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Extended Proposal:**Inside out: a case study on the impact of Forest School learning for pupils in a Secondary school specialist SEND class.**

Abstract: Forest School research involving adolescents is notable by its near total absence from the field. Research involving SEND learners in their own right is also limited and there is an apparent lack of conceptual framework or theory underpinning current research. This proposal aims to fill these gaps by using Vygotsky's Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD) to understand to what extent Forest School can be developed to aid engagement for Secondary aged SEND learners struggling to access traditional forms of learning and, if Forest School activities can be as beneficial for adolescent learners as they appear to be for younger children.

Chapter 1: Introduction.

Due to the competitive neoliberal model of schooling in England, teachers are under pressure to teach in standardised ways, with children identified as having Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND) often being left behind, or stigmatised by being seen as 'other' to their supposedly normative peers (Demir and Done, 2022; Douglas, 2013; Tomlinson, 2013). Negative self-identity can develop leading to children feeling disconnected from their school environment (Skrzypiec, 2016) through the emergence of a fixed self-mindset that they are unable to achieve due to their diagnosis (Wagner and Bunn, 2020). Rather than reflecting on how current teaching methods and environments can negatively impact on academic progress and engagement for some children, blame is often placed on the children by others viewing them as deficit or lazy, leading to a negative social construct of disability (Dray, 2009; Tomlinson, 2013; Douglas, 2013; Ellis and Moss, 2014). In my experience, when children at Secondary school are faced with the same forms of literacy intervention utilised in Primary school, such as phonics, or a one size fits all approach to gaining subject knowledge, this can lead to disengagement or apathy.

In my setting, children are often withdrawn from mainstream classes to complete additional intervention, often due to disengagement as they struggle to identify with the curriculum or have difficulties with decoding text, underpinning a negative stereotype of children with SEND being unable to achieve due the promotion of one

type of learning practice (Carvahlo and Skipper, 2020). However, this ignores the fact that learning is not an autonomous skill but a socially and culturally constructed practice, and the idea that interventions such as phonics are the solver of all literacy difficulties, particularly in a Secondary school, can be viewed as very naïve (Ellis and Moss, 2014).

The proposed research setting is a large, mixed sex Secondary school in England set within an urban area. The area has higher-than-average deprivation, with significant rates of child disadvantage, including those requiring Free School Meals, much higher when compared with national average. Progress across all academic subjects is also much lower than national average and SEND diagnosis is very high, with Speech, Language and/or Communication (SLCN) difficulties and Social Emotional and/or Mental (SEMH) difficulties being the highest. There is also a significant number of children transitioning from Primary schools with much lower literacy levels than expected nationally and they can struggle to engage fully at Secondary level due to this. Socio-economic status can have a significant impact on how well children learn to read and children from more disadvantaged backgrounds can continue to struggle as they are less likely to have access to learning resources at home. However, if schools can find creative ways to engage children there is the chance that some of the effects of social economic status could be mitigated (Ellis and Moss, 2014).

The idea for this research proposal developed due to the ongoing challenges that some of the SEND children I work with face when accessing learning, leading to long term disengagement. This has led me to reflect on how alternate practice can be advocated and utilised in ways that can build children's self-esteem surrounding their learning and move ideas surrounding SEND learners away from a negative discourse to something more positive. I considered a proposal involving Forest School after undertaking an external Forest School training programme, supported by my setting, with the aim that I would carry out activities on school site as part of an enrichment programme. The initial plan for the proposal was to focus on gender stereotype and the benefits that Forest School type activities can have on attainment in male learners. However, as my readings progressed to include the benefits of Forest School towards academic attainment (e.g., Otte et al., 2019, Scott and Boyd, 2014), I began to reflect on the challenges I face in my day-to-day practice with

regards to a range of SEND learners, not just those identifying as male, disengaging from learning as they struggle to access the curriculum via traditional classroom practice. This has been exacerbated by the Covid 19 pandemic due to social isolation, with access to Forest School activities found to mitigate the trauma and lack of face-to-face learning for vulnerable children (Couper-Kenney and Riddell, 2021).

Forest School, with its graduated, child led approach to learning can be seen as linking with Vygotsky's Zones of Proximal Development (Blackham et al. 2021; Streelasky et al. 2019). However, although previous reviews shows that Forest school can traditionally be seen as positively aiding emotional wellbeing (e.g., Garden and Downes, 2023), I wish to go deeper and use ZPD as a conceptual framework to evaluate to what extent this can help the development of Forest School activities to promote engagement specifically for Secondary SEND learners.

