directive interview technique meaning questions were not pre-planned, however, the researcher input is confined to prompting for additional information and rephrasing answers for accuracy (Gray, 2014). The decision to not use a conversational interview technique in unstructured interviews was taken as it ran the risk of a high influence of the interviewer effect, whereas non-directive interviews focus on participant narrative and limits bias (Henn, Weinstein and Foard, 2009).

A benefit of carrying out unstructured interviews was sharing control of data-generation with participants. With observations and pre-planned questions in structured interviews, control over data generation rested with me, yet unstructured interviews gave power to the participants to take the lead and share what they saw as important. The reality of conducting this type of interview meant I needed to get comfortable relinquishing control, relying on in the moment responses and dealing with a worry of not gathering useful data. This took faith in the process and trust in the steps taken before an unstructured interview was conducted. Gray (2014) suggested that unstructured interviews still require a notion of an objective that will be discussed, therefore, photograph prompts were used.

Before observations began, participants were asked to take photographs, during sessions observed, of any moments they wanted to discuss in the interview. For example, whether that be a moment where they believed children were benefiting from their FS experience, a moment they as participants were happy with or thought could have gone better. They were reminded of this before the unstructured interview so they could look back and prepare what they wanted to share. The ethics of the photograph prompts are discussed

below in the ethics section of the chapter. The photograph prompts provided unique, reflective dialogues from participants and enabled a structure that they could take ownership of, yet still be valid to the research. The plan for the photograph prompts was for participants to select five photographs to discuss which would encourage them to demonstrate areas of practice they valued over others. However, the participants all took a different approach to selecting and using the photograph prompts.

### *Realities of unstructured interviews*

When carrying out unstructured interviews using photograph prompts for the first time with the participant from setting 1, I found the request to select only five photographs was difficult for her as she clearly wanted to discuss more. As she flicked through the photographs to find the ones she had selected as the five prompts, she naturally began to discuss and point out with enthusiasm other photographs in the pile. I felt restricting participants to use five photographs consequently restricted their narrative and hindered their control over the interview method. Therefore, in setting 2, setting 3 and for setting 1's second unstructured interview, selecting five photographs was an option I presented to participants as an example of how to use the photographs as prompts in the interview. However, I did not stop them if they wanted to discuss more photographs or felt comfortable approaching photograph prompts in a different way.

By allowing them to take this control, using the photograph prompts to suit them, provided in-depth narratives and uninterrupted reflection from the participants. Setting 2 participant also found selecting five photographs difficult and felt much more comfortable talking me through a range of photographs she had of the sessions observed. This provided her perspective throughout the observation period rather than limiting her reflection to just five moments. Before setting 1 participant's second unstructured interview, her setting changed the policy of taking photographs during the study. Setting 1 participant was very artistic and therefore decided to record notes of her reflections along with small sketches of pictures to prompt her memory. In setting 3, the two participants were interviewed together and did not show the photographs to me, but passed them between each other as they engaged in conversation together. Enabling participants to interpret the idea of interview prompts themselves encourages the constructivist approach to this research and provided a natural

opportunity to encourage participants to verbally analyse learning in their FS sessions with very little encouragement from the researcher.

The unstructured interviews were audio recorded for accuracy of transcription. A challenging aspect of conducting unstructured interviews was the variation of lengths of interviews. With participants leading discussion, the length of interview depended on how much they wished to share, therefore was unpredictable. Unstructured interviews ranged between 15 to 45 minutes. The purpose of the unstructured interviews was to discuss elements of FS practice the participants valued and use the observed sessions as examples. Participants did occasionally venture off this focus, however, did not go completely off topic. Participants tended to stray to discuss their overall experience in FS which helped underpin analysis of data.

## **Ethics**

Although each method of this research came with its own method specific ethical considerations, all were underpinned by the 2018 BERA ethical guidelines. All participants were given access to participant information sheets explaining their rights. Prior to data collecting, voluntary, informed consent was sought from participants through consent forms and their right to withdraw at any stage was assured (BERA, 2018; paragraph 8). Consent forms were also given to gate keepers of the settings, the headteacher, nursery owner and charity organisation manager, as research was conducted on their premises. Both participants and settings involved were given the right to anonymity (BERA, 2018, paragraph 40). All data collected was stored adhering to the University of Huddersfield's General Data Protection Regulations and kept on an encrypted device only access by the researcher.

### *Interview ethics*

It is important throughout interviews and the research process that there are no implications harmful to participants and that they are aware of their rights (Gray, 2014). Meeting informally and talking participants through consent forms and the research process gave the opportunity to build rapport and enable participants to ask questions before giving consent (Henn, Weinstein and Foad, 2009). Before each interview, participants were provided an opportunity to ask questions and were given an explanation of the process and techniques of interviewing they could expect from the researcher. Participants were made

aware that the interview was audio recorded and when recording started and finished. Participants were given the opportunity to view transcriptions to ensure their accounts were reliable.

Photographs taken by the practitioners in the setting were only used as interview prompts and do not feature in the thesis. Not using the photographs in analysis ensured the participants' reflection is the focus of analysis rather than considering the researcher's perspective of the photograph. Photographs were also taken using a device owned by the setting, so settings had ownership of the images.

### *Observation ethics*

BERA (2018; paragraph 3) highlights the importance of rights of those indirectly affected by research. In the context of my research, this refers to children attending the settings as they were present while observations took place; even though FS practitioners were the focus of data collection. Discussions with the settings took place to decide the best ways to inform parents about research carried out and to introduce me, as the researcher, to the children. Children had the right to ask questions as a group when I was introduced to them or individually and informally throughout observations. I answered respectfully in accordance with their level of understanding (BERA, 2018; paragraph 23). The children were often interested in why I was writing in the notebook, and some wanted to make their own marks in the book. One child was particularly interested in the different colours of my pen, so I let her try them out on the back page. The children were not able to be identified in any way in the research as no children were named nor described in the research diary. Support staff involved in the sessions were also given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and were informed of the nature of research as they may have been indirectly involved when interacting with the FS practitioners but were not subject to observation.

As an early years practitioner with experience working outdoors with young children, I am aware of safeguarding procedures of children's settings. A *Disclosure and Barring Service* [DBS] check certificate was presented to the settings on arrival and that if any safeguarding matters were to arise, it would be passed on to the FS leader or safeguarding lead of the setting. A written agreement of my role as researcher was drawn up and signed by the settings' gatekeepers, participating practitioners and myself before research could

commence. It was made clear, for the protection of children and myself, that I was not to have professional responsibility for the children and were carrying out ongoing participant observations through following instruction of the qualified FS practitioners employed by the setting.

### *Researcher ethics*

Research ethics is not just about the protocols researchers should follow but should actively inform every stage of research. This includes positive and unpressured interactions with participants (BERA, 2018, paragraph 1), down to honest and respectful data presentation (BERA, 2018, paragraph 77). As part of a research community, researchers should protect the reputation of educational research (BERA, 2018, paragraph 62). It is important participants felt comfortable with the research methods and there were no negative connotations for engaging in research. This meant adopting a humanistic approach to putting research methods into place and following the participants' wishes. Conducting research in the abductive and constructivist approach made this easier as participants were given flexibility to adapt methods to suit them. For instance, in setting 3 both participants felt more comfortable being interviewed together. Also, setting 1 changed their policy on how they captured and stored images of children, therefore, the participant and I were able to find a different way to create interview prompts the setting felt happy with. Participants and settings were given contact details of the research supervisors from the university for them to approach if they did not feel comfortable raising a concern or question with me (BERA, 2018, paragraph 64). However, participants were encouraged to approach me in person or by email and were given opportunities before research was conducted and throughout the research process. No issues were raised.

### **Interpreting and presenting data**

A thematic approach to data analysis was taken in this study. This was influenced by Braun and Clarke (2022) six phase approach. However, due to this study's abductive approach, which recognises previous knowledge of the researcher (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013), phase 2 of Braun and Clarke (2022) guide to thematic analysis was adapted. This was to adhere to the study's use of both inductive and deductive research processes. The Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens was used as an analytic tool within data analysis.



Therefore, initial development of codes was informed by the critical lens. The study still maintains a thematic approach to analysis as it focuses on providing an interpretation of participants' meanings through identifying and analysing patterns in qualitative research (Gray, 2022). This complements the interpretivist methodology of this research as research questions are concerned with practitioner perceptions, experience and values of FS that underpin their understanding of the approach.

Phase 1 of Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis is to familiarize yourself with the data. I transcribed all the data sets, a process which can help familiarise the researcher early into data analysis (Gray, 2022). Audio recordings were listened to again in accordance with rereading transcripts to gain a good understanding of the text and its' context.

Generating initial codes from data is Phase 2 (Braun and Clarke, 2022). At the beginning of code generation, each settings' data was analysed separately. Braun and Clarke take an inductive approach to generating initial codes where the researcher is encouraged to seek potential patterns within all the data sets to find numerous embedded codes. This appeals to the interpretive aspect of this study, but not the abductive underpinnings which do not side with either inductive or deductive methods in research (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013). Therefore, this study took inspiration from Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) study using thematic analysis with a hybrid of inductive and deductive approaches.

Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) develop a coding manual to act as a data management tool to begin to structure analysis. The coding manuals were broad and were developed regarding the research questions. Therefore, to start my initial generation of codes, this study formed a coding manual using the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens underpinned by the conceptual framework and the research questions.

<b>Coding Manual</b>	
<i>Questions used to prompt codes taken from research questions</i>	<i>Deductive code</i>
<i>What influences practitioners' understanding of Forest School pedagogy?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Forest School's pedagogical principles in use</li> <li>- Evidence of play</li> </ul>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sub codes taken from <i>What is FS</i> section of this study which explores FS philosophy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Evidence of child-centred practice</li> <li>- The use of environment</li> </ul>
<p><i>How do practitioners implement the Forest School approach in practice to make learning meaningful?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practitioner’s perspective of learning in Forest School</li> <li>- Descriptions of how children learn</li> <li>- What children learn</li> </ul>
<p><i>How do practitioners implement the Forest School approach in practice to make learning meaningful?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Practitioner’s value in learning</li> <li>- Aspects of learning practitioners speak passionately about</li> <li>- Repeated events practitioners recall</li> <li>- Areas they do not value</li> </ul>
<p><i>How do Forest School practitioners negotiate instrumental and revisionist perspectives of the Forest School approach?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Influence of EYFS and education agendas</li> <li>- Relationship practitioners have with setting</li> <li>- How they use EYFS</li> <li>- Are there any challenges</li> </ul>
<p><i>What influences practitioners’ understanding of Forest School pedagogy?</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Progression of FS</li> <li>- The importance of FS</li> </ul>
<p>(Inductively coded)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Role of the FS practitioner</li> <li>- Relationship of child-practitioner</li> </ul>

Figure 3. Code Manual

The coding manual of this study was constructed to include broad and open statements which data could form inductive codes within. Text within data sets were colour coded

according to the code manual. Also, an inductively formed code was added to the manual as data emerged which did not fit into the codes created within the manual.

Unlike Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006) who used the code manual as a framework that continued throughout the data analysis process, the code manual of this study acted as a starting point in generating codes. Following the abductive approach, which views research as an interactive process (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2013), the code manual was influenced by inductive data and reshaped as codes merged, weakened and strengthened throughout the process of analysis. Hence, despite taking inspiration from Fereday and Muir-Cochrane in Phase 2, this study's thematic analysis continues to follow Braun and Clarke's (2022) model.

Phase 3 of Braun and Clarke (2022) thematic analysis is to search for themes. At this stage codes are beginning to be arranged into potential themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Colour coded text from the interviews and observations were grouped together and copied into Word documents to be presented under the codes. Inductive themes were then interpreted within the deductive codes. Gray (2022) suggests creating visual thematic maps will help with the process of creating themes. The codes from the manual were centred in the maps with themes attached taken from the word documents. Still being analysed separately, visual thematic maps were created for each setting.

Phase 4, Braun and Clarke (2022) advise reviewing themes. Common themes across the three settings' data sets were beginning to show within the thematic maps. These were combined to create themes across the data sets. Some themes were dropped as not enough evidence was sufficient to include them in data presentation and some themes were merged with other codes to create different themes.

In phase 5, researchers must define and name the themes (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Here a process of refining, defining and naming the themes is to be concluded (Gray, 2022). The final themes were then transferred to word documents using key quotes from transcriptions that informed the themes and developed a story informing the findings. Summaries of the themes were added to the documents to aid the development of the report. These were also considered within the research questions which enabled themes to be group together for presentation of data analysis.

Phase 6 is to produce the report (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Therefore, data is presented in subsequent chapters under the final themes. It was important to include the practitioners' voices in the study to reflect the research's interpretivist approach. Therefore, key quotes from transcriptions are featured in the presentation of findings. Codes after each quote is provided, for instance (WI:100-Susie), to help the reader understand which data sets the text is from (See Appendix 5 for key to data set codes) and so text can be traced back to its' original source to ensure accuracy of quotations.

## **Justification and evaluation**

### *Validity and Reliability*

Qualitative researchers often reject the definitions rooted in positivist research of validity and generalisability (Gray, 2022), instead focus on rigor and authenticity to define quality in research. Maintaining authenticity, through capturing and analysing genuine practitioner experiences and participant voice (McGregor, 2018), was the focus of this research to strengthen the interpretivist, constructivist approach. Collaboration in data collection can improve authenticity (McGregor, 2018). Therefore, unstructured interviews with photo elicitation were vital to capturing participant voice. Following the abductive approach, which encourages participants to be active in data collection (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012), enabling participants to interpret their chosen photographs in their own way further strengthened their authentic representation. The participant involvement also encouraged credibility and trustworthiness of data through member checks (Gray, 2014; McGregor, 2018). Participants were offered access to print copies of the interview transcripts and research diary, this was to confirm accuracy of transcriptions and representations.

Participants from setting 1 and 2 showed interest in viewing transcripts of both background interviews and transcripts of the first observation block. Apart from the participant from setting 2's amusement of reading her speech back, no comment was made on the content. Participants were also reminded that they could look at or ask questions about the raw data recorded as notes in a notebook used during observations. Although no participants expressed interest in the notebook, this did encourage reflection of researcher bias in initial notes and prompted accurate descriptions. The use of data triangulation through observations and two strategies of interviews also promoted internal validity. The use of different methods aided practitioners' voices to underpin research, promoting an authentic

understanding of FS pedagogy. Efforts made for internal validity were made in the process of data collection with a focus on authenticity and accurate recording (Gray, 2014) however, external validity was a concern of research design.

External validity in qualitative research looks at a more 'naturalistic' generalisation of a study which is more intuitive than the law-like nomothetic generalisation of positivist research (Gray, 2014). Although generalisation of this study was not the main focus due to its interpretive approach, efforts were made to improve the study's external validity. The use of theoretical replication of cases (Yin, 2014) provided scope for relatability of data to more than one type of FS setting. Convenience, purposive sampling of three different settings using FS enabled research to go beyond the nursery setting of case 1; however, more case studies to support data gathered at each type of setting would be needed to create stronger generalisation. Interpretive studies rely on detailed contextualised data, therefore, are often held under scrutiny for being too context specific (McGregor, 2018). Although data for this research was in-depth with detailed observations and interviews, the length of time aimed to be spent at the settings was restricted.

### *Limitations*

The research design needed to adapt to the reduction in participant engagement due to flooding followed by the social restrictions of the global pandemic. This meant that data collected was small-scale. Thus, making conclusive, sweeping statements difficult for this study. The abductive development of this research, as both field work and theory developed and informed each other, indicated the study's process of mean-making and developing an understanding of, and not definitive truth of, FS practitioners' experiences of perceptions of FS. Therefore, generalisability is not a focus of this research as the interpretivist paradigm places importance on the context-specific findings of the study. However, efforts were made to increase external validity of the study through theoretical replication of cases, using different types of FS settings (Yin, 2014). This research can be strengthened in future studies in two ways. Firstly, enhancing the interpretivist approach, more time could be spent, as originally planned, collecting qualitative data of case studies of FS settings in an early years context. This would provide further depth to qualitative data and provide opportunities to involve other practitioners of the setting not qualified in FS and create a holistic picture of the FS approach in an early years context. Secondly,

quantitative research of the study could also be expanded and used to develop understanding of FS practitioners with regard to the conceptual framework across a larger scope creating stronger generalisation of the study. However, this would mean moving on from the interpretive, constructivist research paradigm that underpinned this study.

This chapter has summarised the methods and approach to research this study has taken. The next two chapters will present the data found and apply this to the conceptual framework of this study. This thesis will then go on to discuss how the findings from the practitioners' accounts have informed a revision of the conceptual framework and strengthened its use as a reflective, critical lens.

## Chapter 6

### Practitioners' perspectives of Forest School and observed practice

This chapter explores how the practitioners' views of FS practice shapes their implementation of the approach. To address research question 2, it is important to understand practitioners' perceptions of FS and experiences of implementing the approach before the conceptual framework can be applied to their accounts. Therefore, the chapter will first present data from observations and interviews. This will then be concluded with a discussion of the data related to the conceptual framework.

Each practitioner's perspective will be analysed separately to strengthen their narrative and develop the study's understanding of their experiences. Direct quotes from the practitioners taken from interviews will feature to enable their professional voices to be heard within this research. The chapter will focus on themes drawn from the interview data that explores *Practitioners' perspectives of the FS approach*, followed by an exploration of the themes drawn from the observation data that analyses *Practitioners' experiences of implementing the FS approach*. (See Appendix 6 for a thematic map). Three common themes that emerged from the interviews are presented as follows:

- Understanding of progression of the FS approach
- Doubt and comparing FS practice
- Practitioner's roles in learning

However, the practitioners' accounts of how they used nature in FS and the issues FS can address in contemporary education varied. Below are the different themes that emerged in the interviews from each practitioner.

- Susie – Connection with nature
- Lilly and Maya - Responding to society's needs
- Holly - Freedom outdoors, Time to learn

Data from the interviews will then be followed by quotes taken from observations of practice from the research diary to create a picture of what the practitioners' FS sessions are like. Two common themes are explored:

- Freedom of choice
- Practitioners' incorporation of play

However, how the practitioners responded and supported children in their sessions varied. The unique themes of each practitioners' response to children are presented below:

- Susie - Responding to children's interests
- Lilly and Maya – modelling
- Holly - learning from each other

The chapter is then concluded with a summary of the findings from the practitioners' accounts. This is discussed with regard to the conceptual framework by considering instrumental and revisionist perspectives that are present in the practitioners' experiences.

### **Susie**

Susie is a freelance level three Forest School Leader and she works with three different nursery settings. This study focuses on one of the nurseries as observations only take place in this nursery. Susie has a background as a community artist and has worked on outdoor education programs for the council with older children. At the time of this study, Susie had been carrying out FS sessions for the nursery involved in this study for 9 years.

### **Interviews - Susie's perspectives of the Forest School approach**

Firstly, this chapter will explore Susie's perspective of the FS approach and her practice through her accounts collected during interviews.

#### *Understanding of progression of the Forest School approach*

Susie acknowledges FS as a way for early years settings to stand out and act as a point of interest for potential clients.

*Because it offers something different and I think Forest Schools are over and above what the nursery, you know, it's an added extra. (AI: 266-267-Susie)*

*Lots of parents actually choose the nursery because of the outdoor provision that's provided there (WI: 385-386-Susie)*



This highlights the neo-liberal competition between settings within the market of education and how FS is used to heighten practice (Connolly and Haughton, 2015). Susie does not reflect on how this marketisation affects the development of the FS approach.

Susie reflects on her FS training which introduced the concept of English FS as an approach targeting adolescents, particularly those who had struggled in mainstream settings.

*When I did my Forest School training it had been brought over here, to this country, to support young people who were maybe struggling with low self-esteem, confidence, maybe getting into trouble (BI:205-207-Susie)*

Susie shares her experience of how the approach has progressed to include younger children and has become the main target age for the FS approach. With her understanding of the approach initially aimed at teenagers, Susie views the approach's move towards early childhood education as part of early intervention.

*Whereas there has been a big shift ... It's now very much nurseries and a lot of it is very young children, nursery based. (BI:207-209-Susie)*

*But as I say there is a big movement in younger children now and I think it's that, kind of, belief that if you can build self-confidence and esteem from a very early age, then hopefully you won't get to the point of being a teenager and having that feeling that you almost missed out on things in childhood and having confidence issues because you have just been allowed to play and explore and learn through play. (BI:271-175-Susie)*

Although this is Susie's experience and the order in which she has come to understand the FS approach, it does suggest there is a disconnection for Susie from the original early years model of education that inspired the movement and her understanding of how the approach has developed. This may impact how Susie views her practice in the early years context.

### *Doubt and comparing Forest School practice*

When reflecting on her training, Susie explains that it was aimed at using FS with adolescents with challenging behaviour. This influences tensions in how Susie perceives her own use of the approach.

*Whether I run true Forest School to how I was trained, probably not, but it's all about connection and giving the children the opportunity to experience and explore and just be encouraged to play like a child and investigate their natural curiosity. (BI: 236-240-Susie)*

Susie has a strong concept of a 'true Forest School' which is based on FS Scandinavian roots and not her training. She acknowledges the difficulties of conducting *true FS* in England as opposed to Scandinavian countries.

*'I think the true Forest School ways are sometimes hard to achieve here in this country. ... giving children, you know, tools which can be deemed as dangerous is maybe challenging. I do use tools. (BI:176-178-Susie)*

*They [Scandinavian children] would be supervised but not supervised like they are here in the UK.'* (BI:181-182-Susie)

*Forest Schools in Scandinavia are very, very child led. They're very what the children are interested in, you go with. (BI:199-200-Susie)*

*I do come up here with an activity in my head. Whereas, true Forest School might be a little bit more all the tools are here and it's just what the children want to get involved in, get engaged in, want to do that day. (BI:219-221-Susie)*

Looking at Susie's idea of true FS shows her questioning her own practice. Susie comments on the freedom Scandinavian children experience in FS through less surveillance and use of self-directed learning which Susie feels is restricted in England. This reflects the tensions in the FS concept of the learner and the English concepts of the free child restricted by adult's need to control and protect (Boyden, 2014). She explains Scandinavian practice is '*very child led*', yet she values English FS for providing the opportunity for children to '*investigate their natural curiosity*'. However, it may be the conflict of interest between her training and her

current practice which impacts on her confidence in her FS identity. Therefore, the early years Scandinavian model, which Susie implies is 'true Forest School,' may not have been influenced by the training she received. Leather (2018) explains how the rapid growth of training programs resulted in a lack of philosophical underpinning in training as it became more focused on the practicalities of implementing FS within an English context. The conflict of interest in Susie's training and practice may impact her view of her FS identity and confidence in working towards her concept of true FS.

### *Practitioner's roles in learning*

Susie's perspective of her role in learning is linked to FS's concept of play. To be qualified in outdoor play was what attracted Susie to the FS movement. She draws on a very personal connection to her role and the use of FS which she states reflected her own values and beliefs.

*But in terms of actually deciding to take the Forest School qualification, I really just wanted to get qualified in outdoor play with children and to just learn more about the ethos of FS because it just felt like it just fitted with what I believed in and just wanted to enrich my understanding of how outdoor play benefited children's development really. (BI: 29-32-Susie)*

Susie does not refer to roles in mainstream settings. This may be due to Susie's background as a community artist rather than drawing from an education background. Susie's focus is encouraging children's curiosity and promoting their engagement with nature through play.

*I feel a responsibility to, erm, if I could peak the children's natural curiosity that every child is naturally curious and teach them things in a playful way (BI: 150-151-Susie)*

When speaking about her role, Susie often highlights her personal qualities that enhance her delivery of the approach.

*I like to think that I am very childlike in my approach. (BI:127-Susie)*

*So, I'm quite silly with the children, you know, we're in the woods, it's kind of like, it's not just the children that can leap about and get excited about a leaf (BI:136-138-Susie)*

*So, I kind of feel like that inner child has now the ability of, kind of, show itself as an adult. (BI:132-133-Susie)*

Learning about the benefits of outdoor play for children's development was important to Susie's decision to train as a FS practitioner. Play also informs her 'childlike' approach Susie values in her role as an adult in FS. Susie explains the freedom FS encourages in her role as she can express her 'inner child' and show excitement for her own learning experience alongside the children. This demonstrates Sackville-Ford's (2019) notion of radical roles in FS as children and adults share a more equal relationship.

*As an adult, you know, you're double the size of them. You can see over the wall. So sometimes I get down to their level, you know. If one of them is upset or is feeling a bit anxious, I get down to how high they are because, actually, it's a very different viewpoint. It's a very different vantage point from that height... So, yeah, just trying to think about it through their eyes. I suppose I enjoy that. (BI:320-326-Susie)*

Susie demonstrates this equal relationship further as she explains she enjoys putting herself in the children's position and seeks to understand their experiences to inform her support in their learning.

#### *Connection with nature*

An important personal value for Susie is her interest in sharing nature with people which stems from her previous professional experience as a community artist.

*You know, it's just like nature is art and all my art is based around nature anyway. So yeah, I just enjoy opening people's eyes to the great outdoors. (BI:334-336-Susie)*

*I think I just, I enjoy helping people find nature (BI:308-Susie)*

This personal value is transferred into her FS work in an early years context and also sharing this with families. Susie speaks passionately about the FS movement and its ability to address some of the challenges of modern life. Susie highlights consumerism as a concern in modern culture.

*And I just want to be able to support the children to build this connection with nature. So that they can be kind to it. ... it's inbuilt in us. You know, the*

*hunter/gatherer, spend time in nature, harvesting nature, looking after nature but we have kind of become a society who has taken too much or is much more consumer-driven (Bl:143-147-Susie)*

*[L]ife doesn't have to be about materialistic things and money and going out and doing lots of things. You know, so much connection can be found in just an outdoor space. (Bl: 288-290-Susie)*

*We have a leavers party up here and the parents just, kind of, get to come and play in the woods and it's just magic to see them interact. Having that interaction with the children (Bl: 284-286-Susie)*

Susie enjoys seeing families together engaging in FS within the nursery. Susie values her playful interaction with children which informs her role in learning, and she enjoys seeing parents have this interaction with their children. For Susie, being in nature and in FS provides opportunities for special interactions away from the consumerist culture of today and bring people back to mankind's roots in the natural world.

Susie wishes to strengthen the connection between children and nature. She wants to help children understand their impact on nature as well as understand what nature can do for them. With this aim she hopes to create lifelong learning and love for nature.

*[H]opefully that's something that when they grow up they will remember ... and that hopefully they will then want to care for nature and see it as their responsibility to look after the natural spaces around them and always feel that nature is there for them (Bl: 150-156-Susie)*

*[T]hat hopefully they will cherish and move through life with a stronger connection for nature. In the hope that they will go on to want to care for it and teach their own children to care for it. (Bl: 169-171-Susie)*

Susie explains she wants children to feel 'nature is there for them' suggesting a deeper emotional connection than a simplistic give and take relationship. Traditional English approaches to outdoor education are often viewed as how we as people can use the environment as a resource (Mycock, 2020). Mycock (2020) explains FS can be perceived as an alternative pedagogical response to Anthropocene, the human-influenced geologic time-

period, thus encouraging an equal connection to nature rather than seeing people as separated or controlling of nature. Susie's reference to going back to mankind's roots of 'hunter/gatherer' which may link her perspective of the importance of nature more closely with the Scandinavian concept of Friluftsliv, where there is an emphasis of people's historical connections to land which can be stimulated through time in nature (Leather, 2018). Susie appears to be encouraging a mutual respect and belonging to nature which reflects Mycock (2020) and the concept of Friluftsliv.

### **Observations – Susie's experience of implementing the Forest School approach**

This section will focus on abstracts from field notes taken when observing Susie's FS practice at the nursery setting. This will include quotes from the interviews with Susie to support abstracts from the field notes.

#### *Freedom of choice*

*Nothing is compulsory and that's the thing about Forest Schools is that none of it is compulsory. (AI: 181-182-Susie)*

*We just have to, kind of, go with what the children are comfortable and OK with. (BI: 196-197-Susie)*

Susie's understanding of learning in FS is not forced onto children and children are not required to engage in any of the activities provided. Children in Susie's sessions can disengage with Susie with no consequence. From the field notes below, Susie is observed on numerous occasions giving children this freedom of choice.

*Some children were engaged in raspberry picking with Susie while others were exploring the small orchard. (AF:15-16-Susie)*

*Susie explained why there was fungus growing on the logs. Some of the children decided to go play while others listened to Susie. (AF:30-31-Susie)*

*[Susie] then began to set up the fire and call out to any children that want to help. She did not break up the play and sets up the fire with a few children that were interested initially but mostly attends to it on her own. (WF: 415-417-Susie)*

She enables children's autonomy and shows awareness of how to adapt her approach to support this. An example of this is when Susie invited the children to help her make a necklace for a member of staff that was leaving the nursery.

*Susie then called the children and asked if they wanted to make the necklace. Three children did not want to and continued to play with a hose pipe they had found. Five children joined ... The children began to drift away from the activity and back to free play until one child was left. Susie spent some time one-to-one with the child finishing off the necklace and talking about family. (WF: 291-298-Susie)*

Although the activity was adult-led as the decision to make a necklace was Susie's idea and she had predetermined ideas of the skills the children would develop, children were still given freedom to choose. Children were able to have a go at the activity but did not need to complete it. Coats and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) highlight an interesting notion that in FS not all activities are child-led, yet the support from the adult must be. In the observation above, rather than abandoning the activity as most children had disengaged, Susie took the time to focus on one child that took a particular interest. Susie engaged in personal conversation with the child, building rapport with them and did not rush the process. Tiplady and Menter (2020) suggest the child-led focus of FS enables children to take what they need from FS. This child may have been benefiting from learning new skills from building the necklace or simply enjoying one-to-one quality time with Susie.

Children were given freedom within the activities and Susie maintained her notion of FS that 'nothing is compulsory'. Susie indicates that she adapts her activities to follow children's interests.

*I do have an activity in my mind but sometimes I go very off piece depending on if some of the children get interested in something (BI:221-223-Susie)*

*So, the activity that I had actually planned, I thought it just doesn't matter. It can happen another time. If that's what they are interested in. (AI:121-125-Susie)*

This is evident in her practice observed below where Susie is encouraging children to use natural materials to create a group picture celebrating bonfire night.

*She demonstrated how to lay leaves in shapes representing fireworks and encouraged the children to join in by saying 'Can you put them in a line?' and 'Can you find a yellow one?' Some began to lay some leaves down or passed them to Susie. Other children stood by watching, but did not seem to engage. The children became distracted, and Susie followed them. She suggested they could make fireworks a different way. She gathered up leaves and threw them in the air. The children laughed and watched her do it again. As she threw them the practitioner made firework noises. The children began to copy and seem to enjoy throwing the leaves. (AF:361-368-Susie)*

The activity Susie planned had not piqued the interest of the children, regardless of Susie's use of questioning to prompt their involvement. Susie then adapted her activity to suit the more physical and playful interests of the children, over the focused and careful nature of creating a collective picture she had originally planned. This activity did not last long. Susie reflected openly about the activity during the observation in the field notes below.

*I stood with Susie near the fire and watched as the children came in and out of the hut to play. Susie explained she didn't think the children were very engaged with the picture and she thought that the wet and cold weather can sometimes impact on their focus. ... Even though the walk up and the bonfire activity had felt a little challenging, I watched some of the children still playing out in the rain. There was a sense of calm as they played out in the woods individually. (AF: 376-383-Susie)*

The day of this observation had been a very wet and cold day. Susie's engagement with the children had been challenging, in both activities and moving up to the woods, and the children appeared to want to play independently. Tiplady and Menter (2020) state self-motivation is an important element to FS learning. Yet, not directing learning can be seen as a lack of intervention in mainstream perspectives of education (Maynard, 2007). Planning the bonfire activity, Susie has 'ticked the boxes' that the nursery needs in terms of input. When children do not want to engage with Susie, she is comfortable with enabling children to direct themselves. Susie is observed to be providing them with that space by taking a step back and enabling them this independence to play in the rain.



### *Practitioners' incorporation of play*

Play is important to FS's social-constructivist approach in providing young children's autonomy whilst acknowledging the 'community of learning' emphasised in the FS principles (FSA, n.d). Susie uses play to develop children's knowledge of the woods in her pre-planned learning activities.

*Susie used her arms to demonstrate that bats fly and with encouragement the group pretended to fly like bats around the woods. ...Susie moved into the hut to explain how bats sleep. She told them bats might like the hut and held some children upside down, demonstrating to the group how they slept. The children enjoyed the demonstration, shrieking and laughing as a child hung upside down. However, some children remained outside, still more interested in flying and continued to fly around the woods before becoming engaged in a different form of play in the wood's wooden boat. (AF:54-62-Susie)*

Within this observation children were able to stay engaged in the part of the play they wished without being moved on into the next part of the 'game' in the hut. Susie can maintain a less hierarchical position in her planned input as she plays alongside the children as she guides them through the life of a bat. When describing her role in learning, Susie states she wishes to teach children about nature in a playful way (BI: 150-151-Susie). The activity was an opportunity for children to explore their understanding of animals that live in the woods, complementing Susie's principles of FS pedagogy. This activity was not enforced, in keeping with Susie's understanding of learning in FS as 'not compulsory', as children were free to drift from the activity.

Still, the most prominent opportunity for children to engage in free play in Susie's sessions occurred when children first arrived at the woods.

*On entering the woods, the children began to explore the woodland and engaged in independent free play. One child was running up and down the woods shouting 'roar', a few older children began rebuilding a den, some were exploring a woodpile left by the tree surgeon and three children were inside the hut with a practitioner. The children seemed confident finding their own tasks to do in the woods while one*

*of the practitioners walked around taking photographs with a tablet. (WF: 199-203-Susie)*

*Susie and the practitioner went into the hut to set up while the children explored the thin layer of snow in the woods. Some of the children were looking at the snow which had fallen on different surfaces and scraping it on to their gloves to taste. (WF: 22-24- Susie)*

*As we entered the woods, the children disbursed and began exploring the woodlands. The child that came yesterday was showing some of the children the new den and bus [built by Susie and the children]. One child was very excited to play with the bus and called to Susie to come sit on the bus. Susie and the practitioner went to sit on the bus. Other children followed. (WF: 256-262-Susie)*

This would be a time when Susie was busy setting up an activity or building the fire pit to start warming hot chocolate. Susie explains this is a time for children to become 'accustomed to the woods' and explore for themselves any changes in the environment (BI:67-68-Susie). On occasion this free play would extend into the whole session.

*Reflecting on this group as I walked back, activities today seemed to happen very organically and, even though games were encouraged by Susie, they did not seem like pre-planned activities needed to be done. (AF:332-334-Susie)*

The sessions in which free play was observed to direct the whole session was times in which Susie was able to join in and support their child-initiated play. An example of this is time spent playing on the 'bus'. During the time of the observations the bus, made of cuttings from the tree surgeon, was a new and exciting addition to the woods and the children seemed to enjoy repeating play on the bus and Susie was invited to join.

*I stood with the children still building the den but could see Susie was busy building with the log pile. After a while I saw the children sitting on some logs and were singing wheels on the bus with Susie. She then called to the group to board the bus. Some children joined in while others continued with the den. The children played freely with the den or on the bus for most of the session. (WF: 215-220-Susie)*

*On the bus, we sang Wheels on the bus and Susie gave the children prompts in play; such as, 'If we want to get off the bus, we need to ring the bell', 'Look at the lovely countryside' and 'Where are we going bus driver?' They played on the bus as a group for around ten minutes until some of the children decided to move on and Susie needed to start setting up. (WF: 259-262-Susie)*

Susie recalled playing on the bus with the children as she reflected on the observed sessions.

*[O]n the bus, and we were on an adventure, and we ended up on the beach somehow. One of the children said, 'beach'. At the beach, we decided to light a fire and put some picnic rugs out and we were laying on the picnic rug. I was messing about saying I was getting a tan but actually it was freezing cold as it was wintertime. Some of the children wanted to lay next to me (WI: 111-115- Susie)*

Play was not just used by Susie to educate them about nature or something that children did independently when Susie was busy. Play was a time Susie connected with the children. Susie values her child-like nature in her role as a practitioner in FS and seemed to enjoy immersing herself within the children's play.

#### *Responding to children*

Susie's FS sessions are not rushed. She enables children to take their time transitioning from the nursery setting to the FS session and she was observed pausing what she was doing to take the time to follow children's individual interests.

*The group took a little longer than normal to walk up which one of the practitioners had joked was a 'record time'. Susie and the practitioner did not seem to mind and had allowed the children to walk at their own pace. (WF: 93-95-Susie)*

*Susie stopped to talk to a child who was interested in one of the raspberry bushes. She picked the child up for a closer inspection of the bush and engaged in conversation with the child. (AF:17-19-Susie)*

*She notices a child laying down and goes to lay with him and she begins to talk to him about the wind and what they can see up in the trees. (WF: 410-411-Susie)*

Susie enables children's interest to shape her sessions. Below, she describes how one child's interest in looking for bugs under a log inspired the whole group to go bug hunting.

*I normally do that sort of thing in the summertime bug hunting. ... We got interested in it, so I followed it on the next week, thinking that I would have to initiate that, but they didn't actually, they ran into the wood kind of going, 'Can we look for things under the logs?' (WI: 299-304-Susie)*

Susie explains this would not normally be planned for the time of year but suggested her intention to continue the activity into the next session. However, the child's own self-motivation initiated the activity the next session. Susie had planned for the group to go bug hunting again as she observed their interest yet allowed the children to initiate the activity independently.

Susie also uses her own observations of the children's play to create opportunities to extend the play. In the first observation period in autumn, Susie is recorded to reflect on children's play in the woodland hut.

*Some of the children were selling ice-cream in their game. Susie explained to me how she found it interesting that all age groups have played that game with no encouragement. She thought it might be the shape of the window of the hut that triggered the game. (AF:66-69-Susie)*

Susie explains that all age groups, throughout her time at the nursery, have enjoyed pretending to sell ice-cream from the window of the hut that looks like a hatch (AF:66-69-Susie). In the second observation period follow up interview, Susie reflects again on the children's repeated play.

*All of the children that I've ever had up there in 10 years have all gone to the hatch and it must be that association of a hatch, you know, serving out of a hatch and the ice cream van. One of the children actually said about a woodland café, ... and we have made a café (WI: 23-29-Susie)*

Susie used her knowledge of the children's interest in the hut's hatch and, by listening to a child's idea, created a cafe area with the children promoting imaginative play already developing in the area. The children are observed enjoying this area of the woods and Susie

continues to develop play opportunities through using different resources to prompt children's play.

*A child invites me to come play in the café. I spend most of the first part of the session eating pretend porridge and ordering food at the café with four children serving me. Susie comes in and out of the play. She brings different resources for us to use such as little sticks previously cut and different tubs and asks the children what they could be used for. (WF: 412-415-Susie)*

Susie's use of the café in the children's care routines adds a playful nature to adult-led care routines. Snack time is provided in the woods, mirroring the routines of the nursery.

*Once the group had warmed up, we sit in the café for hot chocolate and snack with Susie serving them at the hatch (the hut window). (WF:421-423-Susie)*

*[E]very time we have gone up, can we have snack in the café and the café has just kind of mushroomed... and we have, kind of, paid for our bread sticks and snacks over the hatch with pinecones and bits of wood and things like that. (WI:31-36-Susie)*

This playfulness develops a more balanced relationship between adults and children in care routines which supports FS's radical relationships (Sackville-Ford, 2019).

### *Summary*

Susie uses play as a pedagogical tool within her adult-led activities to develop certain skills and satisfy the nurseries' expectations. However, instrumental focus of procedures over the purpose behind practice is not strong in Susie's practice. Her implementation of play breaks down the relationship of hierarchy between her and the children and she promotes learning about the environment that is in line with her own personal values and the pedagogical principles of FS. Susie engages with the FS concept of the learner with child-centred practice. She enables children to engage in her activities with autonomy as they are not required to complete activities as Susie has planned or can disengage entirely. She will adapt or abandon activities planned to suit how the children are feeling and follow their interests. She used their interest to inform her planning and develop areas of the woods to promote play opportunities.

## Holly

Holly is an experienced teacher and works in an infants and primary school. Holly has worked at the school for a long time and had taken responsibility for developing outdoor provision across the school. At first, this meant establishing a more natural play area for the reception children and introducing gardening to the school. Holly's interest in outdoor education led her to become qualified as a level 3 Forest School Leader and she now takes children of all ages in the school to regular FS sessions in a small woodland next to the school.

### Interviews – Holly's perspectives of the Forest School approach

#### *Understanding of progression of the Forest School approach*

Holly suggests that there is a growing awareness for the need for outdoor learning. This is also something that Holly believes is important to parents.

*So, I feel there is a greater awareness that children need to be learning outdoors.*

*Whether it is FS or outdoor learning, they need to be outdoors for the opportunities that affords their learning in all subjects and for their better mental health and physical health (BI: 205-208-Holly)*

*I think they possibly do because I think they value that more than us, that their children are out in a natural environment and that they are playing and being challenged and taking risks, managed risks, and they are doing it regularly. (BI: 188-191-Holly)*

The recognition of the benefits to outdoor learning may contribute to the increased interest in FS within mainstream education which Holly indicates.

*I think it is developed... more people are aware of Forest School. (BI: 184-Holly)*

*So, I believe in that sense it is growing as part of mainstream education. (BI: 195-196-Holly)*

*[T]here is definitely a lot more equipment for sale in a lot of catalogues for Forest School than there ever was. So, if that's a measure of the development of there being more provision for outdoor activities. (BI: 191-193-Holly)*

The increased awareness of the FS approach and its steering towards mainstream education has aided Holly's ability to introduce FS to her school. She explains evidence she has found on the benefits of FS has supported the school's acceptance to try to incorporate the approach.

*I think that they have been happier for it to happen. There's a lot more evidence or research available, if you look for it. It's not thrown at you but if you look for the benefits of being outdoors, especially in the early years setting. (BI: 218-220-Holly)*

However, Holly expresses concern of a lack of understanding of FS principles in this growth of awareness.

*I don't know if it has developed in people, in knowing that there are more Forest Schools, knowing what that stands for. What Forest School is. I don't know. I don't even know if all our parents understand the Forest School ethos as put out by the Forest School Association, the six principles. (BI: 186-188-Holly)*

Holly raises an important point as she questions whether the need to develop outdoor practice and reap the benefits from outdoor education does not equally reflect the need to understand the approach the school is taking to implement this. She reflects critically on the development of the FS movement and questions whether this reflects the development of the setting's and parent's understanding of the approach. Holly uses the FSA's six principles to guide her practice but is unsure if parents are aware of this. Therefore, the concern of FS dilution of principles, from Holly's perspective, is not a result of its incorporation into mainstream education but the lack of understanding of the principles from the people surrounding the context of FS practice.

Looking back at the instrumental use of Froebel's kindergarten methods, this developed an interest in all things kindergarten and his educational toys known as gifts were marketised and sold to settings (Manning, 2005). Holly indicates this may be happening in the FS movement with an interest in all things FS in catalogues addressed to education settings. This reflects a demand for FS equipment in the market of education which reflects the commodification of FS (Leather, 2018).

### *Doubt and comparing Forest School practice*

Complementing Holly's notion of a lack of understanding of the FS approach underpinning practice, she reflects on other practitioners she has spoken to about their experiences. She explains the tensions they face in practice with restricted space and limited autonomy.

*Only the people I have met when I was doing my training. Some worked in nurseries, some worked in private nurseries. There were mostly all private nurseries, actually. Some worked in schools and they didn't have much outside area and they had those children for a session a week. (BI: 209-214-Holly)*

*A teacher came in as well and sometimes the teacher wanted them to do a certain thing. So, they didn't have the freedoms that I feel that I have. (BI: 212-214-Holly)*

Due to Holly's relationship with the setting (See Chapter 7), Holly indicates that she has more freedom in her practice than other practitioners in other settings. However, she also expresses doubt as to whether her practice meets the standards of FS. Despite this doubt, she continues to take pride in her work.

*I'm just proud of the fact that we are doing it, we are getting outside come rain or shine. It's not always the top quality [laughs] but we are getting outside. (BI: 149-154-Holly)*

Holly does not acknowledge a 'true FS' description in the manner Susie does with Scandinavian practice. However, Holly does compare her practice with other settings she has heard of.

*It was fabulous. It was Forest School [FS exaggerated in speech]. They were outdoors all day. (BI: 197-198-Holly)*

Holly's emphasis on 'It was *Forest School*' suggests she may think her setting is less Forest School in comparison to the other setting she has heard of. Holly may perceive the other setting as 'true FS'. Highlighting that the setting is 'outdoors all day' indicates Holly's concept of FS is determined by the length of time children have access to FS's alternative pedagogy. Practice with the children in Holly's school is shared between dominant discourses of mainstream education and FS pedagogy. This half and half pedagogy may impact on Holly's perceived status of conducting 'true FS'.



### *Practitioners' roles in learning*

When asked about her role, Holly explains it is connected to developing children holistically and lists several skills that she aims to promote through FS.

*My role is to help them develop as a whole person and help them feel happy outside because they don't always when they start, feel confident about coming outside. To promote their communication skills, social skills, physical – set up an environment where they can develop socially, physically, intellectually, creatively, emotionally and spiritually. The SPICES. But I do think about that a lot and do reflect on where they have been able to develop those skills or attributes. Sometimes I feel my role is to develop their self-esteem... by setting small challenges, develop their resilience and determination so that they can keep on at something and achieve something.*

(BI:112-119-Holly)

Holly highlights her use of reflection when setting up an environment that supports the development of these skills. Holly states that she does not see her previous role teaching in a classroom as different to the approach she takes with the children outdoors in FS.

*I like to celebrate what they have done. I don't think that's any different, I'm the same as I was as a class teacher.* (BI:120-Holly)

However, Holly does acknowledge some differences between the two roles which influence how she supports children's learning.

*I'm not particularly focused on subjects when I'm out here. I'm focused on them and their confidence in different areas... but I'm not testing them on it. But I am going back to it time and time again. I think that is different from being in a class.* (BI: 121-125-Holly)

*I make assessments on them on their attitudes, their behaviours, their ability to engage with each other and their ability to engage with what I'm offering as a starting point and the skills that I am offering for them to have a go at. So, I make judgements on that, that makes me amend what I do.* (BI:125-128-Holly)

The key difference for Holly in her role in FS to being a classroom teacher is how she assesses learning. Holly implies the difference in her approach in FS as she is not testing

their knowledge and is more focused on the children, not subjects in the curriculum. She reflects on going back to learning 'time and time again'. Holly does not just use this knowledge to judge children's ability but rather to understand their engagement and adjust her approach to facilitating learning to suit.

### *Freedom outdoors*

To Holly, FS provides children with an opportunity to connect to green spaces which she believes is good for their mental health. She stresses the importance of children choosing their level of engagement in activities and providing them with space.

*I think it's important that they're able to opt out [of activities] ... or just enjoy the space 'cause that's what it's for. ...That's what we say going outside is. It's sort of good for our mental health, wellbeing and our ability to engage with being in green spaces. So, they need that time, being in a green space and some do. Some take that time, and some are just constantly, constantly moving (WI: 290-294-Holly)*

Holly describes being in a green space as a need for children and values the children's enjoyment in the approach. She acknowledges that children use their time in FS sessions differently, some are very physical whilst others take time to just be and experience the woods. Holly values the freedom FS gives children and she highlights the differences she sees in the children when they are in the outdoor environment as opposed to the indoor classroom environment.

*I am proud that the children enjoy it, and they look forward to it. ... And I like seeing children outside being different to what they are like inside. (BI: 149-152-Holly)*

*[A]gain, she's so more physically confident and assertive outside, far more so than she is inside. (WI: 14-15-Holly)*

*And that's my favourite photo. [Picture of a reception girl sliding on her knees through the mud.] I know I've zoomed in on that one. Like, they were out there just playing, they found the mud slide [a small muddy verge leading onto the field] and it was just her confidence, and she couldn't have done that in the garden. So, that to me is all good reason for being out there. And it's just the look on her face. Sheer pleasure. (WI: 9-13-Holly)*

Holly enjoys seeing the children being more active in the FS sessions and values the development of physical skills FS offers children.

*I like to see their practical skills developing or their confidence developing and especially their physical skills. Just the control over their bodies in this environment and their relationship to being outdoors, their respect for the environment. (BI: 134-137-Holly)*

Holly stresses that time spent in green spaces is good for children's mental health. Holly's connection to mainstream schooling may encourage her acknowledgment of children's mental health and wellbeing, with a recent shift in interest as children, teachers and parents call for more focus on wellbeing in schools (Bethune and Seldon, 2018). Holly noticed the difference in children's behaviour in her FS sessions. This indicates her awareness of the two conflicting pedagogical discourses in her setting (Maynard, 2007) and the impact this has on expectations on children and the children's response to the environment. She emphasises the importance of children's enjoyment of the space and giving children the freedom to be able to just simply be in the space or express themselves physically. For Holly, the FS approach is an opportunity to provide a space for promoting wellbeing, physical activity and connection to green spaces.

#### *Time to learn*

Holly also focuses on the development of skills over time and the importance of repeatedly covering skills to embed them in children's learning.

*And yes, they're learning the skills bit by bit... But you have to cover them again and again and again to embed them. (WI: 284-286-Holly)*

Holly stresses that giving children time to learn is the purpose of FS and that it is essential that adults take a step back and allow children to try things themselves.

*[A]s adults, I think it sometimes, we don't just do it for them and I'm just trying to say no. This is the time that, you know, if it doesn't work, it's time to teach, time to learn it... That's the purpose of it. (WI: 259-264-Holly)*

Holly shows an awareness of the tokenistic nature of activities and how the learning process of repeated use of skills is more important than the outcomes of an activity.

*[L]ike when we do the tying bits of ribbon on, it's not to have a pretty stick, it is, that's part of it, but it's also that skill. It's how many ways you can develop that skill that interests them. (WI:308-310-Holly)*

Above Holly is discussing making rainbow sticks through tying knots on sticks using different coloured ribbons. The face value outcome of a 'pretty stick', showing productivity of the session, is not important to Holly which may be used in a tokenistic way by other adults not aware of the FS principles. Holly also stresses that the 'purpose' of FS is enabling children time to learn. Holly indicates her intention to give children the time to try things for themselves and not intervene. Here Holly highlights when it 'doesn't work' and that in FS opportunities to fail and try again are part of the process. Therefore, the shift in the focus from outcomes to the process of learning, building the skill over time, may help build resilience. In her role in learning, Holly describes her role in FS as different to her role in the classroom as she is not testing children's knowledge and is providing time to revisit learning. Again, Holly is emphasising the process over outcome. By providing children time, without intervening and rushing the process, Holly goes against the neo-liberal image of the child in a state of becoming that places importance on a linear course of development (Bethune and Seldon, 2018; Moss and Robert-Homes, 2021). Holly is comfortable to pause and allow children to spend the time they need on developing a skill.

### **Observations – Holly's experience of implementing the Forest School approach**

#### *Freedom of choice*

Communicating the importance of FS's concept of child-centred practice underpinning play, was essential to Holly when developing the approach in the school.

*I wanted that to be to the fore and not to just be an outdoor learning group. To me that is quite important because the child centred nature of it and the element of play that's built into it, that should be part of our Forest School. (BI: 30-33-Holly)*

In the statement above, Holly highlights the importance of the child-centred approach to FS alongside play-based learning. To Holly, these factors separate FS from other outdoor education approaches. Holly demonstrates her child-centred approach as she enables

children freedom of choice in how the children want to engage in Holly's FS sessions and the environment. Children exercising this freedom of choice was recorded throughout observations with Holly. The example below demonstrates Holly's response to children opting out of a group activity she had planned without consequences.

*The majority of children seemed to be enjoying the game while two chose to disengage. Holly encouraged them to take part, but they wanted to sit out. One child got upset when his team lost the first game but was encouraged by the TA to try again. His team lost a second time, so he joined the two children sitting out. (SF: 281-384-Holly)*

*Holly walked towards the woods, she passed the three children who had not engaged with the game. They had been crouched over and busy doing something. Holly went to see what they had been doing. One of the boys told her they had made a waterfall. Holly replied, 'How exciting.' (SF: 392-395-Holly)*

Holly acknowledges that children have their own intentions in the FS sessions and encourages this through providing them the opportunity to continue their own activities throughout the sessions.

*So, I have my idea of what I want to input but I also know that they will want to do their own things as well. (BI:77-78-Holly)*

Children are also able to set up activities they wish to do in the sessions with Holly providing options for resources. Holly is observed allowing children to continue their chosen activities or play, rather than calling them over to complete the tasks she has planned (WF:78-Holly). Part of her planned input is centred around developing the use of skills through a playful scenario which Holly presents to the group as missions.

Holly does not enforce the tasks created by the scenarios she pitches to them.

*I commented to Holly that the children looked busy. Holly explained she had an idea that she would set them missions but wasn't bothered if they found something else to do. She liked 'to give them the option.' (WF: 195-197-Holly)*

Creating a balance between adult-led learning and child autonomy can cause some tension in Holly's practice. Holly reflects that some of the children consistently chose to not engage

in any activities. Holly is concerned with the quality of their FS learning experience. Therefore, Holly reflects on the sessions observed during the winter and indicates of her strong encouragement of these children to take part in adult-led aspects.

*It was an open-ended task that ... I didn't enforce it. And that's OK, but I said to [TA's name] sometimes I'm going to insist that that's the challenge because I appreciate that they're out there, in the forest, and they're choosing their own activities, and that's what I like about it, because if they need any time to be quiet, if they need time to race around, if they need time to talk or follow their own ideas, then I love that about it [FS], but sometimes there are some that would never join in with other activities. So, it's a balance. (W1: 50-56-Holly)*

Holly stresses that insisting on engagement goes against the concept of freedom in choice that she 'loves' about FS. Below, Holly describes that she is more comfortable with child-led learning for the younger ones who are new to FS and benefit through exploring and engaging with the space. In contrast, to the older children as she perceives this as disengagement.

*No, it's just, the young ones, I tend to think, they're exploring an environment that they've not been in as much and as often. But some of the older ones, tend to be on the fringes of things sometimes or they will get involved if I said, this is what we're doing, but I don't want forest school to be, this is what we're doing all the time, but sometimes I want to make sure that they've had the chance to do that. (W1: 64-68-Holly)*

*But I'm just conscious of a group who disappeared up into the top end of the forest for a while... They were just taking themselves out for a chat. I think, I mean I do go around just to make sure. There's a certain amount of trust between us. But if they did that every session, I would think, you know, I need to create a scenario that gets you out of there, but still you've got that choice. (W1: 84-87-Holly)*

Navigating the delicate balance of adult-led and child-led learning is troubling for Holly. Ensuring the opportunities to try new skills, yet provide children with freedom, can stir conflicting perspectives that challenge what she values in FS. These statements demonstrate the dilemma of choice between FS principles of child-centred learning and the performance

measuring neo-liberal agenda of the school setting (Kemp, 2020; Moss and Roberts-Holmes, 2021). Her differing approach to older children may also reflect the 'schoolification' of FS (Bradbury, 2018). Children under the National Curriculum or coming towards the end of the EYFS, in which learning is to become more formal and focused on 'teaching' (DoE, 2021), Holly may feel more pressure to structure their learning experiences and evidence progress. Although Holly's reflection on the tensions of this balance, she appears satisfied that she is achieving this in practice.

*I'm still happy with that balance of introducing new skills and new challenges and different scenarios and then having the freedom to sort of develop their own ideas.*  
(WI: 287-288-Holly)

#### *Practitioner incorporation of play*

Holly indicates that play, along with child-centred learning, is what separates her FS ethos from just outdoor learning (BI: 30-33-Holly). She values play in her practice and acknowledges play as part of a child's need.

*Yeah, the fact that I believe we should be allowed to play. Even for the whole session if needs be.* (BI: 141-142-Holly)

*I'm still happy that they play a lot. I feel that that's their need.* (WI: 279-Holly)

Within Holly's sessions there are plenty of opportunities for children to engage in child-led free play.

*Holly went to go set up the slackline, the group was very much engaged in independent play. Children were playing out of sight in the woods, but I could hear them through the trees.* (SF: 302-303-Holly)

Holly uses imaginative play to create a scenario and purpose for the session in which the children can use their skills they have learnt. This was particularly aimed at the older children, yet the younger children would join in and help. Holly would introduce the 'mission' before entering the woods.

*She then explained she wanted them to 'imagine you have been in a storm at sea.'*  
*The woods were to be a desert island. ... Holly explained that they all will be set on a*

*mission to help them survive. Holly added that there were no tarps so they will need to make a shelter big enough for everyone, using the ropes and branches. (WF: 144-149-Holly)*

*After a while, looking around I could see a few children still engaged in the missions Holly had set. Three boys were independently setting up the shelter, suspending large branches across the tree's using their knowledge of knots. Two girls were engaged in bringing them large branches and showed the boys what they had found. ...The reception children seemed to be engaged in their own activities. One reception boy was interested in moving the large stones in the stream. Two reception girls were playing on a rope swing. One TA was walking with the teddy bear following a reception child. Seven children, a mix of reception and year 5/6, were playing on the slackline. The older children showing the younger children how to use it. (WF:184-194-Holly)*

The scenario that Holly sets introduces children to adult-led play, yet most children in the observed session above are engaging in free play. There are no consequences for not engaging and Holly is not observed encouraging the children to take part or leading them to complete the task. Holly demonstrates confidence in allowing children to stray away from the structure and pre-planned purpose of the session. However, when children's learning experience begin to repeat themselves, Holly begins to feel uncomfortable with the level of progression.

Below Holly discusses a 'zombie' game a group of boys repeatedly play. She acknowledges the physical skills the game has developed for the children, yet Holly wishes to introduce new skills into their learning and development.

*Holly explained that she was a bit conflicted with the zombie game. 'All these boys want to do is play zombie apocalypse. Every time they come to the woods. I'm trying to figure out a way to use it.' Holly explained that the children had gained a lot of agility in the woods through running in the zombie game, but she was looking for a way to include new skills and experiences into the game. (SF: 28-32-Holly)*

In this observation, Holly indicates how she may use play as a pedagogical tool as she suggests she is 'trying to figure out a way to use it' to promote certain skills through their



game. Holly does not wish to prevent children from continuing the game and shows respect for the children's choices. This may reflect Holly's questioning of her role in a school setting as a FS practitioner. Holly explains tensions in her role as she wondered if she is 'opting out' or 'not pulling [her] weight as a teacher' (BI: 142-145-Holly) (See Chapter 7). This indicates the impact of neo-liberal performance measures on practitioner identity (Bradbury, 2018). Holly is not concerned with the children's free play but of the repeated learning experience that demonstrates little progression. She questions how to intervene or whether to intervene despite her emphasis on the importance of children's need to play and her value of children's freedom of choice.

### *Learning from each other*

Holly acknowledges Vygotsky's theory of Zone of Proximal Development [ZoPD] (Vygotsky, 1978) that informs her role in facilitating learning.

*It's like that Zone of Proximal Development. Step in when they're gone as far as they can or with a tip but allow them to sort of find things out for themselves. Just learn, learning opportunity for them, but want them to take responsibility. (WI: 117-119-Holly)*

Holly explains how she understands her intervention in children's learning. When a child has reached their level of actual development (Vygotsky, 1978) or 'gone as far as they can', she supports further development by providing a suggestion to extend their learning experiences. Yet she also values children taking responsibility in their own learning. She encourages children to take pride and ownership of the skills they have learnt.

*Holly then pointed out one child who was good at using the fire strikes. 'She's the expert firelighter.' Holly had explained. The child replied, 'I showed you how to do it because I did it the first time'. Another child joined in 'Yeah, you helped me too'. Holly then said that if anybody needed help, they were to ask the child expert. (SF: 190-194-Holly)*

Here, Holly does not just give praise for children's skills but acknowledges them as the more knowledgeable other. This suggests an equal positioning of roles as the child explained she showed Holly how to use a fire strike. Holly also encourages other children to go to the

'expert' for help. Responsibility given to children prompts them to take ownership of learning and this confidence can encourage children to help each other. Holly values creating opportunities for this.

*I love seeing that, when they're helping each other and teaching each other. (WI: 218-Holly)*

Holly created opportunities for younger children to learn from older children as she merged reception and year one groups with year five and year six groups. Enabling young children to learn from the older children, not only gives the older children responsibility and ownership of skills in FS, but enables them to learn from each other in keeping with FS social-constructivist approach (O'Brien and Murray, 2007; Knight, 2018; Leather, 2018). The older children were observed interacting and supporting the younger children as well as playing alongside them.

*Two older girls were showing a reception girl how to slide down a small slope creating a mud slide with each slide down. Another year 5/6 child was helping three children across a deep puddle, holding their hands as they paddled across. (WF: 9-31-Holly)*

*Holly returned to the fire circle. She explained to the three children she was going to call the group around the fire for hot chocolate and she wanted the three children to help the younger ones to have a go at kneeling by the fire to warm their hands. The children agreed to help. ... She explained to them what the younger ones were going to do while the group had hot chocolate. She asked the three children to show them how and they demonstrated the respect pose around the fire. Holly left the three children in charge of who to invite into the square and the children supported the younger ones. Holly and a TA walked around the circle handing out hot chocolate. (WF: 225-231- Holly)*

Holly also explains mixing age groups aids young children's learning as 'it brings them into the wider environment' (WI:310-Holly) and 'they're mucking in with the older ones' (WI:328-Holly). The younger ones are then introduced to new skills earlier in their learning as the older children teach and model skills (WI:314-Holly).

## *Summary*

It is evident that Holly values child-centred practice and play-based learning in FS which reflects the FSA principles (FSA, n.d). However, there is an adult agenda underpinning her sessions that is reflected through Holly's incorporation of adult-led play and activities that aim to develop a certain skill. Within instrumental thinking, the marketplace logic of education focuses on outcomes as a method of measuring efficiency and profit (Sosnowska, 2020). Holly satisfies this instrumental outcome-driven way of thinking about learning through planning adult-led aspects in her sessions.

Holly's implementation of the adult-led, pre-planned learning demonstrates her disconnection to instrumental perspectives. Holly does not enforce the adult-led activities on children and respects their freedom of choice to disengage. She implies that she simply likes to 'give them the option' (WF: 197-Holly). This indicates how Holly uses instrumental perspectives for the school, yet softens this perspective within her practice. She also discusses her use of Vygotsky's ZPD in her practice which informs her approach to supporting children in the moment. This adds to Holly's use of child-centred learning as she appears responsive to children's development and shows awareness of their own motivation and uniqueness in their learning (McCree et al., 2018). Through ZPD, Holly suggests that she likes to give children responsibility of their learning and encourages children to learn from each other. This highlights the community of learning promoted by the FSA (n.d) and the benefits children can achieve through the social aspect of FS with learning from peers (Tiplady and Menter, 2020).

Holly promotes the importance of free play and provides opportunities for children to choose free play over her adult-led play. She values this aspect of her practice and celebrates their creativity in play (SI: 142-144-Holly). However, when play becomes repetitive or children choose never to engage in FS activities, Holly becomes concerned with their level of progression. This reflects her ties to instrumental, neo-liberal concepts of learning and professionalism as she feels she needs to intervene to ensure they are gaining access to a varied learning experience and evidence their progression of skills. Despite the conflict in Holly's feelings towards repeated play, she does not intervene and respects their choices. This reflects Holly's choice to follow a principle-led approach over instrumentalism.

## **Maya and Lilly**

Lilly and Maya are both level 3 qualified Forest School Leaders. Maya and Lilly's accounts are presented together as they work at the same setting, therefore, they were observed together. They also requested to be interviewed together which means that their interactions in the interviews may prompt each other's responses. To separate their accounts may take their perspectives out of the context in which they were discussed. The setting Lilly and Maya were observed in as part of this study is a charitable organisation that provides services for the local community through a lot of land used as a community garden. Lilly and Maya are hired to run FS sessions during school holidays. Maya also works as a TA within a primary school setting where she carries out FS sessions. Lilly is a freelance FS leader working in a range of settings.

### **Interviews – Maya and Lilly's perspectives of the Forest School approach**

#### *Understanding of progression of the Forest School approach*

In conversation, Lilly and Maya suggest how mainstream settings have moved away from simplistic assumptions about FS and have become more accepting of the approach:

*Lilly: It's definitely become more popular. People are more aware...*

*Maya: Yeah, it's a bit more mainstream now. So, it's not just some kind of hippy movement. [Laughs]*

*Lilly: Yeah, you're going outside and just hugging some trees. That's often what people say (BI: 359-364-Maya and Lilly)*

However, Maya expressed that although she understands the difference in FS practice to other outdoor education practices, FS is a difficult concept to explain to others.

*[I]t's definitely a very different approach to teaching outdoors with children. (BI: 105-106- Maya)*

*But I think it's such a hard concept to explain succinctly. (BI: 375-Maya)*

Maya suggested the FS label is used to advertise outdoor practice.

*But I think with that has also come that level of commercialism and ... that sell-out type happening, you know, where... they put that label on it because it sounds good*  
(369-370-Maya)

Maya and Lilly highlight the lack of understanding of FS principles that encourages tokenistic practices.

*Maya: But what is actually being offered in practice is very far away from what the original Forest School movement was about. ... So, when you get to the point of a class of 30 coming out for an hour on the school field and, oh well, we've done some fire lighting and we chased the butterfly.*

*Lilly: 'We just need a marshmallow. We've done Forest School.' ... We've been doing outdoor activities, with some Forest School activities, but you've not necessarily been practicing that ethos* (BI:365-374-Maya and Lilly)

Maya and Lilly acknowledge the growth of awareness of the approach and how this impacts on the limited implementation of FS principles. A dilution of principles is evident in Maya and Lilly's reflection on FS development as they describe a disconnection to the 'original Forest School movement' (BI:366-Maya) and the incorporation of 'Forest School activities' without the ethos (BI:373-374-Lilly). Maya highlights FS is a difficult concept to explain which may also reflect Leather's notion of the lack a theorisation underpinning practice. This may leave FS open to simplistic marketised versions of the approach in practice.

#### *Doubt and comparing Forest School practice*

For Lilly and Maya, their feelings towards whether the holiday club they run meets the true concept of FS is stronger than doubt. Despite being labelled as FS, Lilly and Maya agree that they would not describe the holiday club as such and propose it is a taster or introduction to FS (BI: 389-Maya). It is not the use of FS as a holiday club that causes them concern in practice as they compare their practice with other holiday clubs they describe as FS.

*This [Lilly and Maya's holiday club] is a bit different in that they [the children] go away and they've crafted something, and I wouldn't particularly describe this as Forest School, you know. ... it's got elements of it but it's not. It's not really Forest School. And then I think, suppose when your labelling holiday clubs as Forest School,*

*some of them I would say are, I think some of the [names organization] because the children come every summer, every session. (BI: 379-386-Maya)*

For Maya, it is the repeated experiences of the children attending the holiday clubs that separates Lilly and Maya's club from other holiday clubs they perceive as FS.

*See I felt today, like it felt very much more like it's a taster because we did have quite a few new children and they needed more support to engage in anything. They weren't really sure what they wanted to do themselves, whereas some of the others, where we've had children come regularly, they've already made friends. This has kind of become their Forest School and they've got ideas of what they want to do, and they go off and then we drop back into that kind of just facilitating rather than needing. (BI: 394-399-Maya)*

When children return to Lilly and Maya's holiday club, they feel their practice becomes more like FS. This indicates that the repeated learning experiences of FS principles are important to Maya. Children returning to the sessions are more comfortable and independent. Maya explains how her role adjusts to become more focused on facilitating learning rather than leading which she sees as more fitting to the FS approach.

However, when talking about their FS practice in school settings that were not observed as part of this study, both Lilly and Maya express their approach is more fitting to FS principles and they maintain a sense of freedom in practice. Maya compares this to other schools implementing the FS approach and how they are more focused on outcomes.

*I think in other schools it's a bit more of a challenge. They like the idea of Forest School. ... But the reality of the fact that you're not actually gonna go back with some progression chart of, tick, this is what this child has achieved in the last three hours that I've, you know, been out with them. I think some other schools have found that much more of a challenge that they are expecting particular skills to have been ticked off, or some kind of progression or evidence of, you know, the impact. (BI: 324-33 – Maya)*

Maya acknowledges tokenistic understandings and practices of FS developing in different settings. She links this to schools needing to address outcomes in their practice and

evidencing progression in learning. However, she does not indicate that this is a concern for her practice in her school setting nor in the holiday club that she shares with Lilly (This will be explored further in Chapter 7).

### *Practitioners' roles in learning*

Lilly and Maya define their roles as facilitators and separate this from the action of teaching. When Maya was asked if she thought her role in children's learning in FS was different to practitioners' roles in mainstream education, Maya responded:

*I'd say it definitely differs quite a lot because you're being led by what the children want to do, their interests. (BI:76-77-Maya)*

*You know, if they don't want to do it, again, it's not teaching and you've got to go, actually, I'm not here to teach them. I'm here to facilitate, to engage how they want to engage, and it might not be the way I particularly want them to, but if I'm going to be true to the ethos (BI: 423-425-Maya)*

Maya highlights the importance of children's autonomy within the FS approach's ethos which informs her role in learning. Reflecting on the FS ethos, Maya reminds herself she is not there to lead and teach certain kinds of learning. Although this may go against how she perceives certain activities, she will support and facilitate children's exploration.

Agreeing with Maya, Lilly also acknowledges the difference between mainstream teaching roles and the role of FS practitioners in learning. However, she takes a slightly different approach to facilitation as she implies the use of teaching is acceptable when instigated by the child.

*I feel the same, there is a huge difference between teaching and basically being that the person there that can facilitate it. (BI:133-134-Lilly)*

*I see it as like a facilitator role, so your facilitating sessions and your bringing things for them to do. And like Maya said, it's their choice about which they want to do and if they want to learn something about it, you can then teach them (BI: 115-117-Lilly)*

*You know a lot of the time in sessions children just say, I really want to do this, how can I do it? And I try and, sort of, nurture that kind of a feel to all my sessions, so I've*

*got the knowledge and I've got the know-how of how to do it, but until they have that inkling of wanting to do something, then they can then come to me and say this is the idea I've got, help me, you know. (BI:121-125-Lilly)*

For Lilly, the importance of her role in learning is not whether she is teaching a skill or facilitating a skill, it is the notion of child-led learning. Lilly explains her role as responding to children's cues. When children express an interest or motivation to learn a new skill or experience something, Lilly will show them how to achieve this.

Within the interview both practitioners agreed that taking a step back and allowing children to lead learning was important. Yet, Maya explained this approach to learning can be challenging at first.

*I think when I first trained, because you've been taught all these skills, you feel like you've got to be showing them how to use tools and do knots, and I think as my practice has developed over the years, I've realised that I don't actually have to be doing that all the time, you know, I have kind of stepped back a lot from leading the sessions or there's a lot less structure to the sessions (BI:85-89-Maya)*

*I do think it is that getting to the stage where you can pare everything right back and not feel guilty... those sessions where you actually don't have to do anything are the most successful ones... But it takes a lot of experience to get to the point where you feel comfortable just letting them crack on (BI: 170-175-Maya)*

Lilly and Maya champion children's choice and imply it underpins their role as facilitators. Maya suggests that a measure a success in FS sessions is the amount of intervention needed by the practitioners. However, she explains it takes time to feel confident in relinquishing control.

#### *Responding to society's needs*

The setting in which Lilly and Maya were observed was a service offered by a community garden and was a funded charity. Parents could send their children to the FS holiday club for free if their children were receiving free school meals.



*Then I built up my experience delivering community events in community Forest School and working on projects with children in less privileged areas and providing funded projects. (BI: 52-54- Lilly)*

*That's this is all funded work... Yeah, worked with quite a few other practitioners over the years doing community open days, things like that. (BI: 67-69- Maya)*

Lilly and Maya mention their work in communities in which they use the FS approach. This highlights a different perspective on the use of the FS approach as something more than just an alternative way of learning. The approach can be used to have impact in communities and children's lives.

Lilly also highlights the growing interest in nature particularly after the covid-19 global pandemic.

*But yeah, it's definitely developing, and I think, especially with COVID and with the lockdown and everything that we had, a lot of people turned to nature as a bit of a place to, you know, retreat to and a lot of, I know the schools that I was working in were saying, you know, we really need to get the kids back outside. (BI: 401-405- Lilly)*

*And a lot of children were saying, you know, we've not done anything like this for ages. It's so good to be outside. (BI: 406-407- Lilly)*

Lilly suggests over social-restrictions nature became a 'retreat' and children expressed relief when returning to FS. This may indicate Lilly's perspective of nature used as a 'green recovery' for children after the pandemic (Nature Premium, n.d). Lilly shows an awareness that this was a need for the settings and children she was involved with. However, Lilly does not specifically reflect on how the FS approach address this need.

For Lilly and Maya, the impact of technology on children's learning and skills is something that affects their experience in FS.

*Maya: I think then, with this whole kind of TikTok culture, everything's little snapshots of things and...*

*Lilly: And everything's very instant, isn't it?*

*Maya: Yeah. Everything is very now. You do it and it's done. Whereas, if you're doing something that's like an activity that's involving a bit of patience, like you say a bit of perseverance, and you've got the saw and you're trying to cut the wood, and your there like, we're halfway there. Uh, I'm done. You know? ... The introduction of technology I think, does impact a lot. (BI: 414-421-Lilly and Maya)*

Lilly and Maya go on to explain that some children do not want to engage in activities that require long periods of concentration and will want to reenact video games they have seen or play at home (BI:429-432- Maya and Lilly). Maya reflects on how this has influenced her to change her approach to supporting learning in FS.

*It's interesting 'cause that that's kind of made me think about how my practice has change because the children have changed as well, in terms of perhaps the physical skills that children have compared to when I started doing it 10 years ago and the ability to concentrate and to persevere with things. I don't tend to do as much woodwork as I did at the beginning because the children have and it's hard work, so they kind of say, Miss, can you do it.(BI: 408-412-Maya)*

Maya explains that she has needed to adjust her practice to accommodate children's needs in today's society. This has meant skills are introduced slowly and with careful consideration into how to peak their interests.

*[T]hen it's hopefully long term you can gradually extend that focus and bring those skills in in ways that interest them. Yeah, you have got to adapt to your audience. (BI:427-Maya)*

Both Lilly and Maya suggest they have observed a difference in children after the pandemic and with the growth of technology in children's everyday lives. This has made them adapt their practice or has given settings a new appreciation of the need for children to play outdoors. However, Lilly and Maya do not specifically link the issues they have observed with how FS practice could support children during this time. This does not mean Lilly and Maya are unaware of this and may simply be a result of the direction of the unstructured interviews. This is a subject that would be interesting to learn more from the practitioners' perspective.

## **Observations – Maya and Lilly’s experience of implementing the Forest School approach**

### *Freedom of choice*

In the above interviews, Lilly and Maya explain that they would not categorise the observed setting as FS true to its ethos. The lack of children returning to the sessions impacts on their perception of the sessions as they feel this steers their role in children’s learning towards a more leading, teaching role than a facilitating role. This affects the level of freedom of choice children have in the session, particularly with deciding what activities are on offer. Therefore, the learning environment of Lilly and Maya sessions was predominantly adult led. Before each session, Lilly and Maya and their volunteers would set up activities for children to choose from.

*Maya had set up a fold away table with small bags of craft resources, wooden discs, wool and paint pens. The volunteer had put out some jugs and metal cups for water play. Lilly asked me to help put out crates to sit on around the fire pit. (SF: 7-9- Lilly and Maya)*

The sessions were mixed with children who had been to FS before and, for the majority, those who it was their first time. Therefore, it may have been difficult to encourage a child-led environment as some of the children would have not known what they could have had access too. Therefore, activities needed to be set up for the children. This reflects the tokenistic nature of the observed setting which Lilly and Maya state is not FS (BI: 379-389- Maya). It takes time for children to become comfortable and familiar with FS pedagogy and for them to become less dependent on the adult’s guidance and structures (McCree et al., 2018).

Although some children needed support in exploring the environment, some of the children were confident in the new space and enjoyed trying out the new activities independently. They were given freedom to explore and engage with the environment in their own ways.

*The other children moved on from blowing bubbles and moved quickly between activities. They played a quick game of tig then had a go at drawing on the wooden discs. (SF: 24-26-Lilly and Maya)*

*[Lilly] asked, 'What do you want to do?' The boy replied, 'Play.' One of the siblings wanted to look for bugs. Lilly let the children go play while we waited for the others to arrive. The boy went straight to the water play while the siblings when to find bugs at the far side of the area (SF: 13-16 – Lilly and Maya)*

However, the children who needed encouragement were not forced and could refuse Lilly and Maya's suggestions and exercise their freedom of choice.

*Maya began to cut pieces of fabric and picked some flowers. She showed the child and asked if he wanted to help her. He did not respond but was watching her. She moved onto the woodwork table and began to use the hammer to create flower prints on the fabric. She showed him what she had made but he did not want a go. (SF: 195-199 Maya)*

*Maya approached the brothers sat at the fire pit. She asked them what they wanted to do but they did not know. She began to chat with them about what they liked to play at home. The boys were not interested in any activities and said they wanted a rest. After chatting with them for a while, Maya moved on. (SF: 189-192-Maya)*

However, the children who had been to Lilly and Maya's FS sessions before were confident to ask to use resources not put out by the practitioners.

*Two girls asked if they could do some tie-dyeing. Maya got the dye out and fabric. The girls seemed to know what to do and did so independently. They then hung their pieces of fabric on a bush. (SF: 48-49- Lilly and Maya)*

*A child approached Lilly and asked if they could use the fire steels and trays to make small fires. Lilly went and got the bag of steels and brought them to the boys. (SF: 52-54- Lilly and Maya)*

This indicates that even if there are long periods of time between children attending the holiday club, when they return, they are more able to shape their learning experience. Children who returned to the sessions were given the freedom to choose the resources they engaged with and were able to continue to build on their previous knowledge.

In comparison to other settings Maya is involved with, she takes a more relaxed approach to setting up the environment and may bring no added resources to the space.

*[A]nd we do have sessions where we, other than the safety kit and a drink, we don't take anything else, and we just leave them to it. And sometimes they'll go, I'm bored, there's nothing to play with. And we go, great, you're bored, that means you're about to be creative, off you go. (BI: 95-98-Maya)*

Maya reflects on the lack of resources she uses in the other setting. This may seem unusual for children who are new to FS and sometimes a challenge for the children she works with as they report being 'bored'. This may seem a radical form of FS environment (Sackville-ford, 2019) compared to the toy and activity filled spaces that may dominate mainstream schooling. This pushes children to use their imagination and natural resources creatively in their play which appears to be what Maya is encouraging. However, the environment of the setting observed contained resources and activities for the children to engage with. Again, she reflects on the notion of the setting observed as a taster session for the children. Therefore, Maya may have deemed her radical lack of resources as not fit for the short period that the children attend. The sessions observed, some children needed support and guidance in beginning to explore the environment around them.

#### *Practitioner incorporation of play*

Although the learning environment was set up in an adult-led manner, with resources chosen by adults and presented for use, there was very little time given to adult-led activities. Therefore, during Lilly and Maya sessions there was plenty of time for free play. As there was little structure to the sessions, other than lunch break, the children were able to play uninterrupted and could resume play after their lunch. Occasionally, the practitioners would get involved in the children's free play. For instance, Lilly was observed blowing bubbles with the children:

*Lilly then said she had an idea and went to go look for sticks. ...[she] tied a loop of wool between two sticks. She dipped the wool in a bowl of bubble solution and lifted it out so that the wind would blow a big bubble. The children who had been playing with the bubbles noticed and went over to play with Lilly, catching the bubbles. (SF: 22-29-Lilly)*

In this observation, Lilly extends the children's interest in the bubbles by creating another method of blowing bubbles. Maya was also observed extending children's free play by providing resources that the children could use and did not know were available.

*The girl with the bow and arrow finally shot the arrow [the bow made by the girl with a bendy stick and string]. ... Maya went into the storage hut and found a board to draw a target circle on. She propped it on the hut for them to try to hit. (SF: 338-340-Maya)*

During the interview Maya reflects on a moment Lilly uses a game to encourage two children's confidence in the space and build rapport.

*It's the one where [name of child] was teaching you that game in his language. From how they were yesterday, where he was sort of, I need to ring dad, I need to ring dad. He was nervous and uncertain. You could see him, kind of, let down his barriers today and then he was interacting with you ... it's nice seeing that kind of progression in their confidence. (SI:8-14-Maya)*

Maya appears to value the progress of the children with help from Lilly's practice and use of play. Maya acknowledges the short time scale of their FS sessions and its implication of the quality of the children's experience (SI: 33-37-Maya). Therefore, the ability to use play as a means to develop a quick connection with children and aid them feeling comfortable in the session may lessen the disadvantage of the limited time.

The FS session Lilly and Maya run centres around free play as children receive little direction from the two practitioners. However, Lilly and Maya play a vital role in showing children how to use the resources to extend their play opportunities and use play to break down barriers quickly. The children in the session are reliant of the practitioners' support to extend their learning opportunities. There is little evidence to suggest the use of play as a pedagogical tool to achieve adult-directed goals. The practitioners' implementation of play is very much in response to the children's interest and needs of support.

## *Modelling*

Exploring the environment independently is not something all children felt comfortable doing initially. Maya reflects on this below as there was a need to intervene and provide activities to support:

*I mean, most of them when they came into it, we were a bit like, right, we're gonna need to start with an activity because they weren't quite there yet yesterday. (SI: 14-15-Maya)*

Maya acknowledges that children in the sessions observed needed support and guidance due to their lack of experience in FS and the short duration of the sessions. Maya and Lilly were observed trying to guide the children's involvement.

*Maya saw a girl lingering in the main area on her own. Maya asked her, 'Are you Ok there? What do you like to do? She showed her the different activities set out. She showed her the paint pens and the wooden discs they could paint. The girl seemed interested in this and began to draw. (SF: 186-189-Maya)*

Lilly reflected on how she could break down the barriers new children may be experiencing. Through a treasure hunt activity, she aimed to introduce them to the space and promote their confidence.

*Before the session, Lilly explained she had brought a wooden box to hide in the grounds. She explained a treasure hunt may be a good way to help the new children explore. (SF: 222-223-Lilly)*

Lilly and a volunteer lead the treasure hunt at the start of the session.

*More children began to take interest in the treasure hunt game with the volunteer encouraging the children to take turns. The two brothers began to join in. After a while the volunteer removed herself from the game and the children continued independently. The children did this for a while. (SF: 235-238-Lilly and Maya)*

*The majority of the children continued with the treasure hunt and had added that they were pirates. (SF: 244-245-Lilly and Maya)*

The treasure hunt game was successful in engaging children to explore the space and develop their confidence. The two brothers in the observation had chosen not to engage in any activities the day before this observation. They were new to FS and were quite reserved the previous session. They seemed to enjoy this activity and it encouraged their confidence. The children began to take ownership of the game as they played with the practitioners and began to add their own imagination to the game. The practitioners' involvement in the game initially helped model to the children how to engage with the space, showing them to look under bushes and behind trees.

However, there were times where Lilly and Maya took a step back and allowed children the space to come to them if they needed to or simply explore on their own once settled. When the children were busy with their own activities, Lilly and Maya were observed engaging in the FS experience for themselves.

*Maya was walking around the area collecting vines and sticks to wrap together. (SF: 51-52-Maya)*

*Lilly went to sit on the swing and began to swing slightly. (SF: 255-256-Lilly)*

This modelled to the children how to explore the environment themselves as the adults seemed to play and take part in the experience at an equal level to the children. Sometimes this piqued the children's curiosity in the adults' activities without encouragement as they began to question what they were doing and join in.

*Lilly began to roast a marshmallow over the fire. As she did, she chatted to the children. One child asked her if she had been camping. Lilly and the girl began a discussion in which they shared their experience of camping. Once the marshmallow was cooked, Lilly ate it. She then asked if anyone would like a go. The children who were sitting by the fire had a go, one at a time. (SF: 320-324-Lilly)*

This created opportunities for the children to be independent and seek out learning opportunities themselves, whether that be on their own or being inquisitive of what the practitioners were modelling. Intrinsic motivation in FS is part of the alternative learning experience (McCree et al., 2018). Lilly and Maya's efforts to take a step back enables children to experience their self-motivation and curiosity in the session. However, the



extended period of FS programs is crucial for children to develop this self-directed skill of motivating their own learning (McCree et al., 2018). Time is not something Lilly and Maya can provide children, so they offer them an opportunity to experience this on a small-scale.

### *Summary*

It is evident in Lilly and Maya's practice that the short time scale of the FS sessions as a one-off experience impacts their implementation of FS practice. Children can play freely in their sessions and exercise their freedom of choice with little intervention from the practitioners. However, the tokenistic nature of the settings use of FS influences an instrumental perspective on the learning environment. Lilly and Maya needed to set up activities for the children to access as many of the children had not experienced FS before and needed support in their transition into the environment (Coats and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). Yet, the FSA emphasise the importance of FS programs carried out over a long period of time to enable children to become familiar with the environment. McCree et al. (2018) also states that over time children can begin to self-direct their learning and the adults' roles can decrease. Thus, the pedagogical principle of time is important to FS's child-initiated learning. Gibson (2011) suggest that in instrumental reasoning, activities become devoid of purpose. Without the principle of time and child-initiated learning, Lilly and Maya's activities lose a sense of purpose in FS and become tokenistic which influences instrumentalism in their practice.

Lilly and Maya demonstrate their critical awareness of the importance of time for learning and acknowledge the tokenistic nature of the setting. Hence, their implementation of play and their response to children is underpinned by their efforts to lessen the impact of the tokenistic nature of the setting. They did not incorporate play as a pedagogical tool. The practitioners use play to encourage children's confidence to explore the environment and build rapport with children quickly. They are also observed providing children with space and modelling engaging in play in FS themselves. This encouraged children's curiosity about what they were doing and prompted their motivation to get involved rather than the practitioner directing their engagement.

## **Summary of Chapter 6: Discussion of practitioners' perspectives of Forest School and observed practice**

This section will pull together the different accounts of the four practitioners of this study to summarise their perspectives and experiences of the FS approach. The above data presentation is important to this study as it focuses on the practitioners' accounts and allows their voices to shape the narrative of the data presented. However, it is also important to place this narrative in the context of this study's focus. Therefore, this section will also discuss the practitioners' accounts with reference to the conceptual framework.

This section will be structured with the titles used above to present data, *Forest School practitioners' understanding of the Forest School approach* and *FS practitioners' implementation of the FS approach*. Above these titles were used to separate data taken from the interviews and observations. Therefore, summaries and discussion of the data sets will be separated in this section using these titles. Subheadings will be used under the two titles to highlight key findings from the data in relation to the conceptual framework.

### **Forest School practitioners' understanding of the Forest School approach**

The interviews, both semi-structured and unstructured, provided insight to the practitioners' understanding of the FS approach and enabled them to express aspects of their practice that they valued. The practitioners of this study indicate a development of revisionist perspectives within their understanding of FS pedagogy (See Chapter 2 for explanation of revisionist perspectives). They have developed a critical awareness of the movements progression and are beginning to make links to FS practice to address modern debates in education. However, there are areas where these links could be strengthened, and their revisionist voice developed. This could illustrate the next steps for the FS movement and how the revisionist FS perspective could be reinforced.

#### *Critical understanding of the growth of the Forest School movement*

The first step for the revisionist Froebelians in ensuring continuation of the approach, after the early Froebelian methods began to damage the Froebel image (Nawrozki, 2006), was to separate their practice from the instrumental perspectives. They achieved this through developing a critical perspective of the instrumental use of Froebel's methods. The

practitioners of this study demonstrate an awareness of marketisation of the FS approach. Acknowledging the dilution of FS principles (Leather, 2018) is evident in Lilly, Maya and Holly's discussions on the development of the approach.

Lilly and Maya demonstrate a critical understanding of the progression of the FS movement. They are aware of the movement's rapid growth (Leather, 2018), acknowledge the use of FS as a commercial label (Connolly and Haughton, 2015) and highlight the implication of this on the tokenistic use of FS as the approach aligns with mainstream education. In contrast, Holly does not indicate a concern with FSs use in mainstream education but suggests there is a lack of understanding of the FS principles surrounding the context that FS is used. Holly's awareness of marketisation and her concern for the lack of understanding of FS principles may indicate a need of revisionist perspectives in FS and revisionist reflection on strengthening the original principles. This difference in the way Lilly, Maya and Holly respond to FS's alignment to mainstream education may reflect the variation in relationships and positioning the practitioners have with their settings (This will be explored further in Chapter 7).

On the other hand, Susie does acknowledge that outdoor education has become desirable for nurseries as a selling point for parents but does not reflect on this critically in the interview. However, she does demonstrate the disconnection the FS movement has experienced in its progression from its roots in early years practice. Susie was introduced to FS through a model focusing on adolescents and believes there has been a shift towards early years practice as the movement has developed. This influences how she sees the quality of her practice in an early years context.

A critical perspective is developing amongst the practitioners which reflects FS literature. However, when this criticality is turned on their own practice, the practitioners appear to doubt whether they are achieving true FS practice. This raises the question as to whether the purest view of FS is hindering practitioners' perspectives of practice.

#### *True Forest School: helpful or hinderance*

Sackville-Ford (2019) describes true FS as a utopian concept and suggests that such utopia is never reached. As practitioners reflect critically on their own FS practice, they begin to doubt whether their practice achieves the ideal concept of a 'true' FS and begin to compare

their practice with other settings, and even other countries, that they perceive as practicing FS closer to its principles.

Holly implies that the shared practice of her setting between dominant discourses and FS affects her idea of implementing true FS. Waite and Goodenough (2018) argue that blind adherence to the FS principles can become an obstacle for the suitability of FS provision in settings. This may be the case for Holly. Although Holly may not view her practice as true FS due to the use of two pedagogical approaches in the setting, she has been able to use the school's structures to establish FS practice in the setting so that the two discourses support each other (Waite and Goodenough, 2018).

In contrast, going back to the original FS principles may not provide a barrier for Susie but may support her concept and use of true FS. Susie describes her idea of true FS in the context of Scandinavian Forest kindergartens. She explains it is hard to replicate in this country. However, she does not make the connections of the aspects she values in Scandinavian practice which is reflected in her discussion of aspects she is proud of in her own practice. Her training was focused on older children which does not support her current practice within early years settings. Thus, going back to the original Scandinavian inspired early years model that sparked the FS movement may help Susie's revisionist voice in FS by establishing stronger foundations of her perspective of FS in early years.

It is possible that unreflective adherence to the FS principles could be preventing progression of the approach (Waite and Goodenough, 2018). However, Sackville-Ford describes FS as a journey towards utopia and McCree (2019) explains stages of FS practice in which FS lite is a step towards full fat FS. Bruce (2011) stresses that the revisionist Froebelians' strength was their ability to adapt to modern life. Thus, developing the FS practitioners' ability to recognise links from their practice to FS original pedagogical principles may aid their identification of modern educational debates that can support their use of FS principles and satisfy their doubt in practice.

#### *Adapting to contemporary debates in education*

Blind adherence to original principles is not a revisionist perspective. Revising and adapting original principles so that they can be strengthened, and not hindered, by the inclusion of modern debates is the aim of revisionist thinking. The practitioners of this study

demonstrate an awareness of the use of FS natural spaces to address concerns of modern society, such as post-pandemic recovery and increased concern of mental health amongst children (Bethune and Seldon, 2018; FSA, 2022). However, practitioners do not reflect fully how the original FS pedagogical principles address these issues.

For instance, Susie wishes to connect children with nature through FS to address the fast paced, consumer-driven society. She links this back to reconnecting with our hunter/gatherer nature. However, she does not connect her perspective, that mirrors the Scandinavian lifestyle philosophy of *Friluftsliv*, to the Scandinavian kindergarten practice that inspired FS approach originally (Harris, 2017; Leather, 2018). Susie regards the Scandinavian model of FS as true FS. Therefore, helping Susie to understand this link will help build her confidence in promoting the use of FS and its original principles to address concerns of children's disconnection from nature in the consumer-driven society.

Holly values the children's enjoyment of being in the FS environment and acknowledges a change in the children's behaviour outdoors as opposed to being inside the school setting. She mentions that being outdoors is good for children's mental health but does not specifically state the factors within FS practice that contribute to positive mental health. Therefore, this promotes the question of why Holly thinks the FS approach is important to mental health. Why not use any other outdoor learning model? The rising concern of children's mental health provides an argument for the use of FS in mainstream settings (Bethune and Seldon, 2018). For FS to address these concerns, it is important the pedagogical principles of child-centred, play-based and autonomous learning are maintained, an aspect of practice lost in instrumental perspectives of FS. This ensures that children can 'take what they need' from their FS experience (Tiplady and Mentor, 2020) and can feel free from expectations in mainstream settings. Holly indicates the importance of child-centred, play-based learning in FS and the benefits of being outdoors bring to children's mental health, yet she does not link the two notions together explicitly. She also indicates the need for more time to learn in FS and places emphasis of the process of learning over the outcome. The notion of slow pedagogy promotes revisiting learning and focusing on the process of meaning-making over the outcome of a learning experience (Clark, 2020). Although Holly value's principles of a slow pedagogy in her FS, she does not link the two movements.

Lilly and Maya highlight their concern of children's change of behaviour, motivation and concentration levels over the years and link this to the growth of technology used in children's everyday lives. They understand the impact this has had on their FS practice and have responded to the issue through adapting their approach to introducing certain activities to children. This shows that Lilly and Maya are reflective in their practice and are responsive to contemporary issues affecting children. This reflects a revisionist perspective in FS. However, they do not state how the FS approach can support children through these challenges.

This does not suggest that the practitioners of this study are unaware of how these modern debates or highlighted issues in society link to the FS pedagogical principles. If pressed on the matter, practitioners may have explored a deeper understanding of the connections of principles which the participant-led, unstructured interviews did not uncover. However, it does indicate a missed opportunity to communicate the connection pedagogical principles have with modern debates. Articulation of these links are vital to promote and strengthen the revisionist perspective in the FS movement.

#### *Different roles in learning*

The practitioners demonstrate differences in their understanding of their roles in children's learning in the FS approach. Lilly and Maya see a clear difference between their role in FS to the role of practitioners in mainstream settings. Between Lilly and Maya, they share conflicting positions as to whether there is a place for teaching in the FS approach. However, both practitioners are driven by the notion of facilitation and the FS ethos to inform their approach to learning. In contrast, Holly does not see a difference in her role as a teacher and as a FS practitioner. She values the same aspects to supporting learning as a teacher in a classroom and as a FS practitioner. Yet she does signify a difference in the FS role as she is not focused on testing and is able to return to learning experiences as opposed to the mainstream linear progress of learning driven by curriculum (Bethune and Seldon, 2018). She also adds with her role in FS that she is also learning alongside children as they progress with the approach.

Susie does not compare her role in learning in FS with mainstream learning. This may be because Susie does not have a background within mainstream education. Susie's experience

comes from working in independent outdoor learning services as well as a community artist background. As a free-lance FS practitioner, her role is underpinned by her beliefs and values connected to the FS ethos. She is proud of her playful nature and how this influences her approach with children in FS. She is open to adapting her practice as long as she is still providing children with an opportunity to connect to their natural curiosities.

None of the roles described link to either instrumental or revisionist perspectives. They do not describe their roles as meeting education agendas nor challenging them with FS principles. Their roles in children's learning are underpinned by their personal values in how to support children and the FS ethos that guides their practice.

The practitioners of this study and their understanding of FS pedagogy reflects aspects of the revisionist perspective of FS. They are developing a critical perspective of the progression of the FS approach and are beginning to indicate links to how FS can address issues raised in modern debates in education. However, their understanding of how to link FS to critical debates could be strengthened as opportunities to articulate links with FS pedagogical principles were missed. Along with FS literature, the practitioners suggest the alignment of FS with mainstream education can be problematic resulting in marketisation, tokenistic use of FS and a lack of understanding of the principles. Therefore, aligning with educational movements and debates that better suit the FS principles, rather than mainstream goals, could provide a more positive growth of the movement. The next step towards a revisionist perspective in the FS movement is to support practitioners in strengthening their developing links with appropriate educational debate.

### FS practitioners' implementation of the FS approach

#### *Practitioners' incorporation of play*

The sessions observed with each practitioner demonstrated the use of both free play initiated by children and adult-directed play. The practitioners implemented play differently with variations in their roles in play and the purpose underpinning adult-led play. With the use of adult-led play, there may be some indication of an instrumental perspective of FS underpinning the purpose behind play.

Susie places great emphasis on the importance of play and encouraged child-initiated play in sessions when she could support this interest. Susie describes her approach to FS as 'child-like' and she enjoys being involved in children's play. Yet, when child-initiated play is more subtle or children appear less engaged in active forms of play, Susie's sessions become more structured, and she relies on the pre-planned learning. This may not be because Susie does not understand different ways children can direct their own exploration of the FS environment. After all, Susie is very passionate about children's natural curiosities. Free play can be an undervalued aspect of early years practice with child autonomy perceived as a lack of control and input by the adult (Bayden, 2014). In instrumental perspectives of FS, play becomes a pedagogical tool which the practitioners use to meet expectations of FS. Susie's reliance on adult-led activities may be an indication of her awareness of the nursery setting's perception of her practice (See chapter 7 for more information about Susie's relationship with the setting).

Holly is less involved in children's play than Susie and is not observed playing alongside children. However, she is focused on promoting children's learning through play and enabling time for free play. Holly uses adult-directed play to introduce new skills to children and provide opportunities to put skills into practice in fun and creative ways. This indicates an instrumental perspective within how Holly uses play as there is a clear pre-determined outcome from engaging in play planned by Holly. Therefore, Holly does use play as a pedagogical tool. Like Susie, this could be an indication of the settings influence on Holly's practice, or it could stem from Holly's professional background as a teacher and her confidence in directing and planning for children's learning.

In contrast, Maya and Lilly's observations were held when working for an independent charitable organisation which does not influence them to respond with instrumental perspectives of FS as the setting has very little expectations from them in terms of learning outcomes. Instead, instrumentalism in their practice is influenced by the setting's tokenistic nature of FS as the setting does not enable full incorporation of the FS principles. The lack of time and repeated learning experiences are a particular concern for the quality of practice for Lilly and Maya. They view the activities they set up in the setting as 'tasters' as there is no time to develop and build on the children's learning experiences. Therefore, this influences an instrumental use of activities devoid of the purpose of the pedagogical



principles of FS (Gibson, 2011). Activities were planned by Lilly and Maya to help children settle into the space and for them to take something home after the session was finished.

Adult-led play used by all the practitioners indicate a level of instrumentalism in practice. However, all the practitioners demonstrate some resistance to instrumental perspectives as they all value children's freedom within FS and promote children's autonomy to engage or disengage with activities.

### *Enabling children's autonomy*

Enabling children's freedom of choice was an essential factor in the practitioners' practice that softened the consequences of instrumental perspectives of FS on children's learning. Instrumental thinking is concerned with standardising practice influenced by normative agendas (Gibson, 2011; Loyal, 2020). Providing children with freedom and autonomy in their learning conflicts instrumental thinking by encouraging children to experience FS in their own unique ways. Children exercising their freedom of choice was observed in all the practitioners' practice. The practitioners' responses to children also softens the impact of instrumentalism and demonstrates a more principle-led approach over outcome-driven provision. The practitioners indicated child-centred approaches to their interactions with children that impacted the learning experience on offer.

How the practitioners promoted this freedom and enabled children to shape their learning experience differed. Lilly and Maya used modelling to support children's curiosity and confidence when accessing the new environment. This provided space for children who felt confident but also, for the children who were new to the approach, indirectly demonstrated to children the types of activities and exploration they could engage with. Susie demonstrates her reflective approach to responding to children's interests. She used her knowledge of the children's interest to shape her planning and develop the environment to extend play opportunities for the children. Holly highlighted the importance of children taking ownership of their learning and development of their skills through the ZPD and becoming the more knowledgeable other. There were opportunities for children to support other children's learning with Holly taking a step back to enable this.

This demonstrates there is more to the practitioners' implementation of FS than pre-planned learning and adult-led structures of the environment. They promote the FS concept

of the learner as autonomous and enable the children's freedom to influence the practitioners' responses to children's needs in practice.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has enabled this research to better understand the practitioners' perspectives of the FS approach. They have shared their aspects of their practice that they value and how their personal reflections on the FS approach have informed their practice and interpretation of the FS approach. Flexibility of the FS approach takes a conscious effort of FS practitioners to adapt the FS principles to adjust to their individual context (Kemp, 2020) that can promote the contextualisation of FS in English education (Knight, 2018). Revisionist perspectives focus on creating a dialogue between dominant discourses and the movement. In this chapter, the observation of practitioners' practice has demonstrated the practitioners' negotiation of instrumental use of play. The observations found enabling freedom of choice of children and responding to their unique learning experiences is how practitioners manage the impact of instrumentalism on practice and maintain the FS principles in pedagogy.

Reflecting on their own perspectives, the practitioners have demonstrated a critical approach to the FS movement, shown FS practice that is underpinned by the importance of child-centred learning and provide a reflective response to contemporary issues presenting in education. This suggests that the practitioners' perspective may complement revisionist perspectives. However, this study has found that the relationship between the practitioners and the setting they work within shapes how practitioners can communicate and act upon revisionist perspectives of FS. The next chapter will analyse the practitioners' responses to the settings they work in, the tension they experience and how this may impact instrumental and revisionist perspectives within their practice.

## Chapter 7

### **Forest School practitioners' relationships with settings and how they negotiate tensions in practice.**

The previous chapter explored the practitioners' understanding of the FS approach and their values in practice as individuals. This chapter aims to understand the practitioners' experience in the context of their setting and will explore their interactions with the settings. To understand factors underpinning their interactions with the settings, this chapter will apply the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens.

An influential factor that impacted practitioners' negotiations between instrumental and revisionist perspectives is the practitioners' relationships they shared with their settings of employment. The practitioners indicate different relationships with their settings which contribute to how they respond to instrumental pressures and how confident they are in communicating revisionist perspectives. For the practitioners who work in multiple settings, they describe differences in relationships between settings.

Relationships with settings provided the main theme within addressing this research. The relationships explored are consumer, cooperation, and autonomy and trust. Within the main theme of relationships with settings, there are subthemes that feature in the discussion of this chapter. These are as follows:

- Justifying practice
- Setting's expectations
- Educating the setting
- Other practitioner attitudes
- Limited time in sessions

In the chapter, each practitioner's experience is presented separately, with the exception of Lilly and Maya who work together and were interviewed together.

#### **Susie and the consumer**

Through interviews with Susie, this research found that Susie valued children's play and provided children with opportunities to exercise their freedom of choice. Susie is proud to see children initiating their own learning through play and she is comfortable following and

getting involved in children's play. However, during observations, when children's play was more subtle and less active, Susie tended to rely on adult-led activities and games. This raises the question as to why Susie felt compelled to direct children's learning in some instances. Looking at the relationship Susie has with the setting may provide an answer to this question.

### *Justifying practice*

Susie is a freelance FS practitioner who works in three nurseries. She acknowledges that each setting has different expectations of planning and practice in FS. These expectations enable or hinder her professional autonomy in FS. As an independent FS practitioner, Susie views her practice as providing a service which she explains must be justified.

*[D]ifferent settings need different things to tick the boxes that they need... to be able to justify, you know, paying me to come in and run FS (BI:224-228-Susie)*

Susie shows an awareness of the settings' expectations that her practice must suit. This is represented as expectations she must 'fall in line with' or direction of learning they wish her to cover in the sessions.

*I have to, kind of, fall in line with what the nurseries that I work for feel is an OK level of risk. (BI:182-183-Susie)*

*I try and go with whatever their theme is or mould Forest School into that theme.'*  
(AI:226-227-Susie)

This indicates how the settings' expectations shape her practice. It is the settings that define boundaries for risky play introduced in FS. Susie also suggests how the FS ethos is moulded to suit the settings' understanding of learning in the outdoors. Susie appears willing to adapt to their requests and satisfy their expectations of investing in the approach. There may be little choice for Susie as justifying her practice by ticking 'the boxes that they need' may mean her employment or unemployment in the setting. Therefore, Susie's relationship between her and her settings represents the consumer of a service provided.

Neo-liberal education implements market metrics into modern education practices (Moss and Robert-Holmes, 2021). Not only does this encourage settings to measure efficiency, it also places importance on standing out in the market of education (Connolly and Haughton,

2015). Settings may not seek to invest in the FS approach because they respect and value its unique ethos and pedagogical principles, but rather as a selling point and an attractive addition to provision other settings do not offer (Connolly and Haughton, 2015). In her interviews, Susie acknowledges nurseries buy into FS to stand out and help them appeal to parents (AI:266-267-Susie; WI:385-386-Susie). For Susie, this means viewing her settings as consumers of FS (Kemp, 2020). Consequently, she must adapt and 'mould' her practice of FS to provide a program that fits the settings' possibly limited understanding of the FS ethos.

Susie reflects on the need to tick the right boxes for the settings that employ her and refers to one setting which has learning themes that they wish Susie to replicate outdoors. This signifies instrumental agendas behind their expectations of how Susie runs her FS sessions. Instrumental thinking is concerned with producing measurable outcomes for efficiency (Gibson, 2011). By ticking the boxes identified by the settings she works for, Susie can evidence efficiency and value of the time the children spend in FS provision. Therefore, this may indicate why Susie relies on adult-led games and activities when the children's engagement in FS is less active. Susie may feel she needs to be seen providing a service. FS advertises certain benefits of its programs, such as problem solving and physical skills, which places emphasis on the FS practitioner to facilitate such outcomes (Sharma-Brymer et al., 2018). Susie must deliver on learning outcomes which reflect the setting's themes. Therefore, this impacts on Susie's delivery of FS pedagogy.

### *Setting's expectations*

With an outcome driven agenda underpinning practice, Waite and Davis (2007) suggest FS practice can become increasingly adult-structured. Producing planning for the settings, with adult-led activities, is a method Susie can use to satisfy expectations of settings and justify FS practice. However, not all settings Susie works for require an adult-led structure. Susie explains that the setting involved in this study are 'quite open' (BI:225-Susie) and she has an agreement that she does the planning.

*[T]hey just know that I work around the seasons and about the creatures that are in the wood and what the children are interested in. (AI:240-241-Susie)*

In the observed setting, Susie appears to have ownership and autonomy in her planning. She can connect planning to the FS principles through basing the sessions structure on the

children's interests, in keeping with the FS concept of the learner, and around the seasons and the woodland animals, linking in the FS use of nature. However, in other settings that may not have a strong understanding of FS, Susie explains how her practice is restricted by planning overseen by the settings. This affects how she views her practice as she does not refer to her sessions in other settings as FS but more focused on outdoor education.

*[E]ach week they have a particular topic... there my Forest School is more about outdoor education in that way. (A1:225-226-Susie)*

*So, with them, if the children are learning outside, they are coming with me and they are doing it in an outdoor way. (A1:229-230-Susie)*

Susie indicates the tokenistic nature of the use of FS in these settings. Outdoor learning is often placed under the label of FS despite being better described by other outdoor educational approaches (Leather, 2018). Susie suggests that learning happening inside the nursery, is just transferred to learning in 'an outdoor way'. The setting's incorporation of FS practice with Susie, yet without challenging their perspective of outdoor education, reflects the normative agendas of maintaining the status quo in instrumental education (Loyal, 2020). The simplistic notion of bringing inside learning outside restricts Susie's incorporation of the FS pedagogical principles, such as, the autonomous learner and exploration through free play. This disrupts the purpose of the FS approach as an alternative pedagogy as practice mirrors mainstream discourse occurring indoors.

Susie expresses frustration that opportunities for learning are missed as she remains restricted by the terms of which she is employed. In one setting, Susie is hired to work with children in the toddler unit. When children from the baby unit express interest, Susie tries to incorporate them, but the activities do not consider their abilities and needs. Susie explains:

*But I obviously have to pitch it up at the group that I've gone in to do. (W1: 449-450-Susie)*

Susie expresses her enthusiasm for piquing children's 'natural curiosities' (B1:151-Susie). Therefore, restrictive planning not only impacts Susie's use of the FS pedagogical principles but also limits her own personal values and understanding of how children learn. Hence, viewing the settings as consumers of FS, prompts Susie to justify their investment in FS, and

her employment, thus creating the instrumental perspective of FS within Susie's practice. However, Susie's practice is less restricted in the setting involved in this study. Although her relationship with the observed setting still reflects the consumer, she has a positive relationship with the setting and Susie can exercise revisionist perspectives of FS.

### *Educating the setting*

In terms of relationships with settings, the revisionist perspective focuses on opening a dialogue with settings in which critical perspectives of FS can be explored and links to FS principles can be strengthened. During interviews, Susie had explained she enjoys 'helping people find nature' (BI:308-Susie) and uses the FS approach as a way she can build peoples connection with nature. Susie's role as a FS practitioner does not just refer to supporting children's development but also opening a dialogue with the setting through supporting other practitioners. Susie explains:

*It's not just about passing on the skills to the children. It's about passing on the skills to the people that come up to the woods with me. (AI:64-65-Susie)*

According to Maynard (2007), early years practitioners can experience tensions as they come to terms with FS's alternative learning environment and pedagogy as barriers occur in moving beyond mainstream discourses. By supporting other practitioners through this process, Susie creates a soft approach to challenging other practitioners' predetermined ideas of children's learning and helps them begin to understand FS's radical pedagogical space.

In the field note below, Susie is observed supporting a practitioner in this manner as their concept of safety and risky play is challenged. The practitioner noticed a child that had found a mallet in the shed. The practitioner took the mallet from the child and raised it as a concern with Susie.

*Susie suggested that the practitioner could help the child use the mallet to nail sticks into the soft ground. The practitioner seemed hesitant and suggested it might be dangerous. Susie encouraged the practitioner to give it a go, so the practitioner decided to try it. [Later in the session] ... Susie called to the practitioner using the mallet with two of the children, asking if it was going OK. The practitioner seemed to*

*be enjoying the activity with the children and I could see a few sticks that had been successfully nailed into the ground. (WF: 110-119-Susie)*

The following day, the same practitioner was observed to be continuing the activity, she originally deemed as unsafe, independently without Susie's encouragement (WF: 351-352-Susie). This demonstrates that the practitioner's confidence in risky play improved with Susie's support and challenge to her assumptions. Here Susie is also encouraging the practitioner to follow the child's interest, by supporting safe practices with the mallet, rather than prohibiting their interest by taking the tool away.

The revisionist perspective of FS stresses the importance of inspiring change in mainstream education and challenging the development of instrumental, tokenistic practices in FS. The neo-liberal view of the child is an unempowered image of children as deficient (Moss and Roberts-Holmes, 2021). Therefore, it is not surprising that the practitioner did not trust the child with the mallet and sought to control the situation. In contrast, the FS view of the autonomous child, values their intrinsic motivation to learn which practitioners should follow and support (Coates and Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). Thus, Susie may have seen this as an opportunity to promote safe use of the tools, empowering the child to initiate safe practice with an adult in future sessions. Susie was able to challenge the practitioner's perspective underpinned by dominant discourses of early childhood practice and demonstrate how the tool can be seen as a learning opportunity, not just a risk.

Susie's acknowledgement of supporting the development of early years practitioners' skills in the FS environment reflects the bottom-up movement of the FS approach (Knight, 2018). By encouraging practitioners' confidence in FS, Susie can support the development of radical, sub-cultures, or 'pockets of resistance' to neo-liberalism, practicing FS which Sackville-Ford (2019) argues is needed to achieve the utopian, purest view of FS. However, not all practitioners are open to this challenge.

#### *Other practitioners' attitudes*

Changing mainstream practitioners' attitudes and perspectives of learning in FS can be difficult. Practitioners can appear resistant to some elements of the FS approach which, in contrast to mainstream education, can seem to lack intervention and include unnecessary risks (Maynard, 2007). The normative agenda of instrumentalism can also act as a barrier as



FS's alternative practice can appear too radical in this perspective of education (Gibson, 2011). Despite her confidence in supporting and challenging practitioners' understanding of learning in FS, as explored above, Susie seemed to take a different approach with one practitioner who came along to a few of the sessions observed.

During an observation, Susie expressed frustration with the practitioner's approach to FS as she felt it restricted the children's experience.

*Some of the children had ventured off the footpath to inspect the chicken hut... The practitioner told the children to come away from the hut and join the rest of the group. Susie commented to me that there was no exploring with this practitioner (WF: 386-389-Susie)*

Exploring the chicken hut had sparked the children's interest in a previous observation, yet Susie remained passive as the practitioner instructed the children to come away. The practitioner was also observed to have added new rules in Susie's FS session, regardless of Susie explaining she 'has few rules in FS' (AI:57-Susie). Susie seemed to lack confidence in her authority when in the presence of this practitioner and did not communicate the FS principles despite having done so successfully with other practitioners.

Susie's response to this practitioner may reflect her perspective of the setting as consumers, with Susie being adaptive to their needs. Susie appears avoidant of tension and as she describes, 'fall in line' with the level of risk the setting is comfortable with. This enables the practitioner's approach to managing the children's behaviour to alter the feel of the session. However, many of the early years practitioners at the setting observed appeared open to Susie's FS ethos and she demonstrates confidence in encouraging their use of the FS approach and inspiring change in their practice. The consumer relationship places Susie in a reactive position despite being able to communicate revisionist perspectives of FS. This is dependent on the settings' expectations, and on the attitudes of the practitioners supporting Susie's FS sessions.

### *Summary*

Susie's FS practice is influenced by the consumer relationship she shares with the settings she works for. Susie caters to the settings' expectation of FS to justify her employment. This

promotes an instrumental perspective of FS as Susie uses adult-led activities and planning to demonstrate delivery of outcomes and value in their investment in the approach. This restricts her implementation of the FS pedagogical principles as she suggests her practice resembles outdoor education rather than FS. However, the nursery involved in this study is more open to Susie's autonomy in FS practice which puts Susie in a stronger position to communicate revisionist perspectives. In this setting, Susie is observed encouraging quality practice informed by pedagogical principles of FS through supporting practitioners' involvement and confidence in the alternative pedagogical environment. Susie's confidence in communicating a revisionist perspective is dependent on the setting and practitioners' attitudes when supporting the session. Due to the consumer relationship, when accompanied by practitioners who are resistant to FS pedagogical principles, Susie does not challenge their perspective and adjusts to their expectations.

### **Holly, the school and cooperation**

Holly has a professional background as a primary teacher, having worked most of her teaching career at the setting observed. As a result, she has a strong relationship with her school setting and with senior management. Holly's setting is very supportive of her FS practice and she has been the leading voice in promoting the need for FS and developing outdoor provision across the school. The relationship that Holly shares with the setting is one of cooperation. There is a certain amount of give and take between Holly and the setting as they negotiate the delivery of the approach. There are disadvantages and advantages of their strong relationship that impacts on revisionist and instrumentalist perspectives of FS in practice.

#### *Justifying practice*

Holly has a good understanding of how the school system works and has developed her FS practice within that. It may be Holly's teacher background or her good relationships with senior management that prompts her to take a sympathetic understanding of the headteacher's position of responsibility. Therefore, Holly is not resistant to justifying her practice within the structures of mainstream education. She operates her freedom to conduct FS within these structures, yet indicates concern about the potential for pressures of accountability to increase.

*[B]ut she is the head. She is accountable for what people do and I understand that. ... I'm not resistant to that. I would worry if it got any more in depth than that. (BI: 253-256-Holly)*

*[I]t's not a big worry. It's just that I can sense it from a head and academy trust making sure that, you know, they're not just going out and having a good time, [whispers] which we are [Laughs], but it's planned and purposeful, relevant to their needs. (BI: 259-262-Holly)*

Holly indicates how the school setting influences her planning for FS sessions. Holly is cooperative with structures of planning in the school and discusses how she can use FS to support learning happening in the classroom.

*I know time's tight, curriculum time's tight, to get through everything and if I can link the science with what they're doing in class then I will do... sometimes, it's set for people who can't get outside and we can, so it just extends it. (WI: 26-29-Holly)*

Holly is also proactive in recording children's learning in her FS sessions.

*We've just been talking about making sure that we have Forest School, or outdoor adventurous activity, on our long-term plan so when someone looks at it, know that ... we've got and spent quite a lot of time doing outdoor and adventurous things (SI: 204-209- Holly)*

Recording learning and creating long-term planning is not just to justify practice to senior management but also to external agencies. It is important to Holly that her practice is evidenced as embedded across the school and not viewed as a one-off.

Neo-liberal governance places importance on standards and measures of performance (Moss and Roberts-Holmes, 2021). Education becomes a product which schools are responsible for its' efficiency (Sims, 2017). This puts the school in a position of accountability, and in Holly's understanding, particularly the headteacher. Due to her good relationship with senior management, Holly states she is 'not resistant' to justifying her practice. The neo-liberal emphasis on standards influences the instrumentalist focus on procedures (Gibson, 2011). Producing planning documents is a way Holly can demonstrate the value of FS within the school's instrumental procedures. Holly acknowledges that the

purpose behind FS in long-term planning is for evidence of practice to be seen by external agencies. This directly addresses the school's procedures motivated by accountability.

Holly also stresses the need for her sessions to be taken seriously, as not just 'having a good time', but with practice viewed as 'planned and purposeful'. Therefore, planning does not just provide evidence of implementation of FS but also significance to children's learning. Sims (2017) argues that neo-liberal agendas promote the push-down of school curricula in early years practice. Bradbury (2018) suggests this aids the 'schoolification' of early years practice and, as argued in chapter 4: *Growth of the Forest School movement*, this encourages the *schoolification* of FS practice. Holly discusses her efforts to link FS with curricular to extend children's learning in the classroom. This may also be the result of Holly's professional background as a teacher which suggests she is familiar, accustomed, and sympathetic to the dominant discourse of neo-liberal procedures. The neo-liberal focus on measuring efficiency of education influences the method of recording outcomes of learning to show progressions (Sosnowska, 2020). Furthermore, this promotes importance of developing skills in instrumental concepts of education (Gibson, 2011). This is reflected in Holly's use of planning in practice.

Holly repeats that having to justify her practice is not a 'big worry' but implies she may be more concerned if the school made stronger demands for her to demonstrate value in her FS practice. This indicates that, although Holly is comfortable using FS within these procedures, there are some possible tensions for her practice. Hence, Holly's relationship with the setting is one of cooperation. The school is supportive of her practice whilst Holly needs to be compliant of school procedures.

#### *Setting's expectations*

Holly's relationship of cooperation reflects McCree's (2019) notion of collaboration in the steps to implementing FS within a setting. McCree (2019) suggests that within collaboration practice can maintain FS lite which is when some of the principles, but not all, are present in practice. For Holly, the school's focus of pre-planned learning and the need to justify practice for accountability, impacts on Holly's use of the FS principles.

Holly's cooperation with the school's instrumental planning procedures can be difficult for her. She highlights this when discussing mid-term planning.

*I am happy to put things there that we might do or we might cover but it's very, sometimes, planning in the moment. It doesn't fit the planning formats for other subjects but that doesn't mean to say that there is no planning going on. (BI: 155-158-Holly)*

FS's principles of child-led learning do not fit the formal structures of pre-planned learning required by the school. Holly acknowledges this through highlighting 'planning in the moment'. Her description of planning in FS may indicate that FS practice requires freedom and flexibility within FS pedagogy as she is happy to provide examples of what she 'might cover' in her sessions. Knight (2018) suggests it is important for FS to become contextualised with English education. Yet embedding FS practice in mainstream discourses can also mean it becomes subject to schools' structural influences (Waite and Goodenough, 2019). Therefore, Holly is encouraged to measure and record children's progress through annual reports, mirroring reports produced by class teachers of the setting.

*And I find that taking photos is really, really good. It helps me remember the children when I've been writing these reports. ... And it's made me think about next year and about trying to do regular observations of children and make sure I've got something on everybody (SI: 237-240- Holly)*

The neo-liberal concern of measuring efficiency of education impacts professional identity. Bradbury (2018) suggests the development of datafication of early years practice informs teachers' perceptions of their own professional status by acting as a means to measure their own capabilities. Holly's practice is subject to a form of datafication in that she must produce reports of children's learning. Holly is not resistant to this and expresses her self-motivation to carry out more 'regular observations' through photographs. This suggests her compliance to the datafication on learning in her sessions. With Holly's teacher background, producing FS reports is valid in her school environment. This complements the normative agenda of instrumental thinking as education, including FS, must maintain the status quo (Loyal, 2020). Hence, Holly's use of planning and evidencing progress must mirror the procedures carried out by class teachers. However, Holly states in her interviews that what she looks for in assessment in FS is different to what she assesses in the classroom. Holly explained she is more focused on the children, not subjects, and aims to assess their attitudes, levels of engagement and confidence (BI:121-125-Holly; BI:125-128-Holly). This

softens the instrumental perspective of assessment as Holly stays true to the purpose of the FS approach and focuses on the children's individual learning.

The school also influences a focus on outcomes of learning to demonstrate progression. Holly discusses the use of an outdoor learning program, aimed at FS practice, that the school encourages her to use.

*[T]he fact that we have [names outdoor program] shows that we are aware that the children have got half a day and what are they doing in that session. So, we can show evidence that they are learning this skill and that skill. (BI: 244-248-Holly)*

This shows Holly's awareness of the need to develop children's skills to justify time spent outdoors. Whincup et al. (2021) suggest independent FS programs can be a big investment for settings and provide a pre-planned structure of sessions to introduce children to new skills whilst linking them with the curriculum. The focus on the development of skills is profoundly instrumental, particularly when used with context-free language (Gibson, 2011). FS is a social constructivist learning approach (Knight, 2018) which is unique to the people and the place involved in the use of the approach (Waite and Goodenough, 2018). Thus, using an independent program loses the context in which FS is implemented and the unique qualities that Holly brings to sessions and her varied, unpredictable interactions with the children. Although Holly cooperates by working within the school's procedures, she does express a slight frustration with validating the approach.

*It would be nice to see it [FS] grow to be accepted for what it is rather than be ticking off elements to prove it is worthwhile. (BI: 234-235-Holly)*

It may appear that Holly's practice is very restricted by the instrumental procedures of the school and their investment in measuring progress. However, due to Holly's strong connections with the school, she does have an influential professional voice in the school, particularly, when it comes to promoting quality outdoor and FS provision.

### *Educating the setting*

The relationship of cooperation works both ways for Holly, with her adjusting to the setting's requests for planning and the setting adapting to suit Holly's ethos of FS. Holly is an experienced teacher in the school which has gained her a level of autonomy and ownership

of her practice. As a result, she has been able to use the formal structures of the school to educate the setting about FS and build support for implementing the approach.

*I fed back to the head and the governors about what the training is and what FS is.*

(BI: 27- Holly)

*[A]nd I put displays up about it and tell people about it. I sell it because I think it's great.* (BI: 48-51- Holly)

*I have created information for adults working in FS, if we ever get any volunteers which we never have, they know what would be expected of them. In other words, it's in line with my ethos.* (BI: 35-37- Holly)

Holly uses the formal structures of meeting with governors, display boards and staff and volunteer handbooks to pass on her message of what FS in the setting should be and what is to be expected in her sessions. Within interviews, Holly expressed concern for the lack of understanding of the FS ethos despite people's interest and acceptance of the approach (BI:186-188-Holly). Holly uses the formal structures of the setting to educate staff and develop an understanding of the approach. It is clear Holly is leading change within the setting as she promotes practice 'in line with [her] ethos'. She is also confident in the practitioners' abilities to carry out the FS ethos and encourages their involvement in the approach.

With practitioners' involvement encouraged, Holly explains how she begins to trust and rely on the practitioners' support as she leaves them responsible of certain activities so she can support other aspects of children's learning.

*I'm confident that [name of TA] is confident with the fire and everything about it, so I don't have to be there all the time. We can share and we can do other things.*

She confidently models quality practice for the practitioners to follow. This was observed when Holly corrected a child's method of carrying a branch.

*I heard the TA ask a child not to carry a large branch he had found. Holly also approached the situation and ask the child what he wanted to do with the branch. He explained he wanted to take it to the other side of the woods. Holly showed him a*

*safer way to carry the branch. The boy then carried the branch the safer way and Holly praised him. (SF: 50-53- Holly)*

The practitioner mirrored Holly's practice in a later observation as a child pulls a large branch to use for making a fire square.

*As he passed me, he said proudly, 'I've found the jackpot!' A TA noticed the child with the branch and said, 'I like the way you're carrying that.' (WF: 61-63- Holly)*

This suggests the practitioners' willingness to learn how to facilitate the approach. Despite Holly's adherence to the school's structures, Holly appears to have ownership and authority of the FS practice. She can use these structures to inform the development of FS practice in the school.

Reinstating the use of FS pedagogical principles is important to the revisionist perspective of FS. Holly is focused on educating every level of the school about the value of implementing the FS approach, from governors' meetings, encouraging the involvement of teachers and teaching assistants and producing handbooks for volunteers. This reflects the notion of FS as a bottom-up movement with practitioners leading change. Holly has been the leading voice in her school, strongly communicating her beliefs about the FS ethos and how it is implemented in her school.

Communicating the revisionist perspective, challenging and opening a dialogue with mainstream agendas can be difficult when settings are not open to such discussions. In the spirit of cooperation, Holly's setting is supportive of FS and practitioners are onboard with the approach. Kemp (2020) suggests FS can be a mutually transformational relationship which takes conscious efforts of FS practitioners to adapt the approach to their unique context. This is important to the long-term normalisation of the approach within the setting (Knight, 2018). Holly must cooperate with school structures, and she uses this to her advantage to open this dialogue between revisionist perspectives and mainstream agendas. Coats and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) state that the two pedagogical approaches of the school and FS can be used to complement each other, offering children the best of both worlds. Holly appears confident in negotiating the relationship between FS and the school and has secured the use of the approach within the culture of the setting.



However, Holly must be aware of the school's influence on her FS practice. As the leading voice in the implementation of the FS approach, quality of provision relies on her communicating, strengthening, and maintaining the FS pedagogical principles in practice. Therefore, Holly needs to develop a strong sense of her identity as the FS practitioner and not allow the inclusion of school structures to transform her understanding of the FS ethos.

### *Justifying practice*

Although Holly discusses the school structures to which her FS practice must comply, FS's alternative pedagogy also gives her some freedom from the pressures of accountability prevalent in classroom teaching. Yet, this may impact on how she feels towards her role and the strength of her revisionist voice as she questions whether she is 'opting out' as she does not 'face the constraints'.

*Sometimes, I did have to say to myself am I opting out because I am letting them go? Am I not pulling my weight as a teacher? I'm not being paid this salary because I have stepped back and their doing that? I'm quite happy for that to happen because I can see what they are getting out of it (BI: 142-145- Holly)*

*I enjoy it. I just sometimes feel guilty. Not guilty, I don't really feel guilty. I work hard [laughs], but because I love it and I am doing something I enjoy. I'm doing something that the children enjoy, and I know I don't face the constraints that working indoors has and I don't face the constraints that subjects indoors have (BI: 222-226- Holly)*

Holly expresses a sense of guilt as children enjoy her sessions and she enjoys her time outdoors with them which is not restricted like subjects taught indoors. This may indicate that Holly feels FS is a separate pedagogical space to learning indoors and does not feel part of the neo-liberal culture of the school that is controlled by procedures and accountability. As an experienced teacher, Holly's professional background is rooted in the school's culture. Though Holly states she values the opportunities she gives the children and sees 'what they are getting out of it' and works hard to provide this, she feels as though she is not 'pulling her weight'. Not being included in the neo-liberal culture of the school may suggest why Holly is keen to use the school's formal structures within her FS practice. Not only is she justifying the use of the FS approach, she is also justifying her role as a FS leader. Bradbury (2012) suggests that addressing curricular goals is sometimes used by early years

practitioners to demonstrate their professional status and competence. Thus, navigating formal structures of the school within FS implementation, Holly is ensuring the continuation of the approach but also evidencing her professionalism. As Holly questions her position in the school as the FS practitioner, this may hinder her revisionist perspective and use of FS pedagogical principles if she begins to justify the use of FS with instrumental structures.

### *Summary*

Holly has developed a relationship of cooperation with the school she works for. Holly's teacher background enables her to be understanding of the headteacher's accountability and she applies the formal structures of the school to her FS practice to help justify the schools' adoption of the approach. However, this has both negative and positive impacts on practice and promotes use of both instrumental and revisionist perspectives of FS. Holly's implementation of FS is structured by planning, developing individual learning reports and the inclusion of an independent outdoor learning program. This is to evidence progress complementing the neo-liberal focus on efficiency and embedding FS in school structures reflecting instrumental normative agendas. Yet Holly is confident in communicating the FS principles and takes a revisionist perspective as the leading voice on the development of FS in the school. The setting and practitioners cooperate with Holly's FS ethos and are supportive and open to the different pedagogical style. An aspect that impacts on Holly's communication of revisionist perspectives is her understanding of her position in the school. She expresses guilt of not being a part of the neo-liberal culture of the school which arguably indicates the presence of instrumental perspectives within her practice.

### **Lilly and Maya: autonomy and trust**

Lilly and Maya appear to implement FS practice with independence. They operate within two different settings that each has a different response to their autonomous approach. The setting observed demonstrates an instrumental perspective of FS but still enables autonomy in Lilly's and Maya's practice. During the interviews, Maya and Lilly often reflect on other settings where they are employed to draw on examples of practice. They appear to develop revisionist perspectives of FS with the other settings whilst gaining autonomy and trust.

### *Setting's expectations*

The setting observed in this study is a charitable organisation running FS as part of a community outdoor project. The projects are run in a community garden which was once an abandoned allotment. The space contains large gardening plots and a wild, natural space where the FS sessions are held. Whilst the sessions are advertised as FS, the setting is more focused on providing funded projects that enable the local community to use the space. The people involved in running the organisation were on site running other projects for adults in the community. They were present in some sessions to drop off the children's lunches and to help make decisions when a safeguarding issue occurred. However, their involvement was minimal. Lilly and Maya were hired by the organisation, as the qualified FS leaders, and given autonomy and trust to run the sessions. They seemed independent of the organisation with little restrictions or expectations from the setting.

However, the nature in which the setting implemented FS appeared tokenistic. Maya and Lilly also reflect on this as they discuss:

*Maya: [T]his setting's not Forest School, it's got elements of it but it's not. ....*

*Lilly: I think for these, it's more of a snapshot experience, isn't it?*

*Maya: It's a taster if that's the word. (BI: 379-389- Maya and Lilly)*

The sessions were held as part of a holiday club and advertised as FS to encourage engagement from the local community. There appears to be little concern of how Lilly and Maya could implement the full principles of FS pedagogy.

Neo-liberalism encourages market metrics and practice into all aspects of life (Moss and Robert-Holmes, 2021). Although this setting is offering a holiday club experience, neo-liberal concepts of efficiency and accountability are not present, they are using FS as a marketable approach to enhance engagement. Leather (2018) is critical of FS as a marketable approach and is concerned it will encourage a limited version of outdoor, environmental education implementing less developed concepts of FS principles. This links to instrumental thinking that, as FS becomes standardised, its procedures and typical 'FS activities' will become disconnected from its purpose. Lilly and Maya stress that the setting observed is not FS and imply it is a snapshot experience. The FSA (n.d) urge the importance of FS not being used as

a one-off experience and emphasise the importance of repeated, long-term experience of FS in its principles. Therefore, the setting's use of FS is disconnected to the FS principles and FS has become a badge of honour to advertise the sessions (Connolly and Haughton, 2015). Consequently, this has an impact on the quality of provision Lilly and Maya can apply.

#### *Limited time for sessions*

During interviews in Chapter 6, Lilly and Maya highlight the lack of time as a significant factor that impacts on their perspective of whether the observed setting is FS. They imply the sessions are merely a taster or snapshot of FS, therefore, do not offer a complete FS learning experience.

During their second interview reviewing the sessions observed, Maya highlighted what she believed she could have done better. She talks about a missed opportunity to extend a child's interest in woodwork.

*[Y]ou could see that he would have probably quite enjoyed a project ... But again, that's because this is more just a drop in taster, ... if it was longer, you know, we would go home and be like, right, we've identified that's what he's interested in. Will offer more of that next time, and then you have that time to build on those skills. (SI: 33-37-Maya)*

Maya indicates that had the FS program been longer, she would have reflected on his interests and used this to inform practice in following sessions. This demonstrates how the short time period impacts on Maya's implementation of child-centred pedagogy and disconnects FS from its' principles. Woodwork activities were set up without knowing if children would respond and understanding how they may want to use the resources. Maya is limited in how she can promote and encourage the development of the child's intrinsic motivation to explore the tools. Therefore, the activities are tokenistic in nature and, as Leather (2018) suggests, demonstrates a limited implementation of FS's complex pedagogy.

Maya and Lilly discuss introducing children to the activities:

*Maya: Whereas this is just like, a little bit of this, a little bit of that... Like a buffet.  
[laughs]*

*Lilly...I agree. I think it's that pick up and put down, isn't it? (SI:37-41-Lilly and Maya)*

Maya and Lilly acknowledge the tokenistic use of activities as children sample the different skills FS has to offer. They also reflect on the simplistic purpose of the sessions which further reflects Leather (2018) notion of a limited version of FS.

*This is a bit different in that they go away and they've crafted something (Bl: 379- Maya)*

*They're getting two hours outside. (Bl: 388- Lilly)*

This implies the instrumental use of FS as the development of skills and activities are devoid of purpose (Gibson, 2011). Children gaining access to the natural environment for two hours limits the connections to nature FS aims to build over long periods with children (FSA. n.d). The use of craft activities is so children can take something home. This implies evidence of children's activities which complement neo-liberal measures of efficiency (Moss and Robert-Holmes, 2021). Children dipping in and out of the different skill building activities further indicates disconnection to FS explorative, slow pedagogy. However, Lilly and Maya do not seem to engage in this tokenistic use of FS within the other settings they are employed with.

The other settings Lilly and Maya carry out FS practice are school settings. Again, there is a relationship built on autonomy and trust from the settings. However, unlike the observed charitable organisation, the lack of intervention is not caused by a tokenistic, instrumental perspective of FS by the setting but of respect and support for the implementation of FS practice.

#### *Justifying practice*

As Lilly and Maya work in school settings, the option of justifying and planning practice promoted by neo-liberal agendas is more prominent. Lilly and Maya response to this differs to Holly, who needed to ensure FS fit into these structures to strengthen the approach's position in the school. Lilly is resistant to the pre-planned learning structures of mainstream education.

*I'm not spending endless time doing paperwork, like you say, like proving things or planning things to the tenth degree. You know, have you done your planning yet solidly? Yeah, it's all in here. [Laughs, points to head]. Oh, I need it on paper. Well, I can write down some of the activities they might do, but they might not want to do*

*them. I'll write a list out and then you can look at the plan and throw it in the bin.*

*[laughs, jokingly]* (BI: 337-341- Lilly)

Lilly indicates that freedom within planning of FS practice is needed as she explains she can list 'activities they might do' and having a 'general idea' of skills. This is in keeping with the FS concept of the learner as autonomous. She demonstrates the frustration she feels when settings require planning 'on paper' in formal structures. This may suggest that Lilly is not focused on aligning FS with mainstream settings and may wish to, or is enacting, FS practice as a radical form of pedagogy (Sackville-ford, 2019). Her lack of concern in 'proving things' may indicate her resistance to the neo-liberal subjectivities on FS. In her interviews, Lilly does not refer to justifying her practice in FS to settings, suggesting this is not a priority for her.

Yet for Maya, it was the headteacher's value of seeing the children 'doing' rather than 'writing about what they're doing' which changed how Maya would justify her use of FS. Maya explains a conversation she had with the headteacher about getting the children to write about their FS experience as evidence. She recalls the headteacher telling her:

*I'm happy for you to spend that extra time out with the children just doing rather than wasting time writing about what you're doing... We can justify why we're spending this amount of time on it. Crack on, you know.* (BI: 333-336- Maya)

Justifying practice was a concern when the FS approach was first implemented at Maya's school. Maya was involved in creating solutions to justify the approach which may have opened a dialogue to creating understanding of the approach in the school. As the approach became more embedded and the head more confident about knowing 'what they're [the pupils] getting out of it', justifying practice became less of a priority for Maya and the headteacher. This suggests justification of practice may be dependent on the culture of the setting and the confidence of senior leadership to resist neo-liberal agendas impacting on practice in favour of giving time to the FS approach.

### *Educating setting*

An important aspect for Lilly is how she helps her supporting staff in the FS session to become comfortable using the approach. Lilly indicates that this is part of her role in FS.

*[A]s a practitioner, I'm always keen to try and break that barrier down... and just really get down to the... crux of it (BI: 289-291-Lilly)*

*[I]t was her insecurities and her worries of not been in control of everything ... I sometimes forget where I've come from and I have to stop and go right back and look at a teacher and think, where is their head at and what are they finding difficult or ...what barriers do they have to this? And it was just a really good learning moment for me as a practitioner to remember that, you know, it doesn't come totally natural to everybody to come out and be that free. (BI: 150-158-Lilly)*

Lilly explains her reflective approach to supporting teachers in her sessions. She acknowledges that there is a difference between the 'free' approach of FS practice compared with the 'structured' approaches of classroom settings, and that this difference might unsettle classroom teachers who are inexperienced in FS. Below Lilly discusses a conversation she had with a practitioner struggling in the session.

*I could sense that she was quite tense and nervous. So, I just pulled her to one side and I went, come on, what is it? ... She was like, oh I don't like stuff like this, there's no structure. The children don't know what they're doing. I can't cope with it. ... So, I talked her through all the different bits, different things we had out ... And she calmed right down, and she just settled into it, and I gave her a craft activity and we did that together. And she just said, oh, [Lilly] I wish I had come out sooner, I've really enjoyed it (BI: 137-147-Lilly)*

Lilly's response to other practitioners' barriers in FS is not judgemental as she aims to help them transition into their role in FS. She acknowledges how she can support their needs, for example by giving them a craft activity to be responsible for, which softens the concept of a lack of purpose and intervention that teachers can feel when facing FS's child-initiated, play-based learning (Maynard, 2007).

A part of the revisionist perspective of FS is resisting neo-liberal influences in education shaping practice. For Holly and Susie, expectations of pre-planning sessions to justify learning restricts their approach and influences the instrumental perspective in practice. Maya's school initially requested her to justify the use of the approach by setting pupils writing tasks about their FS experiences. This may have been to further link learning in FS

with other curricula goals complementing instrumental perspectives of measuring and ensuring efficiency of time (Gibson, 2011). However, as the headteacher became more confident and understanding of the FS approach, her attitude to FS changed and she no longer required evidence on paper. This reflects the relationship of autonomy and trust between Maya and the headteacher as she is given freedom to practice FS without being restrained by school structures. This may also indicate that the implementation of FS has aided the headteacher and Maya to question the use of neo-liberal agendas of measuring progress in FS. This may have initiated a sub-culture in their FS practice that refuses neo-liberal subjectivities; pockets of resistance as Sackville-ford (2019) may suggest.

Lilly challenges the use of planning in her FS sessions and does not reflect on justifying her practice to settings. This implies that aligning FS with mainstream education is not a priority for Lilly. She explains that she can offer settings a list of possible activities, but does not infer that she or the children are going to follow them. This can seem like a radical response to requested planning from Lilly which could influence tension between her and the setting. However, Lilly describes her reflective and compassionate approach to supporting teachers new to FS and inducting them into understanding the FS learning environment. This approach helps ease tensions in Lilly's autonomous stance in implementing FS in a school setting. An essential part of revisionism is creating a dialogue between the different discourses to prevent rejection of the FS approach. FS can be seen as a mutually transformative process between mainstream settings and FS practitioners. However, it is important to maintain FS principles to avoid tokenistic practice. Mainstream settings can find themselves operating in the normative agenda of instrumental thinking (Gibson, 2011), thus challenging this is difficult. Lilly remains resistant to mainstream structures, but Lilly demonstrates a good understanding of negotiating this dialogue by reflecting on teachers' reactions to practice and helping them understand aspects of pedagogy they find different to their norm.

### *Practitioner attitude*

As Susie had experienced, not all teachers, early years practitioners or other supporting staff in FS sessions are open to adjusting to their role to the FS approach. Lilly and Maya both express difficulty in challenging practitioner perspectives of children's abilities. This is



despite Maya's setting fully supporting FS and Lilly's confidence in transitioning practitioners into the approach.

Lilly discusses how she can break barriers to help teachers feel more comfortable in the space yet communicating the concepts behind FS pedagogy can be challenging. Lilly reports on the tension between pedagogical roles in FS with supporting children. She reflects on a difficult dynamic of the teachers' expectations of a child and Lilly providing space and autonomy for the child to disengage in an activity.

*I think that's tricky because you've got that dynamic of the teacher there going, I know what that child can do, and it's like, well, actually we're in this [FS] space and we're going to respect the fact that that child isn't ready. (BI: 220-222-Lilly)*

FS encourages radical relationships between children and practitioners (Sackville-Ford, 2019) in which a child can refuse engagement and exercise their right to choose the direction of their learning. The instrumental view of the child is as something to be moulded (Sosnowska, 2020) and neo-liberal imagery of children is as something needing to become (Moss and Robert-Homes, 2021). Therefore, differences between FS and mainstream educational perspectives of children can be hard for teachers to accept. This results in tension between the two discourses resulting in challenging interactions between FS practitioners and teachers (Maynard, 2007). This can strain the dialogue between the two professionals when communicating revisionist perspectives.

Maya also shows awareness of supporting practitioners' attitudes and difficulties in the initial experiences of FS. She describes the FS pedagogical environment as a 'alien space' for other practitioners that not only provokes tensions for them but also fear.

*You could read the fear was coming from them, not from the children. (BI: 252-Maya)*

*Sometimes you've got to hold their hand through it... Rather than the children's. (BI: 254-256-Maya)*

Maya attempts to challenge practitioners' assumptions of the children's abilities. Maya supports practitioners in viewing the children differently in the alternative environment and learn to trust them.

*Please just give them the space. You know, one of us will stand at one end of the valley, one of us will stand at the other end of the valley. We've got our phones, if we need to. Just give them a chance to explore and see what happens (BI: 235-238-  
Maya)*

Maya talks them through the FS pedagogical principles of providing children with 'space' and 'a chance to explore'. Understanding the benefits to risky play is a difficult barrier to overcome for practitioners not used to this type of learning. Maya reiterates the procedure for safety which appeals to the instrumentalist way of thinking as there is security in procedures (Gibson, 2011). Although Maya has gained a relationship of autonomy and trust with senior management, she still needs to remind practitioners to trust the approach in practice.

### *Summary*

The relationship Lilly and Maya share with their settings is one of autonomy and trust. The setting involved with this study enabled them to implement FS with little expectation or limitations from them. However, the setting's perspective of FS is tokenistic and there is little regard to how FS principles can be enacted upon in the short sessions. This marketised approach to FS encourages instrumental perspectives and a disconnection to the FS pedagogical principles. In other settings Lilly and Maya work for, autonomy and trust are gained through the setting's openness towards the approach. Neither Maya's headteacher nor Lilly are concerned with justifying the approach which demonstrates a resistance to instrumental perspectives. Lilly demonstrates confidence in communicating revisionist perspectives as she discusses her reflective stance to supporting practitioners to feel comfortable in FS's pedagogical space, which is alternative to their usual classroom experiences. Both Lilly and Maya challenge practitioners' predetermined assumptions about children in the session. However, this can be difficult when practitioners are not open to viewing the children as autonomous agents in the FS learning environment. This can impact on their use of revisionist perspectives.

**Conclusion: Forest School practitioners' relationships with settings and how they negotiate tensions in practice.**

The tensions between instrumental and revisionist perspectives reflect the individual relationships of the FS practitioners and the settings they work with. Three types of relationships were highlighted: consumer, cooperation, and autonomy and trust. These relationships influence the way practitioners respond to the settings' expectations of FS and how they communicate the FS principles.

A fundamental aspect of instrumental perspectives is the use of marketisation of the approach. For the Froebelians, this was reflected in the marketable interest in all things kindergarten (Manning, 2005), and the incorporation of kindergarten as a tokenistic, extracurricular activity in elementary timetables (Lilly, 1967). This tokenistic and marketable approach in instrumental perspectives is present in Susie's, Lilly's and Maya's description of some of the settings they work with. The setting observed with Lilly and Maya used the FS label to engage the local community in the project by taking advantage of the marketable interest of FS. This impacts on their use of the FS principles as they describe the sessions as not FS. Susie also refers to her practice in other settings as more outdoor education focused due to the setting's tokenistic approach. The setting's expectation of her is to extend learning happening indoors into her outdoor sessions which indicates the use of FS as an extra-curricular activity rather than an educational approach in its own right. Leather (2019) suggests FS is becoming a familiar label which all outdoor education is coined under regardless of their commitment to the FS philosophy. This is reflected in Lilly and Maya's and Susie's experience. However, the practitioners share varying relationships with the settings which demonstrate different responses to marketisation and expectations of FS. Lilly and Maya's autonomous relationship meant that they worked independently from the setting which had little expectation of the FS approach. Whilst Susie's consumer relationship meant the setting required justification for their investment, therefore, further restricting Susie's use of the pedagogical principles.

Instrumental education is focused on standardisation with emphasis placed on the importance of procedures and measures of efficiency (Gibson, 2011). Through creating standardised pre-planned FS sessions, Susie and Holly can justify their use of the FS approach. For Susie, this meant meeting the requirements of the setting's expectations of

FS learning to support their investment in the approach. Holly is not resistant to instrumental procedures of the schools with her relationship of cooperation. She understands accountability in neo-liberal education systems. She uses formal structures to validate the importance of the approach in the school. Yet, this influenced instrumental perspectives in her practice, such as, the use of an independent FS program to evidence children's progression in skills. In efforts to address mainstream education agendas, instrumental use of procedures creates a context-free use of the approach and consequently loses the purpose behind the approaches' philosophy (Gibson, 2011). This reflects the Froebelians' standardisation of practice in instrumental perspectives with the development of the kindergarten manuals providing instructions of how to implement Froebel's gifts without his principles (Brehony, 2000). This is also evident in Holly's implementation of the context-free, independent FS program and Susie's pre-planned learning that restricts her use of the FS principles. With instrumental pressures embedded in mainstream education culture, it becomes the practitioners' responsibility to communicate revisionist perspectives. FS can be a mutually transformative relationship between both educational discourses (Kemp, 2020). Yet it is important FS practitioners continue to negotiate revisionist perspectives to avoid tokenistic practice impacting their use of FS and becoming stuck in what McCree (2019) describes as FS Lite and Ultra Lite.

All the FS practitioners of this study demonstrate or discuss the communication of revisionist perspectives in their practice. However, it is evidenced in their experience that the strength of their revisionist voice depends on the relationship they have with the setting and the settings' openness to change. All FS practitioners of this study make efforts to challenge mainstream practitioners' perspectives through developing their confidence and understanding of the FS approach. This is observed to be effective in Susie's and Holly's observations as mainstream practitioners are seen changing their approach. This is also discussed by Lilly and Maya as they encourage FS principles in other settings they work for. This reflects the notion of FS being a bottom-up movement with FS practitioners leading change. The FS practitioners in this research influenced a change in the culture of their settings from the bottom-up by supporting non-FS experienced practitioners to understand and implement FS ethos and pedagogy. However, Holly demonstrates this further as she uses formal structures to influence change at all levels of the school.

Part of the revisionist perspective of FS is challenging neo-liberal subjectivities on FS practice which can be difficult when working with mainstream practitioners who are resistant to adapting their perspective of learning. Mainstream practitioner attitudes impacts on how well the FS practitioners can communicate revisionist perspectives. This is more apparent in Susie's consumer relationship with the settings as she feels obliged to meet their needs. Although Holly has been able to get her supporting practitioners onboard with their relationship of cooperation, it is her own attitude to neo-liberal, formal structures of the school that may impact on her use of the revisionist perspective. With her professional identity rooted in the school, she has developed a strong revisionist voice in the setting. But separating her professionalism from neo-liberal pressures is difficult, thus instrumental perspectives are evident in her implementation of FS.

The tensions between instrumental and revisionists perspectives are complex and rooted within the practitioners' relationships with the setting. The unique relationships influence both aspects of practice with positives and negatives of the relationships formed. Instrumental expectations are laid out like rules in the game of education. The rule appears that if practice can be justified and evidenced then FS can flourish in the setting, whether that be tokenistic or true FS. The previous chapter explored whether practitioners played the instrumental game and if they followed the rules in practice with the children. The previous chapter found that the practitioners were led by their values underpinning their implementation of the FS approach and were able to soften the impact of instrumental perspectives on play with their emphasis on children's freedom of choice and the practitioners' facilitating roles in learning.

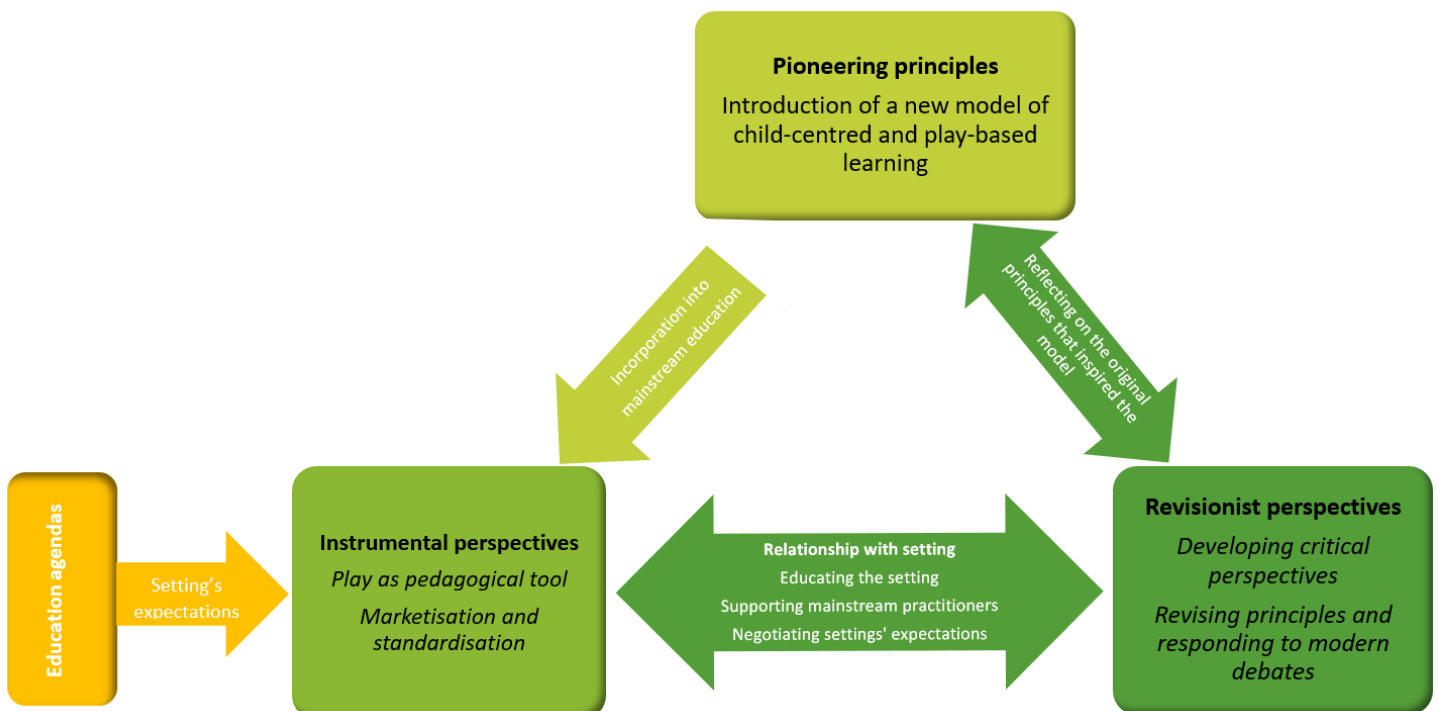
Therefore, this study has found that the practitioners are not carrying out either instrumental perspectives or revisionist perspectives of FS. Both perspectives are present in practice. This has influenced the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens to be revised and strengthened from the lessons learnt from the practitioners of this study. The revised Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens is discussed in the following chapter.

## Chapter 8

### Revising the Instrumental and Revisionist Critical Lens

This chapter summarises the practitioners' experiences and reflects on how their experiences have aided the revision of the conceptual framework to strengthen the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens. Learning from the FS practitioners is an important part of the interpretivist, constructivist approach of this study as both participants' knowledge and the previous knowledge of the researcher are valued in shaping the research findings (Egbert and Sanden, 2020). The practitioners' contributions have helped develop the revised critical lens as a model of reflection that represents practitioners' complex experiences in the reality of implementing the FS approach. The revised Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens (See figure 4 below) is this study's original contribution to knowledge. This chapter details why and how the critical lens has been strengthened.

*Revised diagram Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens (Figure 4)*



*(To view an enlarged image of the critical lens, see Appendix 6)*

The key constructs of Instrumental and Revisionist perspectives within the conceptual framework have not changed and are present in the revised critical lens. Instrumental

perspectives are still defined as when play is used as a pedagogical tool and when practice has become standardised and marketised to meet education agendas. Revisionist perspectives are still defined as when there is development of a critical reflection on instrumental methods, along with a rise in efforts made to revise the original principles of the approach. The key aspect that has changed is the positioning of the two perspectives in the revised critical lens. This influences how these two perspectives interact with each other. The original conceptual framework diagram (see Figure 1. Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens in Chapter 2) depicts a linear process of progression from the original pioneering principles of a new model of education to instrumental perspectives and ending with the development of revisionist perspectives. This showed a hierarchical notion of practice with little interpretation of how practitioners can progress through these perspectives of practice. In this study, the practitioners demonstrated how they negotiated instrumental perspectives of FS and revisionist principles within their practice and relationships with the settings. This highlighted the need for the revised model to place Instrumental and Revisionist perspectives at the same level to capture the practitioners' active negotiations between the settings' instrumental expectations and their revisionist FS principles. This supports the critical lens to move beyond simply characterising the quality of FS practice through a hierarchical model and helps the lens to communicate a more critical stance that depicts the active reflections of FS practitioners. The text within the arrows on the revised critical lens (Figure 4) indicate the additional features to the diagram of the critical lens that has been inspired by the practitioners' experiences in this study.

### **Instrumental perspective of Forest School**

In the original conceptual framework model depicting a linear process, instrumental perspectives were described as a phase educational movements must go through to be contextualised in English education. Instrumental perspectives signified the move away from an approach's original principles to create instrumental methods that morphed pedagogy into practice that addresses education agendas and English norms in practice. Having gone through this phase, a revisionist perspective can begin to develop as practitioners see the impacts of the instrumental perspectives on the movement. A critical understanding of practice can emerge as practitioners move away from the instrumental perspective and begin to revise and strengthen the original principles of the approach.

However, the original linear conceptual framework does not account for the messiness and complexity of the reality of transitioning through this process. It simply shows FS practice can be either instrumentalist or revisionist. It does not enable practice to be described as both. It suggests that the instrumental perspective is the lesser developed approach to practice and places judgment on practitioners who may find their practice falling into this perspective. Therefore, learning from the practitioners' experiences of instrumental perspectives is crucial for the conceptual framework to develop into a critical lens that can aid practitioner reflections on practice, rather than simply categorising them.

### *Practitioners' experiences of the instrumental perspective*

Neo-liberal market metrics that underpin contemporary education create the conducive climate for instrumental perspectives of the FS approach as discussed in Chapter 4 (The Perfect Storm). Neo-liberal governance focuses on creating standards for education and measuring performance of education systems to ensure it is cost effective (Moss and Roberts-Holmes, 2021). A culture of performativity supports instrumental thinking as it rationalises normative agendas to standardise practice and values the instrumental focus quantities and measurements (Gibson, 2011). For early education, this promotes the reliance on the EYFS to determine the expected level of development for children and a standard of practice settings can be measured by (Moss and Roberts-Holmes, 2021). For the participants of this study, neo-liberal agendas influence their implementation of FS and the inclusion of instrumental perspectives in their practice.

Yet neo-liberal education agendas did not impact the practitioners' practice directly. The practitioners made little to no reference to the demand to address the Early Learning Goals of the EYFS. Curriculum goals did not seem to limit their FS practice or feature as a structure to their planning. However, the performance agenda of education did impact them indirectly through the setting and the setting's expectations. Proving the worth of the FS approach to the school or nursery was a key factor that encouraged instrumentalism in their practice. Justifying practice was a common theme amongst the practitioners' experience, although they had different reasons for providing justifications.

Holly had a relationship of cooperation with her school setting and a professional background as a teacher in mainstream schooling. She was understanding towards the



headteacher's accountability for the school and her need to be able to produce evidence of learning and development to warrant the amount of time the headteacher had assigned for implementing FS. Holly was to provide long-term planning and annual reports for the children. Providing planning was also a way Susie could justify her FS practice to nursery settings. Unlike Holly, Susie's reason of justifying practice did not come from a place of understanding the nurseries' accountability for learning, but instead was a means to ensure the continuation of Susie's employment with the settings. Susie is a freelance FS leader and shared a consumer relationship with her settings in which Susie provided a service that settings bought into. This resulted in Susie using pre-planned activities so that she was seen to be providing input in children's learning to demonstrate the value of the nurseries investment into including Susie in their outdoor provision.

For both Holly and Susie, the use of pre-planned activities to justify practice encouraged the use of adult-led play for the purpose of developing certain skills. Within instrumental perspectives, play becomes a pedagogical tool that adults use to meet educational agendas, rather than a tool for children to use for their own exploration and learning. The emphasis on developing skills appeals to instrumentalist thinking as it is an easy way to measure effectiveness of education systems (Gibson, 2011). Yet, Gibson (2011) warns that when the skills developed within instrumental procedures are devoid of the context of pedagogical principles that should underpin practice, the development of skills loses its purpose. Susie and Holly indicate their experience of this loss of purpose and understanding of the FS approach from their settings.

The educational settings' focus on the development of skills over the implementation of principles affects Susie and Holly in varying ways. Holly mentions the school invested in an independent outdoor learning programme for Holly to use alongside FS. The program offers a structure in which to implement and introduce certain skills in the FS approach. This acts as a curriculum for outdoor learning. The use of independent programmes in FS encourages the instrumentalist context-free promotion of skill development (Gibson, 2011). Holly acknowledges the school's investment in the program as a method of evidencing outcomes (BI: 244-248-Holly), yet the use of the program does not feature in observations of Holly's practice. This could suggest that Holly exercises some resistance to this form of practice. Although Holly used pre-planned activities, other themes coming from the observations of

her practice, such as *freedom of choice* and *learning from each other* (See Chapter 6), were more prominent in her practice. Providing children with space to choose the types of activities they engaged in and allowing them to take ownership of the skills they had learnt were important aspects of FS practice for Holly. As a result, Holly's ability to provide children with these opportunities softened the impact of her use of adult-led activities. The activities were important as they satisfied the school's instrumental expectations, however, Holly was skilled in her delivery of FS so that it did not overpower the children's experience.

Susie reported that some of the nurseries she worked for emphasised skills over principles, which she attributed to the nurseries' lack of understanding about the FS approach. She explains she adapts FS practice to suit topics the nursery is covering indoors and that the nurseries like her to pre-plan sessions (AI: 226-227-Susie). The impact of this prompts Susie to explain that her practice in those settings reflected other outdoor approaches rather than FS (AI: 229-230-Susie). Therefore, Susie indicates that the development of skills in adult-led activities separates her practice from the purpose of FS in some of her sessions. Susie suggests this has less impact in the nursery she was observed in for this study. She has a good relationship with the observed nursery and has more freedom with planning. During Susie's sessions, she used adult-led activities. However, similar to Holly, Susie's values in practice softened the impact of this on the children's learning experiences. Themes emerging from Susie's practice, such as *freedom of choice and responding to children's interests* (See Chapter 6), evidence Susie enabling children to opt out of activities and saw her adapting her practice to suit the mood and interest of the children on the day.

Justifying practice is something that Lilly and Maya spoke passionately about, yet this does not influence an instrumental perspective in their practice. Lilly is resistant to producing planning documents and Maya's senior leadership in the school she works in supported her to move away from evidencing learning to justify practice. Lilly and Maya share a relationship of autonomy and trust in their settings. In contrast to Susie and Holly's experience where the settings' expectations began to influence practice, a lack of expectations from the organisation that Lilly and Maya's sessions were observed in encouraged instrumental perspectives in their work. Lilly and Maya make it clear in their interviews they do not regard the setting observed in this study as FS, despite it being advertised as such. The lack of time and repeated learning experiences impact Lilly and

Maya's practice as they view the holiday club as an introduction to FS. Pedagogical principles of child-centred, play-based learning do not have the time to flourish in Maya and Lilly's sessions. They believe this changes their role in learning from facilitating to leading. The purpose of the sessions appears not to provide children with the unique learning experience that the FS principles can support but to meet the needs of the community during school holidays. This is a beneficial and important service for the children in the area, however, it does illustrate the tokenistic use of FS. Devoid of its principles, FS is used as a marketised label which underpins an instrumental perspective of FS.

*Revising the critical lens: instrumental perspective informed by practitioner accounts*

This section considers the accounts of the practitioners discussed in the section above and how this has influenced the development of the critical lens. The practitioners' engagement with instrumental perspectives and expectations of the settings highlights their abilities to adapt their FS practice. Therefore, the critical lens must reflect their active approach to instrumental perspectives in FS.

An interesting finding from the practitioners' experiences was their lack of concern regarding curriculum goals. This had very little impact into how the practitioners structured their sessions. However, it was the indirect pressure of performance agendas that were active in the settings that influenced the practitioners. The FS practitioners were more concerned with meeting the settings' expectations rather than achieving curriculum goals themselves. Validation and justification for their practice did not come from contributions to curriculum outcomes, but rather how they could fit within formal structures of the school or demonstrate the value in the settings' investment. Therefore, the revised Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens has the addition of education agendas on the side of the instrumental perspective. Education agendas have been separated from the instrumental perspective to highlight education agendas as an external influence on FS. The separation of education agendas illustrates the practitioners' experiences of the indirect impact performance pressures have through the settings expectations on their FS practice.

The section above has discussed how instrumental perspectives of FS are present in the practitioners' implementation of play and pre-planned activities to develop certain skills. The instrumental perspective behind play is underpinned by the practitioners' awareness of

the settings' expectations of FS and the need to justify investing money and time into the approach. However, the practitioners were able to soften the instrumental impact on the children's experience and ensure practice maintained what they believed to be important in the FS approach. This indicates the importance of reframing the critical lens from its original linear visual representation to a model that presents instrumentalism and revisionism at the same level (See Figure 1). The practitioners' ability to soften instrumental perspectives in their practice demonstrates their ability to negotiate between instrumentalism and revisionism in practice. Therefore, the visual presentation of the critical lens needs to highlight this interaction between the two perspectives (See Figure 4). Hence, in the diagram of the revised Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens, the two perspectives are presented side-by-side with an arrow in between depicting the negotiation between the perspectives. The negotiation between the instrumental perspective and revisionist perspective highlights the active response of the revisionist's adaptive and reflective nature in practice. Thus, to understand this negotiation, the study must understand how FS practitioners communicate and act on revisionist perspectives.

### **Revisionist perspective of Forest School**

The inspiration for this study to consider revisionism for the FS approach was Bruce's (2011) reflection on the success of the revisionist Froebelians. She wrote:

*Froebelians are not by nature revolutionary in spirit. They are pioneering, and thanks to the example set by the revisionist Froebelians, embrace the need for change when it arises. (Bruce, 2011, p.61)*

Here Bruce characterises Froebelians as pioneering, highlighting the Froebelian efforts of influencing change with their bottom-up approach and capturing their ability as revisionists to adapt to change. This prompted me to think about the bottom-up movement of FS and the need for FS to embrace change in ways that strengthen, not hinder, the FS pedagogical principles. The study aims to promote the revisionist ability to be reflective, critical and adaptive within FS practitioners.

However, placing revisionist perspectives at the end of the linear visualisation of the conceptual framework encourages the concept of revisionism as an end goal. This may encourage the idea that once revisionist perspectives of FS are achieved, there is no need

for further action. Active reflection on principles and modern debates is needed to enable the continuation of the revisionist adaptive nature. This study found that relationships between FS practitioners and their settings are key to the development of instrumental and revisionist perspectives. Within these relationships, the practitioners demonstrate constant negotiation in order to support the settings' acceptance of the FS approach. This highlights the practitioners' continues reflective and active stance.

### *Practitioners' experiences of the revisionist perspective*

In this study, the FS practitioners demonstrated their critique of the FS approach as they discussed its development in England. They acknowledge the impact of tokenism in FS and the impact this had on practice. Maya and Holly were particularly concerned with the fast growth of the approach and the lack of understanding of the principles that underpinned this. Developing a critical understanding of an approach is the first steps to revisionist thinking.

However, when reflecting on FS in its purest sense, all of the practitioners doubted their practice in some ways. Susie's understanding of 'true FS' came from her appreciation of the Scandinavian models of forest kindergartens. However, her training was aimed at using FS with adolescents which influenced whether Susie thought her practice in an early years context was reflective of her professional training. She also communicated the difficulties she experiences implementing FS as it could never represent how she views FS practice in Scandinavian countries. This was despite Susie expressing pride in aspects of her practice, such as child-initiated learning and spiritual connection to nature, that complemented the Scandinavian model she admired. Holly doubted whether her practice was 'top quality'. She saw the split between FS and the dominant discourse of the school impacted her practice in achieving what she saw as true FS. Lilly and Maya compared their holiday clubs with others they regarded as more FS. The practitioners' doubt in the quality of their practice demonstrates how the hierarchical concept of a 'true FS' could impact practitioners' confidence in their practice. Thus, revisionism needs to be shown as an achievable and adaptable perspective practitioners can see within their own efforts to improve practice. This chapter has already discussed the practitioners' abilities to soften instrumental perspectives of FS within play so that it does not influence the children's experience. This

highlights that the practitioners of this study are confident, reflective FS practitioners and the model must empower practitioners to recognise this.

A key factor in instrumental perspectives are its normative agendas of education which maintain the status quo in neoliberal systems (Gibson, 2011; Loyal, 202). Part of the revisionist perspective is disrupting this with positive change. The most prominent way practitioners were able to demonstrate a revisionist perspective was their efforts to inspire change and challenge the early years practitioners of the setting. Educating the setting was a theme that derived from understanding the FS practitioners' relationships with the setting and each practitioner had their own way of promoting change. Opening a dialogue is a crucial aspect of the revisionist perspective of FS. The practitioners' abilities to adapt to the settings' needs and communicate the FS principles in a way that supports the settings' understanding, demonstrates the dialogue between the settings' instrumental expectations and the practitioners' revisionist reflective and adaptive stance.

Holly's approach to implementing change in a school through educating the setting was particularly interesting for the development of the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens. Holly was responsible for developing the outdoor provision and used the school's formal structures to her advantage to educate the setting on the focus of FS. She did this at all levels of the school from 'selling' FS to the school's governors and senior leaders to providing FS handbooks for volunteers and supporting staff. Holly was able to clearly communicate her vision for the school's use of the FS approach which enabled her to carry out principle-led practice. Holly did cooperate with providing formal planning for the school which it required from teaching staff. However, Holly had established herself as the lead of outdoor provision and had a level of authority over its implementation. As a result of Holly's effective communication of the FS principles, Holly was able to justify reasons for flexibility in FS planning. Therefore, the setting understood and respected the need for children's freedom in learning in the FS environment. Holly is a good example of how FS practitioners can create a dialogue between the two perspectives of FS. She showed the importance of being respectful towards the instrumental expectations of the setting with her use of planning. She did this whilst using her revisionist voice by supporting the development of the setting's understanding of the need for flexibility in the FS approach within the school's structures and that it can still be valued within them.

Supporting the settings' practitioners was also a method the FS practitioners used to encourage change and were aware of the challenges early years practitioners faced when introduced to FS. In initial sessions of FS, tensions between the early years and FS practitioners can negatively impact on their experience working together (Maynard, 2007). The FS practitioners of this study seemed to take a non-judgemental approach to early years practitioners experiencing these challenges and would make conscious efforts to support them through it.

Susie explains she aims to pass on knowledge and skills to adults supporting her sessions and is observed supporting the confidence of the nursery's practitioners to engage with risky play activities. With gentle encouragement, Susie challenges the early years practitioners' understanding of risk and helps them to relax and enjoy these experiences with the children. Lilly and Maya reflect on their observations of other practitioners' fear when supporting FS for the first time and state it is part of their role as FS leaders to support other practitioners through it. Maya explains she reminds them of the steps taken to ensure the safety of the children. This prompts them to feel comfortable within the school's formal structures which regulates the risks in FS. Lilly addresses practitioners' sense of a lack of control, that Maynard (2007) refers to, through scaffolding their involvement in the FS sessions. She explains how she gives them an activity to do with the children to introduce them to FS and give them some structure. Providing a structure in initial sessions mirrors how Lilly and Maya support the children's transition into FS with more structured activities that will decrease as confidence in the FS environment increases. The FS practitioners' support for mainstream education practitioners reflects the bottom-up movement of FS with practitioners leading change. When mainstream practitioners were comfortable with FS, they were observed using the skills the FS practitioners modelled and were positive contributors to the FS sessions and children's learning. This helps create the foundations for revisionist principle-led approach within the setting.

However, the relationship practitioners shared with the setting, and the early years practitioners' attitudes towards FS, affected the strength of the FS practitioners' revisionist voice and the level of impact they had on change. For instance, Susie's consumer relationship with her settings placed her in a position of reaction to ensure continuation of her employment. Susie's approach to educating the setting was led by the practitioners'

openness to FS. Thus, when practitioners at the setting were not open to change, Susie's ability to challenge their practice was limited and she would adapt to fit their interpretation of FS. This highlights the importance of the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens as a model to empower FS practitioners and not to just judge their practice. When challenging perceptions of FS in educational settings, FS practitioners must create a delicate balance of inspiring change and ensuring the continuation of the settings support for investing in the FS for the FS practitioners' livelihoods.

Consequently, it is crucial that the FS approach continues to stay relevant in contemporary education. Thus, the revisionist ability to adapt to change can support FS practitioners to continue to strengthen the approach. An important part to maintaining this continuation for the revisionist Froebelians was through establishing links to contemporary education debates. The FS practitioners of this study demonstrate their use of FS's natural environment with regard to surrounding issues affecting children's everyday lives. Lilly and Maya reflected on the impact of technology on children's concentration and motivation. Holly discussed the use of nature for promoting mental health and freedom in play to counter the effects of the restrictive and competitive dominant discourses of mainstream schooling. Susie emphasised the need for children's reconnection to nature and she believed it is important for children and their families within our consumer-driven society. The practitioners acknowledge these contemporary issues in early education, however, do not explicitly link them with debates and movements underpinning the issues. This indicates that the practitioners' motivation of addressing these issues are a personal motivation and not necessarily connected to the FS approach and the FS movement. Communicating the link to these issues and how FS can be used to address them could be beneficial for the continuation of FS as a point of interest for settings to maintain their engagement with the FS movement. Therefore, it is important that FS practitioners are supported in establishing links with contemporary debates of childhood.

#### *Revising the critical lens: revisionist perspective informed by practitioner accounts*

This study found that the practitioners' interactions with the settings was a crucial factor in the implementation of instrumental and revisionist perspectives. Both instrumental and revisionist perspectives can be present in practitioners' implementation of FS. Hence, the instrumental and revisionist perspective was moved in the diagram representation of the



critical lens to indicate a less hierarchical position of revisionism. Consequently, this also placed a stronger emphasis on the negotiation between the two perspectives that the original diagram representation did not capture. This also provides an opportunity to highlight the key elements that supported the practitioners' revisionist perspective within their communication and negotiation with the settings.

The arrow going between instrumental and revisionist perspectives highlights building a positive relationship with the setting as an important part of FS's move towards a revisionist perspective. Relationships with settings can influence the FS practitioners negatively if the setting is not open to embracing the FS principles. When the relationship is positive, the FS practitioners were able to inspire change in the setting. The way that the practitioners of this study inspired change and communicated the revisionist perspective was through educating the setting about the FS approach and supporting mainstream practitioners to feel comfortable in the approach. Therefore, educating the setting and supporting practitioners feature in the arrow between instrumental and revisionist perspectives. This captures the practitioners' ability to reflect on the settings' understanding of FS that may be informing instrumental perspectives in practice and adapting their support to encourage the settings' adoption of the FS principles in a more authentic way.

However, an important part of the practitioner experience of working with settings and building a good, supportive relationship was their ability to negotiate the settings' expectations. The education agendas that create pressures for settings to operate in instrumental ways, creates a barrier for accepting revisionist perspectives of FS. This may always be a challenge FS practitioners face in their practice, even if the setting is supportive of FS. The FS practitioners of this study demonstrate their skill in negotiating the expectations settings had for FS practice. They were able to meet the setting's expectations by incorporating the settings' requirements for providing planning documents, yet, when it came to the FS sessions, the pre-planned learning had very little impact on the children's learning experience. This was due to the practitioners' values of FS as a method of supporting children's freedom and autonomy. Also, the practitioners' efforts to support the settings' understanding of FS enabled the setting to see the value in allowing flexibility in planning and supporting children's freedom.

The arrow between the pioneering principles and revisionist perspectives indicates the importance of FS practitioners' reflections on the original principles underpinning the FS movement. For Susie, going back to the original principles of FS as an early years model of education would have supported her confidence in her current practice in the nurseries she worked in. However, this study aligned with Waite and Goodenough's (2018) argument that blind adherence to the FS principles may have a negative impact on the development of the approach. This was evident in the practitioners' reflections of the quality of their practice as all doubted whether they practiced 'true' FS. The notion of revisionism is to reflect and revise the original principles of FS to strengthen them in contemporary education. Thus, the arrow indicates the need for continuous reflection between the FS original principles to ensure the approach is connected to its roots, but also encourage a critical and responsive reflection of the principles that underpin revisionist perspectives.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter discussed the key findings from the FS practitioners' experiences and reflected on how this has strengthened the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens. The practitioners' accounts have influenced the development of the lens from a hierarchical model to a more reflective and active model. Adapting the critical lens to take into consideration the practitioners' experience of FS was a crucial part of developing the critical lens as this study's original contribution to knowledge.

The review of FS literature in this thesis follows the initial framing of the conceptual framework (See Chapter 4: The growth of the Forest School Movement). The initial framing of the conceptual framework depicted the critical lens as a linear process of development as a movement aligns with mainstream education (See figure 1). The initial ideas of the conceptual framework described instrumental perspectives as a phase of a movement's development which it must go through before a more critical revisionist perspective can be developed. The linear concept of the critical lens reflected FS literature and scholarship well. It captured the focus of early FS research on the benefits of the approach to raise awareness and buy-in for mainstream settings. The focus on the positive outcomes of FS over analysing the quality of pedagogical principles paved the way for instrumental perspectives in FS. More recent FS literature focuses on a critical perspective of the FS approach and problematises aspects of the movement's rapid growth. This critique reflects the

development of revisionist perspectives in literature. Concern over the dilution of the FS principles and the commodification of FS practice has created a dilemma in FS pedagogy between staying true to the FS principles or adapting FS to contextualise the approach in English mainstream education. The initial linear conceptual framework highlights the progression of these debates in literature. However, it does not capture the FS practitioners' experiences of this dilemma. It simply categorises their practice as either instrumental or revisionist. Literature may be able to be categorised in this way, but the human experience is a more complex phenomenon.

Considering the FS practitioners' experiences in this study enables the critical lens to move on from the linear structure to a more reflective representation of the relationship between instrumental and revisionist perspectives. This study found that instrumental and revisionist perspectives can both be present in FS practice and FS practitioners are active in negotiating between the two perspectives. The FS practitioners in this research demonstrated their abilities to meet education settings' instrumental expectations whilst limiting the impact this had on the children's experiences in FS. The practitioners softened the impact of instrumental agendas by remaining connected to the FS pedagogical principles of child-centred and play-based learning; thus, providing children with freedom of choice in sessions that strengthened their autonomy. Building good relationships with the settings was key for the practitioners to successfully communicate revisionist perspectives and inspire change in the setting. The practitioners were able to communicate the importance of FS's pedagogical principles through steps they had taken to educate the setting and provide support for other practitioners engaging with FS by facilitating their confidence in the FS approach. The steps the practitioners took to influence change and support a positive relationship with the settings are highlighted in the revised Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens. Bringing attention to these steps is important for the use of the critical lens as a model to prompt reflection of FS practice for FS practitioners and FS scholarship.

The emphasis of the revised critical lens as a reflective tool is important for this study's original contribution to knowledge. The initial development of the linear critical lens placed revisionism as the more developed perspective of FS and as an end goal of the approach's progression. This hierarchical concept of 'true' FS practice can be a barrier for practitioners in practice. This was indicated in this study with the practitioners' reflections of their

practice falling short of true FS. It is crucial that the critical lens is not used to simply judge quality of practice, but is used to empower FS practitioners by supporting their efforts to move towards an authentic representation of FS and realistically manage educational agendas influencing practice. Highlighting steps taken by the FS practitioners of this study in negotiating instrumental and revisionist perspectives can help other FS practitioners to recognise these steps in their own practice. Implementing the FS approach in a mainstream education setting is not an easy endeavour and being able to recognise small steps towards change can aid practitioners' confidence in the positive progression of their FS practice in the setting. Revisionism is not about creating a true FS, but its focus is to promote continuous critical reflection of practice in efforts to work towards strengthening FSs principle-led approach.

Learning from the practitioners has aided the lens to capture the complexities of the reality FS practitioners face when inspiring change in mainstream settings. The focus of the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens is to encourage reflection amongst FS practitioners and help them to recognise aspects of their practice and negotiations with settings that inspired change. This is to support the use of the critical lens as a model to empower practitioners as agents of change and not to be used simply as a tool to judge quality of practice. The following chapter concludes the key findings of this research with recommendations for practice and literature.

## Chapter 9

### Conclusion

The original contribution to knowledge of this research is the development of the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens. The critical lens was derived from the study's literature exploring the development of the Froebelian kindergarten movement in England and the similarities this shares with the development of the FS movement. This study's historical exploration of Froebel's kindergarten movement indicates the novel approach this research has taken to analyse the FS approach. This concluding chapter discusses how the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens has been used to underpin findings.

The chapter explores how the three research questions have been addressed. The chapter reviews the effectiveness of the critical lens to investigate the FS approach and how the data has informed further development of the lens. Limitations of the study are also discussed with suggestions for future research using the critical lens. The chapter highlights implications of this study for FS literature and practice.

**Research question 1: Are the historical perspectives of instrumental and revisionism, evident in the development of the Froebelian Kindergarten movement in England, relevant to analysing modern debate in the FS movement?**

The literature review of this study explores the Froebelian kindergarten movement and the FS movement as an unlikely pair. Contrasting images of the Froebelian movement and the FS movement may be conjured when exploring their different histories. For instance, young children sat in galleried classrooms used by early, orthodox Froebelians as opposed to children playing in the woods in FS. However, the two movements have faced similar challenges as the international models of practice have been interpreted in English education. The literature review draws on the similarities of the patterns of progression between the two movements that determined the development of the conceptual framework.

Both movements have had to weather the perfect storms created by English education systems that prioritise outcome-driven methods. This has laid the foundations for instrumental perspectives of the approaches to shape development of the movements as

they aligned with mainstream education. For the Froebelians, industrial revolution and mass education influenced the education agendas of the time. Outcome-driven practice was required to ensure England remained competitive in the industrial world (Nawrotzki, 2006). Therefore, Froebel's pedagogical principles of play were transformed with play becoming a pedagogical tool for the development of industrial skills (Joyce, 2012). Bethume and Seldson (2018) state that not much has changed in English modern education system since the industrial revolution as priority is still given to developing children's technical skills for modern industry. The FS approach weathers the neo-liberal climate of education that focuses on performativity and measuring efficiency (Moss and Roberts-Holmes, 2021). Play in FS is also used as a pedagogical tool to deliver outcomes valued in neo-liberal education (Pimlott-Wilson and Coats, 2019) to justify practice and investment in the approach. The success of aligning the approaches with mainstream education, promoted using play as a pedagogical tool to meet desirable outcomes, led the movements to standardise and marketise the approaches to satisfy and control growing interest in their pedagogy.

Standardisation and marketisation represents instrumental thinking that reflects normative agendas and maintaining the status quo (Gibson, 2011; Loyal, 2020). An interest in marketising Froebel's educational toys known as gifts led to an interest in Froebel's methods without his underpinning philosophy. Thus, instrumental thinking of procedures devoid of purpose (Gibson, 2011) came apparent in the movement's progression. This is evident in the problematisation of FS which has become a desirable label and badge of honour for education settings without commitment to the principles (Connolly and Haughton, 2015; Whincup et al., 2021). The success of marketisation and growth of popularity led to the rapid development in training programs of both the approaches. Nawrotzki, (2006) highlights that many of the Froebelian training providers did not include Froebel's original text. Froebel's kindergartens pedagogy became unrecognisable with the absence of his underpinning philosophy. Training programs for FS also grew rapidly (Leather, 2018) with independent programs incorporating their own versions of what FS practice should be (Knight, 2018). In order to standardise and validate the development of the approaches, governing bodies were created; The London Froebel Society in 1875 and the FSA in 2012. With the change in education agendas, the marketised version of kindergartens and morphed use of play began to be viewed as outdated and damaging to the Froebelian

image. The Froebel Society's membership began to drop. Similarly, the rapid growth of FS led to dilution of its principles (Leather, 2018) and added to the identity crisis of FS (McCree, 2019). A different approach was needed to ensure continuation of the two movements.

The revisionist Froebelians began to rebuild Froebelian integrity through distancing themselves from the early Froebelian orthodox methods. Revisionist Froebelians, like Elsie Murray, were openly critical of the corruption of Froebel's principles and began to reinstate his original principles. However, the revisionist Froebelians understood that Froebel's principles needed to be revised to ensure the approach's relevance to contemporary education. Therefore, they began to align his principles with modern debates in education. Bruce (2021) praises the revisionist Froebelians ability to adapt to modern education and still advocates the importance of reconnecting to Froebel and his original principles in modern Froebelian practice. This ability to adapt yet remain centred by original principles is what this study proposes the FS movement can learn from the Froebelian kindergarten movement.

A critical perspective is developing within FS scholarship. Research, such as Maynard (2008), McCree (2014), Davenport (2019) and Whincup et al. (2021) explore practitioner experiences in implementing FS and the challenges they face. Other research, such as Leather (2018), Sackville-Ford (2019) and Waite and Goodenough (2018) discuss the variation of quality in practice and effects of tokenism in the FS approach. This kind of research problematises aspects of the FS practice rather than looking at the approach through rose-tinted glasses and reclaiming the wonders FS pedagogy can do for children. This can support practitioners to think critically about FS and began to separate themselves from instrumental perspectives. Waite and Goodenough (2018) state blind adherence to the FS principles is also hindering the realities of implementing the approach. Therefore, taking inspiration from the revisionist Froebelians, FS needs to explore how to create links between its pedagogical principles and modern debates. This is developing in literature with Knight (2022) supporting the nature premium campaign of the FSA which indicates links with FS and a green recovery in post-pandemic education. McCree et al. (2018) and Tiplady and Menter (2020) also highlight slowing down pedagogy to combat fast paced structure of education with the aim to improve wellbeing for children. However, these links need to be made more explicit to support practitioners in practice to make those connections.

In conclusion, the patterns of development between FS and the Froebelian kindergarten movement have underpinned the conceptual framework of the study and provided key constructs in which to explore FS through the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens. This literature review highlights the development of revisionist perspectives in FS scholarship, yet this may be reinforced over time with the growth of a critical stance in FS research.

**Research question 2: Do instrumental and revisionist perspectives reflect English FS practitioners' understanding of FS pedagogy and their experiences of implementing the approach within an Early Years context?**

To develop the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens, it is important to investigate how this reflects the realities of practitioners' experiences. Therefore, the empirical research focuses on exploring practitioners' understanding of FS pedagogy and their experiences of carrying out the approach. The practitioners' understanding of the FS approach was explored to develop a picture of the practitioners' unique perceptions and values in FS practice. This was followed by an analysis of the practitioners' experiences in the context of their settings of employment to identify the impact the settings had on practice. The critical lens was used to discuss the findings of the study's data and is summarised below.

*Practitioners' perspectives of the Forest School approach*

The findings of this study indicate the development of revisionist perspectives in the practitioners' understanding of FS pedagogy. Still, there are opportunities that the practitioners' understanding can be supported to strengthen this.

The practitioners demonstrated a critical awareness of the rapid development of the FS approach and the implication this had on the tokenistic use of FS and marketisation of FS. This is the first step in developing a revisionist perspective. This aided the revisionist Froebelians to separate themselves from the instrumental perspectives of the early Froebelians and begin to align themselves back to Froebel's original principles (Nawrotzki, 2006). When this critical perspective is used to reflect on their own practice, the practitioners of this study began to compare and doubt the quality of their practice against other settings, and even other countries, which they perceive as enacting the full FS principles. This raises the question explored in the literature review as to whether attaining all the FS principles is achievable and whether this places pressures on practitioners to



measure their practice against the utopian concept of FS (Sackville-Ford, 2019). However, this study puts forward the revisionist perspective of FS to support practitioners to recognise aspects of their practice that meet the FS pedagogical principles and having the confidence to communicate this.

In Holly's and Susie's case of understanding FS pedagogy and reflecting on their practice, the revisionist perspective could be particularly helpful. Susie compares her practice with the Scandinavian model of forest kindergartens that she regards as 'true FS'. Susie does not express that many aspects of her practice, such as her perspective of nature and the emphasis on play, reflect the FS movements roots in Scandinavian education. Susie describes her training as focused on teenagers and addressing challenging behaviour. Therefore, her training may not have reinforced Susie's understanding of 'true FS' as she describes the use of FS in early years education as a recent development in the FS movement. Developing Susie's revisionist perspective of revising the original principles of FS pedagogy could aid Susie's reconnection to the origins of the movement and inform her perspective of meeting true FS within her own practice.

Holly compares her sessions to a setting she has heard of that only implements FS pedagogy. This implies tensions in Holly's perspective of her FS practice which is run alongside the dominant discourse of the school. In Holly's cooperative relationship with the school, she has worked hard to negotiate instrumental and revisionist perspectives which may impact on her view of not meeting a purest concept of FS. With Holly's efforts, the school appears to embrace Holly's use of FS, therefore, it may be time to start to challenge the neo-liberal structures influencing FS practice. Developing Holly's revisionist perspective of criticality of the school's influences on her pedagogy could help her communicate the separation of the two pedagogical spaces and aid Holly's recognition of elements of her practice that complement the original FS principles. Promoting the revisionist perspective in FS could help practitioners recognise when their perspective of FS has been influenced and help them work towards realigning with FS pedagogical principles. The utopian concept of FS may be unachievable for the reality of practitioners' experience; however, Sackville-Ford (2019) describes the search for utopia as a journey. This can be the first steps of that journey for FS practitioners as it was for the revisionist Froebelians and their separation from instrumental, early Froebelian methods.

An important part of the continuation of the Froebelian kindergarten movement was the revisionist Froebelians' ability to revise the original principles and adapt practice to address modern concepts of education. To do this, the Froebelians began to link Froebel's principles with challenges concerning society at the time. For instance, health concerns of the children in urban areas inspired Froebelian Margaret McMillian to develop camp schools (Joyce, 2012). This ensured the movement remained relevant and provided a reason for interest in the approach. The practitioners of this study highlighted issues of concern in modern society and education in their understanding of FS pedagogy. They acknowledge a number of issues from protecting time for 'childhood' experiences and slowing down pedagogy, to how the environment can address concerns of mental health caused by a fast-paced modern life or the aftermath of the global pandemic. The practitioners acknowledged awareness of these issues, however, they did not elicit knowledge of education initiatives that support their awareness or did not connect their understanding to theory or literature that underpinned their use of FS to address this. This does not mean that the practitioners did not know of any supporting initiatives as they may have highlighted connections if pressed on the matter. Participant-led interviews limited the study's ability to uncover their deeper understandings. This highlights a missed opportunity for the practitioners to communicate their understandings. Confident articulation of the FS approach's relevance to modern debate is critical for maintaining continuation of the FS movement away from restrictive neo-liberal education agendas. The practitioners' understanding of FS pedagogy complements revisionist perspectives, yet this can be strengthened with clearer links to relevant education debates. This research indicates a need for practitioners to be supported in building and communicating these connections. This informs the implication of this research for FS literature.

#### *Practitioners' experience of implementing the Forest School approach*

It was interesting to see how the practitioners' values and perceptions of FS was enacted in practice and how this shaped their approach to learning in their sessions. Observations of the practitioners found that instrumental perspectives of FS were evident in the practitioners' approaches to play, however, they made conscious efforts to minimise the impact this had on the children's experiences.

Adult-led activities and environments demonstrated the influence of instrumental perspectives on practice. Adult-led activities and play were used by Holly and Susie to satisfy the instrumental expectations of the settings that required pre-planned learning. Lilly and Maya acknowledged their setting's use of the FS label to advertise the session that limited their ability to carry out FS's full principles. The lack of repeated learning experiences was a particular concern for them. Consequently, the environment was adult-led due to children's dependence on activities being set up for them.

To soften the impact of instrumental perspectives the practitioners prioritised children's freedom of choice to direct their own learning. Children were able to exercise their autonomy in learning with their choice to engage or disengage with the practitioners and their adult-led activities. Practitioners also responded to the children in their sessions to make learning meaningful. Holly described her role as underpinned by a Vygotskian approach and demonstrated how she adapted her response to children in the moment to support their individual learning stages. Lilly and Maya were observed supporting children's transition into the environment but also knowing when to take a step back. This allowed children space and time to come to them, if needed, rather than Lilly and Maya being over supportive and interfering with their engagement in learning. Susie responded to children's self-motivation by using their interests to inform her practice and build opportunities to extend this in the woodland space.

The practice observed in this study may seem instrumental on face value with adult-led activities providing direction in the sessions. However, observing the children's engagement with these activities demonstrated the practitioners' encouragement of the children's freedom in sessions. Thus, the children's experiences were not standardised through these activities, and they maintained the self-motivation and direction in learning that is important to FS pedagogy. Therefore, the activities acted as an option for children but importantly ticked the boxes required of the settings. During observations, it is evident that the practitioners can play the instrumental game and satisfy settings expectations, yet maintain their principles and support children's freedom.

*Forest School practitioners' relationships with settings and how they negotiate tensions in practice*

This study found that the relationships the practitioners' share with their settings of employment is influential in the practitioners' experience of instrumental and revisionist perspectives of FS. Practitioners who implemented FS pedagogy in more than one setting described a different response to the perspectives depending on the setting. This indicates that it is not the individual practitioners who are responsible for the degree of revisionism or instrumentalism in their practice, but it is a response to the context of the setting. This complements McCree (2014) who also found in her study of practitioner experiences that practitioners were subject to their context. Three types of relationships were explored in this study, and each had both positive and negative impacts on instrumental and revisionist perspectives.

The consumer relationship led Susie to feel she needed to justify the settings investment in her employment through pre-planned learning activities. The consumer relationship also made Susie less likely to challenge settings' expectations and assumptions as she adapted FS to suit them. However, with the setting involved in the study, Susie felt more confident with the nursery's open approach to FS pedagogy. She was able to model good practice and support early years practitioners in overcoming barriers in FS pedagogy. This demonstrates how the settings and practitioners' attitude effected Susie's communication of the revisionist perspectives.

Holly shared a relationship of cooperation with her school setting. Holly's awareness of accountability placed on schools prompted her to implement instrumental pre-planned learning to ensure progression and evidence learning through annual FS reports. This demonstrates Holly's cooperation with the neo-liberal structures of the school and how this impacted her approach to FS. Yet, Holly was able to use the structures of the school to educate the setting and embed FS into the culture of the school. Thus, the school cooperated with Holly's vision of FS. Holly also demonstrated authority and confidence in setting out her expectations of adults supporting the sessions and encouraged their engagement with the approach. Therefore, she was able to communicate revisionist perspectives of practice. Holly's relationship of cooperation enabled her to use the school's

formal structures to open a dialogue with the setting to promote FS, but also subjected her practice to planning structures and accountability in the neo-liberal culture of the school.

Lilly and Maya experienced a relationship of autonomy and trust in the settings they were employed with. The setting involved in this study appeared to have very little expectations of Lilly and Maya's practice, therefore, they were given the freedom and trust to implement FS as they wanted. The setting used FS as a label to engage the local community with the setting. This indicated the tokenistic understanding the setting had of FS that promoted instrumental perspectives in Lilly and Maya's practice and limited opportunities to communicate revisionist perspectives. In contrast, other settings that Lilly and Maya worked with were more supportive in incorporating Lilly and Maya's radical approach to FS whilst still granting the practitioners autonomy and trust.

In summary, the relationships of the settings with the FS practitioners were influential. Instrumental perspectives stemmed from the settings' expectations, or in Lilly and Maya's case a lack of expectations, of the FS approach and its outcomes for children. Practitioners negotiated revisionist perspectives with efforts to support change in the setting through modelling good practice, educating the setting in the FS principles, and encouraging other practitioners to engage with the approach. Revisionist perspectives were impacted by the setting's practitioners' attitude towards FS pedagogy and the confidence of the FS practitioners in the relationship with the setting to feel comfortable to challenge assumptions about learning.

### **Research question 3: Does the development of the instrumental and revisionist critical lens support conceptualisation of FS practitioners' experiences and development of FS pedagogy?**

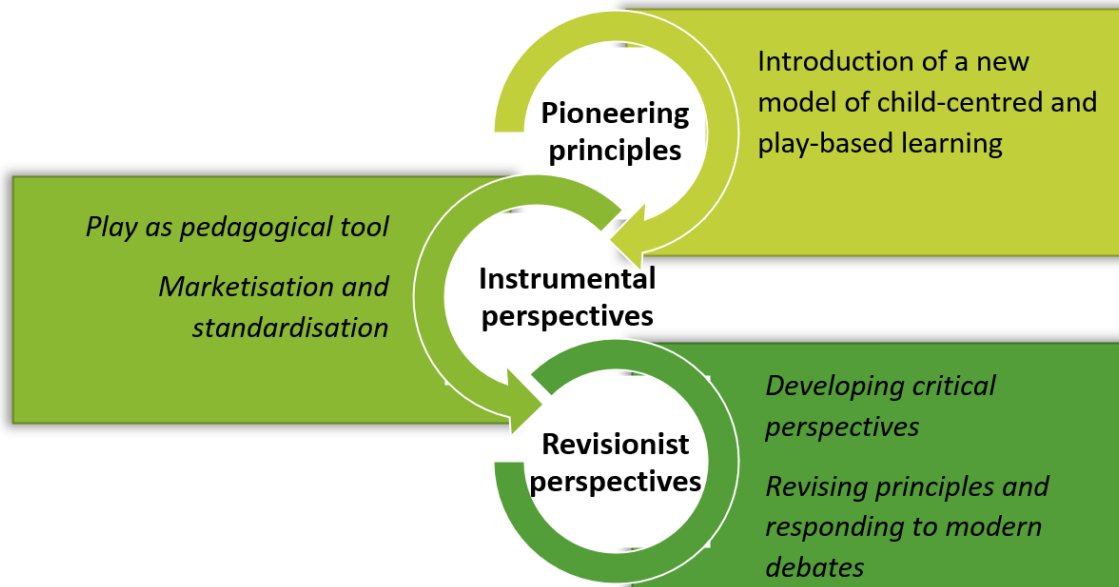
#### *How the critical lens was used*

The critical lens was devised from the literature of the study that analysed the historical development of the Froebelian kindergarten and compared this to the development of the FS movement in England. This exploration informed the key constructs of the conceptual framework underpinning the study and framing the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens.

The critical lens was first used in Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework to help the reader understand how the literature informed the development of the critical lens. The conceptual framework is then used in Chapter 3 and 4 to structure the presentation of the literature review. This highlights the connection between the development of instrumental and revisionist perspectives in both the Froebelian kindergarten movement and the FS movement. Chapter 5: Methodology explains how the critical lens was used to underpin the construction of the code manual in data analysis. The critical lens was then used to discuss findings from the data. The critical lens has aided the flow of research presented in this study; however, it is important to review the efficiency of the lens to strengthen its development.

### *Review of the critical lens*

Chapter 8 provides a detailed reflection of how learning from the FS practitioners' experiences influenced the revision of the critical lens and how their accounts strengthened the lens. FS literature paints a picture of FS as an approach that is pushed and pulled towards mainstream agendas with practitioners implementing tokenistic practice against their beliefs or due to a lack of understanding. With my previous experience of having faced these challenges in practice, my positionality, supported by literature, led me to think that I would find evidence of an instrumental perspective of FS and that the revisionist perspective would be the next step for the FS movement. Hence, the initial conceptual framework is depicted as a linear process.



Initial diagram of critical lens.

However, the findings of this study suggest the relationship between instrumental and revisionist perspectives is more complex. The practitioners do not simply find themselves caught in instrumental structures of mainstream settings. They are active in critically applying both revisionist and instrumental perspectives with constant negotiations between their relationship with the setting and the realities of practice. This may indicate that the FS movement is in-between developing the revisionist perspective, yet also operating within instrumental perspectives. However, it is not this study's intention to put the revisionist perspective on a pedestal. The literature review of this study raised the question of whether the purest concept of FS is hindering practitioners' perspectives on the quality of their approach. FS as a utopian concept demonstrates that such utopia may never be reached (Sackville-ford, 2019). In McCree's (2019) concepts of Full FS, Lite FS and Ultra Lite FS, she explains that practice can become stuck in FS lite with little incentive for settings to invest in the full principles when their practice is perceived as an acceptable level of quality. The practitioners of this study expressed doubt in their ability to enact their concepts of 'true FS'. Yet they demonstrate indications of revisionist perspectives that can be strengthened. I wish to empower practitioners through developing criticality in their perspectives, not add to judgment of their shortcomings towards an unrealistic utopian FS practice. Therefore, reframing the presentation of the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens can help support this empowerment and reflect the experiences of the practitioners of this study.

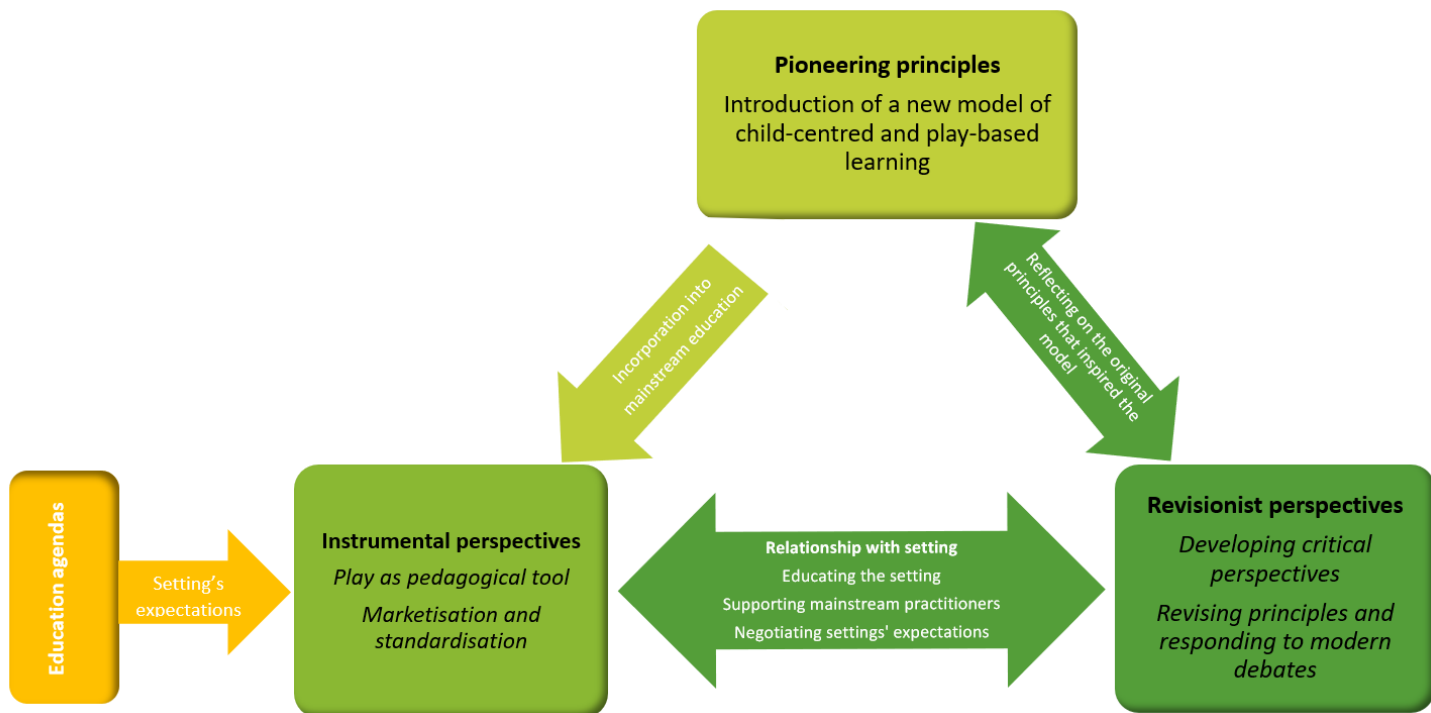


Figure 4. Revised diagram of the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens

Here, the revisionist perspective is represented as a critical and active perspective in the FS approach. The practitioners of this study experienced instrumental pressures and expectations of their practice from their settings, yet were able to soften the influence this had on their pedagogy and children's learning experiences. This demonstrates the practitioners' ability to communicate and initiate a revisionist perspective whilst creating a dialogue between FS and mainstream education through managing instrumental perspectives in practice. The diagram demonstrates an open dialogue and negotiation the practitioners experienced through the arrow pointing to and from instrumental and revisionist perspectives. This reflects the adaptability of revisionism that was a crucial skill for the revisionist Froebelians (Bruce, 2011). It also places revisionism at a level that is achievable and adaptable so that this perspective can be strengthened amongst practitioners' active negotiations between instrumental and revisionist perspectives.

The revised critical lens diagram also includes the orange box representing education agendas influencing the instrumental perspectives. This is not connected to revisionist perspectives to indicate the separation of FS pedagogy from mainstream dominant



discourses. Therefore, the revisionist perspective creates a dialogue through instrumental perspectives with education agendas with intentions to move towards revisionism.

It is also highlighted through this study the importance of engaging critically with the original pedagogical principles of FS. Blind adherence to principles can create barriers for implementing FS practice (Waite and Goodenough, 2018). Thus, revising the pedagogical principles along with appropriate modern debate that strengthens the principles is an important lesson the FS movement can learn from the revisionist Froebelians. This research found that the connection to the original FS principles and modern debate could be strengthened in both literature and the participating practitioners' accounts. Therefore, the arrow going between the pioneering pedagogical principles and the revisionist perspective represents the critical engagement with FS original principles.

### **Limitations**

The timing of the study presented challenges. Gaining access to participants was problematic due to the unpredictable weather conditions followed by social restrictions during the global pandemic (see Chapter 5: *Storms of my own*). This resulted in the small scale of the research as opposed to the ethnography informed, multiple case study approach originally planned. Consequently, generalisability of the study is limited. However, the studies interpretivist approach to qualitative data does not place importance on generalisability but focuses on improving authenticity (McGregor, 2018).

To extend this research, building on the case study approach would provide richer data on the relationship of the FS practitioners and their settings of employment. This relationship became an influential factor in the use of instrumental and revisionist perspectives of FS. Therefore, in future research, it would be interesting to gain the perspective of owners/senior leadership of the settings and other supporting staff involved in FS sessions. This would help the study understand how they shape the context of the setting that FS practitioners interact with and navigate. The case study approach would also provide an opportunity to explore the policies and structures in place in the setting that may influence revisionist and instrumental perspectives to better understand how FS practitioners implement policy within practice. However, as time was limited to gather data in the

settings involved in the study due to interruptions to opportunities for access, this study could not explore this further.

In future research, it would be beneficial for the development of the critical lens to explore the practitioners' opinions of the Instrumental and revisionist perspective of FS. It would be interesting to analyse how practitioners interact with the critical lens through their own reflective diaries to see if it can aid their reflections on their practice. This study used an interpretivist, constructivist approach to understand practitioners experience with regard to developing and analysing the formation of the critical lens. Thus, exploring practitioners' engagement with instrumental and revisionist perspectives would be an interesting next step for validating and exploring the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens.

### **Implications for Literature**

This research analysed the case for revisionist perspectives in the FS approach. Within FS research there is indication of a lack of theorisation underpinning the FS approach which results in an identity crisis of the movement (Leather, 2018; McCree, 2019). This represents similar challenges to identity the Froebelian kindergarten movement faced. The revisionist Froebelian perspective enabled the movement to strengthen its identity and root the approach back to Froebel's philosophy that sparked the movement. Therefore, the revisionist perspective of FS can promote exploration into the FS movements origins and encourage a focus on the original pedagogical principles that have become lost. Part of the problem for the FS movement is its rapid development (Leather, 2018). As a bottom-up movement on a constant upward trajectory, the weakening of the foundation of the movement has gone virtually unnoticed. Promoting a case for revisionism in FS urges FS literature to go back to its roots and revise the principles the foundations of the movement rests on.

There is debate surrounding the dilution of principles as problematic (Leather, 2018) or whether this is part of the approach's contextualisation in English education (Knight, 2018; Waite and Goodenough, 2018). The relationship between FS and mainstream education can be seen as mutually transformational (Kemp, 2020). However, in some cases FS cooperation with mainstream settings has meant not all FS principles are met and there is no indication to improve this from some settings (McCree, 2019). The relationship between FS and

mainstream education needs to be reevaluated. The FS approach must not lose its principles as an alternative approach to education to meet mainstream education norms. Therefore, the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens can add to this discussion. The instrumental perspective explores influences of mainstream education agendas on FS pedagogy which can be used to recognise these influences in discussions of FS alignment with mainstream education in literature. The instrumental concept of FS brings attention to agendas underpinning FS pedagogy to enable these influences to be questioned critically in literature.

### **Implications for practice**

In terms of informing practice, the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens aims to help practitioners understand when their practice is being influenced by mainstream agendas. It is important for practitioners to think critically about the types of practice they engage in. To do this, practitioners need support from research, literature and FS training organisations to recognise the FS original roots that inspired the movement and how this is represented in the FS pedagogical principles. I aim to make the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens more accessible for practitioners through approaching the FSA to feature on their blog and present workshops at their annual conference. Encouraging practitioners to reflect on their FS practice critically is the primary focus for this study's implication for practice. Therefore, the use of questioning can help make the critical lens more engaging for practitioners. Running workshops to introduce practitioners to the concepts of instrumentalism and revisionism in FS, I aim to prompt practitioners to question their practice with the topics, *Am I thinking like an instrumental FS leader?* and *How do I think like a revisionist FS leader?* Other early years practitioner orientated conferences will also be approached, such as the British Early Childhood Education Research Association. The Froebel Trust has published an introduction of this study's exploration of the historical analysis of the English Froebelian kindergarten movement and its similarities to the development of the FS movement on the trust's blog (Bullard, 2022). Therefore, their readership may be interested in the Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens use in modern Froebelian practice.

## Final thoughts

Scholars who write about the FS approach and practitioners that implements FS pedagogy share a passion for the FS movement and its approach to education. Early research argues reasons why education settings should take the approach seriously by promoting the benefits of engaging in FS; benefits that practitioners must see every day. However, the development of FS's popularity has come to include tokenistic practice in FS pedagogy. With the movement's alignment with mainstream education, I fear that FS could become just another trend, coming in and then quickly out of fashion. Ensuring the continuation of the FS approach is what I am passionate about. Through this research, the case for revisionism in the FS approach is analysed as a way FS can move forward with its pedagogical principles intact.

The instrumental perspective of FS could be damaging to the movement in the same way that it was damaging for the Froebelian image. Allowing education agendas to shape play in FS pedagogy and standardise practice contributes to the FS approach's loss of principles and identity as an alternative approach. The revisionist Froebelians salvaged Froebel's kindergartens from the same fate through revising and modernising practice and making Froebel's principles relevant to modern debates that supported his ethos. Through revisionism, FS practitioners can also exercise this critical perspective demonstrated by the revisionist Froebelians. I feel it is time for the FS approach to be more critical about pedagogy, rather than being accepting of tokenism as just the realities of implementing the approach. FS should be more open and critical of practice not meeting the pedagogical principles and seek ways of creating a dialogue towards supporting authentic FS practice. As opposed to aligning the FS movement with mainstream education's instrumental agendas, FS can look towards contemporary issues to support and strengthen the FS ethos, not hinder it. This will create a new dialogue between FS and mainstream education that has a chance to influence change.

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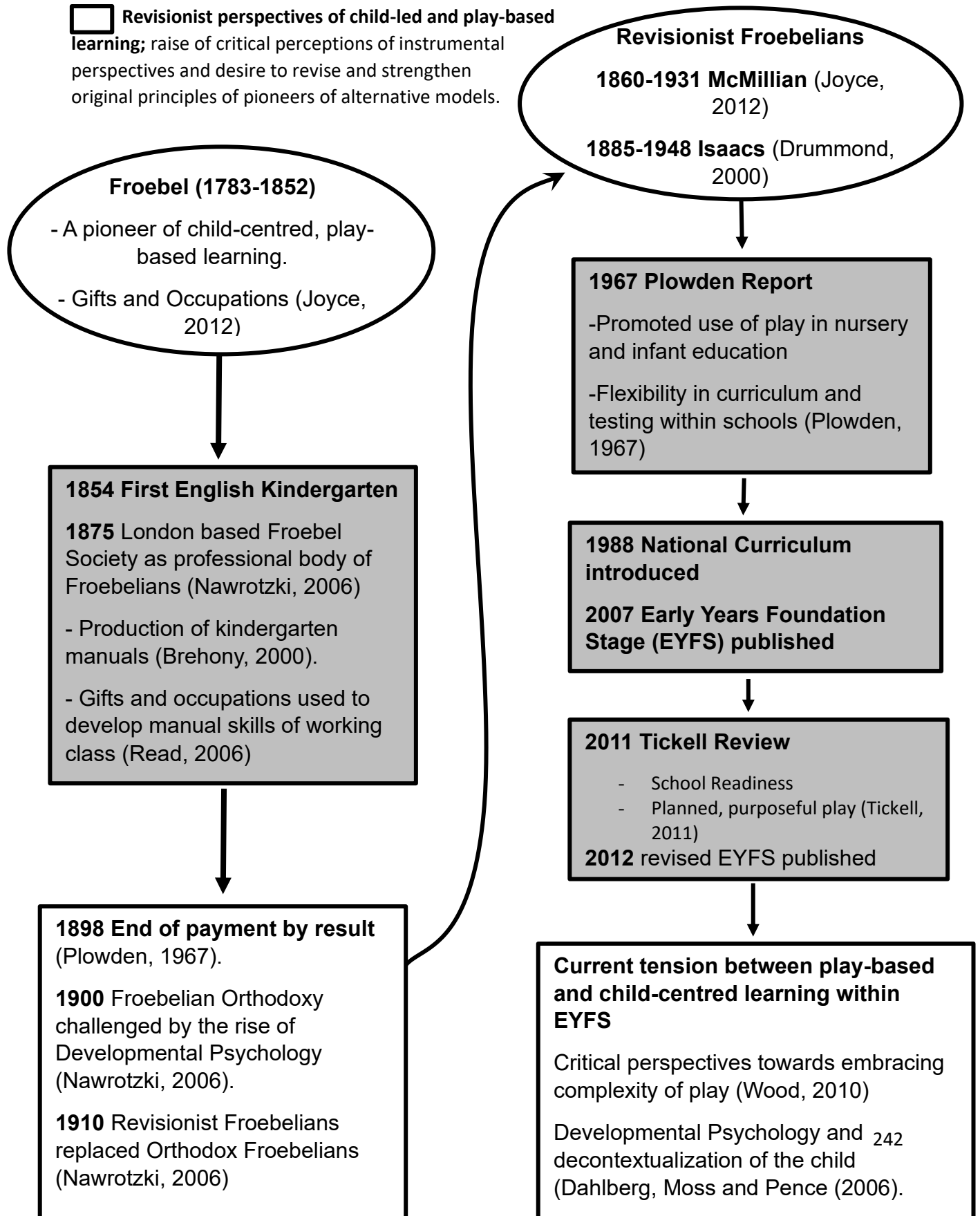
## Appendix 1. Historical Timeline

### Key:

 **Pioneers of child-led and play-based learning;** introduction of alternative models of education.

 **Instrumental perspectives of child-led and play-based learning;** desire to standardise and define alternative models through development of curriculum and ties educational agenda.

 **Revisionist perspectives of child-led and play-based learning;** raise of critical perceptions of instrumental perspectives and desire to revise and strengthen original principles of pioneers of alternative models.



### Froebel (1783-1852)

- A pioneer of child-centred, play-based learning.
- Gifts and Occupations (Joyce, 2012)

### 1854 First English Kindergarten

- 1875 London based Froebel Society as professional body of Froebelians (Nawrotzki, 2006)
- Production of kindergarten manuals (Brehony, 2000).
  - Gifts and occupations used to develop manual skills of working class (Read, 2006)

### 1898 End of payment by result (Plowden, 1967).

1900 Froebelian Orthodoxy challenged by the rise of Developmental Psychology (Nawrotzki, 2006).

1910 Revisionist Froebelians replaced Orthodox Froebelians (Nawrotzki, 2006)

### Revisionist Froebelians

1860-1931 McMillian (Joyce, 2012)

1885-1948 Isaacs (Drummond, 2000)

### 1967 Plowden Report

- Promoted use of play in nursery and infant education
- Flexibility in curriculum and testing within schools (Plowden, 1967)

### 1988 National Curriculum introduced

2007 Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) published

### 2011 Tickell Review

- School Readiness
- Planned, purposeful play (Tickell, 2011)

2012 revised EYFS published

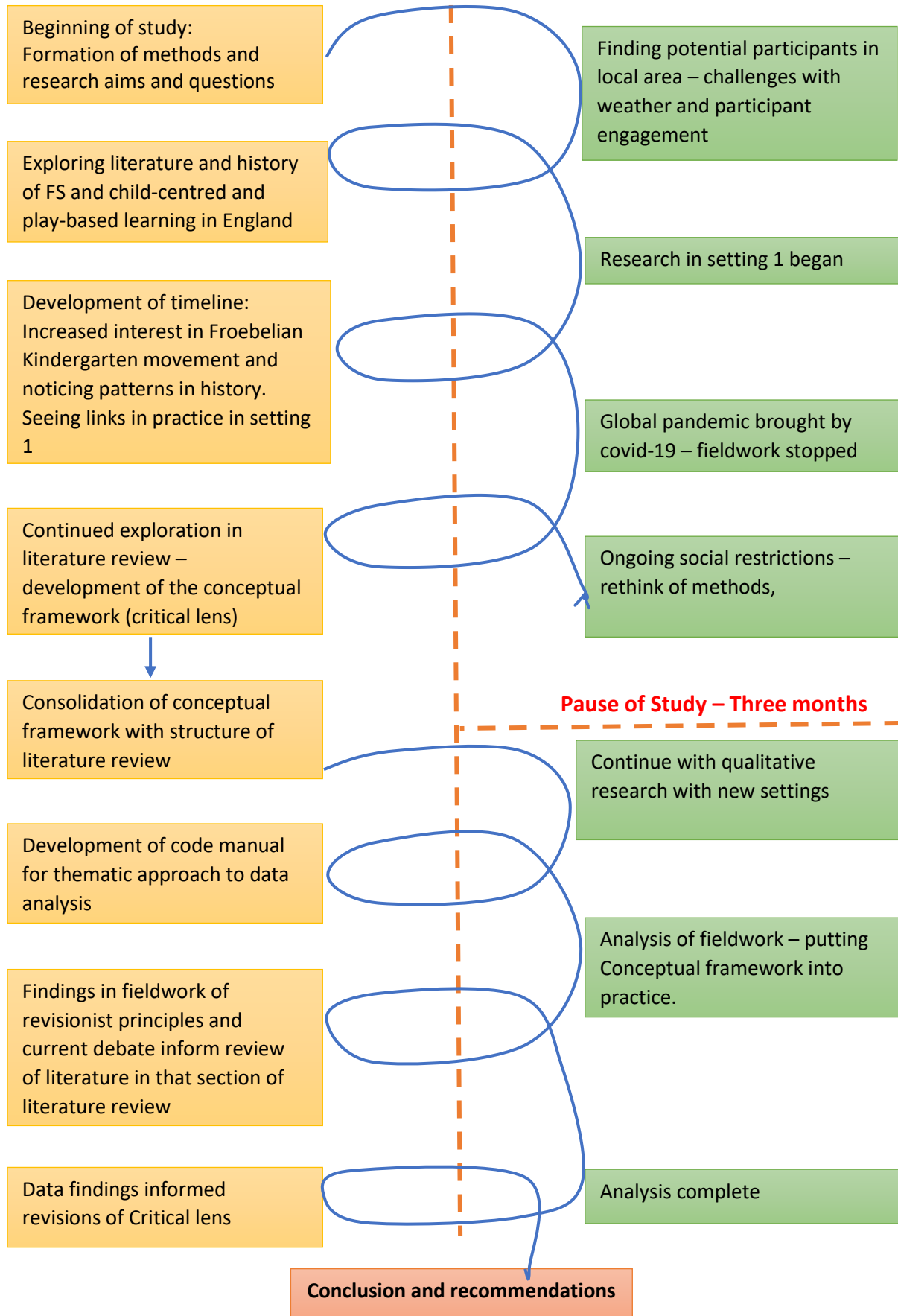
### Current tension between play-based and child-centred learning within EYFS

Critical perspectives towards embracing complexity of play (Wood, 2010)

Developmental Psychology and decontextualization of the child (Dahlberg, Moss and Pence (2006).

## Appendix 2 Theory

## Fieldwork



Appendix 3	Setting 1	Setting 2	Setting 3
Initial meeting	<p>In participants home, very informal.</p> <p>Participant very chatty, open and willing to share experience of FS.</p> <p>Need to be curious to separate information shared in recorded discussion and information shared off record.</p>	<p>Meeting at the school.</p> <p>Participant seems proud to show me around settings and outdoor space. Participant curious of my FS experience and prompts conversation around sharing both our experiences in FS. Need to be aware how much I share with participant to avoid my researcher bias affecting her practice and what she thinks I may want to see her doing.</p>	<p>Day 1- Meeting at the FS site just before sessions starts. Maya was first contact in research, however, appears more reserved to engage in conversation. Lilly appears more open about her background and willing to discuss why she likes FS. Lilly is very interest in my research project and asks questions about it. Need to ensure rapport is built with both Lilly and Maya</p>
Second visit – observation block 1	<p>Conversation flows easily and remains unformal.</p> <p>Susie talks me through her FS session as it unfolds and explains why she arranges the routine this way. She is happy to share her knowledge of the children. Susie appears to talk to me as a fellow Forest Schooler, insider.</p>	<p>Meeting Holly for the second time feels less formal. She appears excited to show me the children in the woods and often comes to tell me what’s going on and if there is something interesting the children are doing. At the end of a session, Holly asks for some advice on a game the children are playing. Feeling conscious about disturbing the naturality of the setting, conversation is diverted to include a TA who also gives suggestion of ideas.</p>	<p>Day 2 – a safeguarding incident occurs before the end of the morning session. Lilly and Maya seem comfortable including me in conversation about the event with the other volunteers. As the afternoon session is cancelled, this gives more time to speak to Lilly and Maya together.</p>
Final visit – observation block 2	<p>Not much has changed in interaction with Susie. Conversation is still unformal with caution and care taken to ensure only using discussions in recorded time.</p>	<p>Holly seems a lot more relaxed and is happy to tell me her idea of merging the age groups. Her view of me as the ‘expert’ seems to have softened as Holly offers me advice about FS practice and useful resources that I could pass on to other FS practitioners starting the approach.</p>	<p>Day 3 – In final interview Maya takes lead in discussion. Both May and Lilly engage in discussion together and seem comfortable with my presence.</p>

#### **Appendix 4. Interview Questions**

1. What interested you in the Forest School movement and how did you decide to get involved?
2. Could you tell me about your day-to-day/weekly routine of working within a Forest School organisation/ as a Forest School leader?
3. What is your role in supporting children's learning within the Forest School approach environment and does this differ to the role of the teacher in mainstream education?
4. Is there an aspect of your practice that you are most proud of?
5. Do you face any challenges within your practice as a Forest School leader?
6. How do you think the Forest School movement has developed and what are your experiences of that as a Forest School leader / organisation?

## **Appendix 5. Key for Data Sets Codes**

Data set codes are used after each direct quote from data. Data codes are formed using the following code.

Letter of season recorded followed by letter of data set: Line number – name of participant

Data set letter glossary:

Field Diary – F

Interview – I

Letter of season:

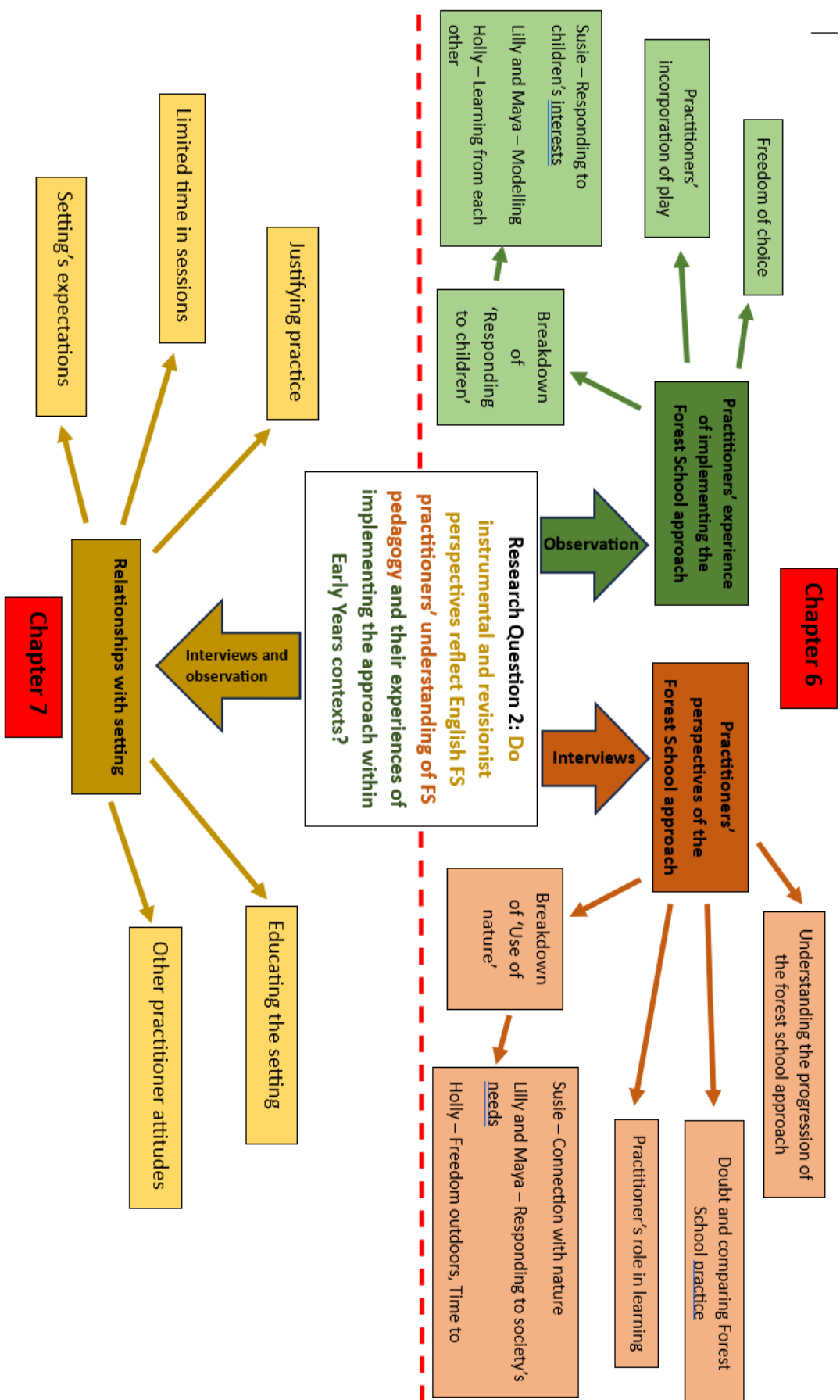
Autumn – A

Winter – W

Summer – S

(No recording in spring)

Appendix 6. Thematic Map



Appendix 7. Enlarged image of the revised Instrumental and Revisionist critical lens