Vygotsky viewed SEND through a social constructionist lens and he believed that alternate practices should be implemented to aid children to take the 'detours' they need to develop (Rodina, 2006).

There is a distinct lack of Forest School research undertaken with Secondary aged learners, with the majority being carried out with pre-school or Primary aged children (Barrable and Arvanitis, 2018). Therefore, it is important for more research to be carried out with Secondary aged children to ascertain if it can positively support them as much as it appears to with Primary aged children. For research in this area to evolve it is also important for it to begin using some form of conceptual framework, which appears to be lacking in most existing research, to aid understanding of child development through Forest School practice using the framework as a way to develop activities to encourage engagement. It is also important as it could further inform our understanding of how we can aid young people identified as SEND to positively progress via Forest School practice, which is again limited for this age group in the literature, offering a rationale for such activities to become a useful part of regular school practice as current methods for some of these learners in my setting is clearly not working. As described by a child accessing Forest School 'I don't have ADHD when I'm out in the woods' (Forest School Association, 2023a).

Chapter 2: Literature Review.

Despite its increasing popularity, there continues to be a narrow availability of Forest School literature for review, especially in England, for the themes this proposal wishes to explore. In their own recent review of current literature, Garden and Downes (2023) highlight this lack in England, particularly with regards to the interrogation of deeper, more abstract, themes outside of traditional themes such as play and social skills. This is echoed by Leather (2018), who evaluates Forest School literature as being undertheorised, with no current agreed theory as to why access to the outdoors may improve children's academic learning (Quibell et al, 2017), thus making it in danger of marketisation and distortion of its original purposes (Leather, 2018). Indeed, some examples of early research, such as O'Brien and Murray (2006), although still highly informative due to their large participative cohort in comparison to some more recent studies leading to a comprehensive report offering wide and detailed evidence data, was funded by the Forestry Commission who have a commercial interest in their Forest School programmes being successful for all. Perhaps due to this narrowness of availability, in a critique of Garden and Downes I would argue that they have also fallen into the existing pattern of reviewing the same general themes that have been historically reviewed, rather than interrogating the literature more deeply for emergent themes or highlighting under researched areas.

Garden and Downes's review covered five key themes: risk, development through nature, child development through constructivism and play, self-esteem and wellbeing and relationships. Through my own review I was able to identify a similar cross section and therefore, due to the dearth of current literature available, inevitably there is *some* crossover of the literature reviewed and the themes, as several papers were read as part of previous module study. However, unlike Garden and Downes I have also included research from outside of the UK to find themes in acknowledgment of my research proposal.

This review, then, will explore four key themes that are pertinent to my proposed research questions exploring to what extent Forest School activities would benefit Secondary aged SEND children: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, self-determination and self-concept, academic attainment and literacy and, Secondary school aged children. This is not to ignore the themes raised by Garden and Downes, as those highlighted have a high level of significance and are common

themes raised within the majority of the literature available in England. However, by hopefully shining a lens on some alternative themes, this not only connects directly to my research proposal, but also offers a wider view of the research available to inform future practice.

The search for literature was carried out primarily using the Open University resource library and Google Scholar. Research Gate as also used but kept to a minimum with the need to ensure that papers were peer reviewed. To access appropriate literature, I used the key terms 'Forest School' and 'outdoor learning', later including the term 'wilderness schooling' as in some cases this was used as a synonym for Forest School (e.g., Quibell et al., 2017). It was clear that terms were interchangeable and any future literature review needs to take this into account, along with the fact that 'outdoor learning' does not always mean Forest School type activities, but purely completing a traditional lesson outdoors.

A brief History of Forest School.

As a consequence of the omission of certain themes from previous reviews and the general lack of abundance of Forest School literature, at this stage of the review I am taking the opportunity to briefly discuss the history of Forest School. This offers a vehicle to discuss tensions that have arisen since its conception which may provide some understanding of how research has developed as it has.

Forest School first emerged in Sweden in the 1950s, initially through the work of Frohm, recognising that children were becoming disconnected from nature, a fundamental part of Scandinavian life (Scott and Vare, 2020). This led to the introduction of Skogsmulle schools, for 5- and 6-year-olds, with practice centred around stories, songs and characters based on the outdoors, with other countries such as Finland and Denmark later following suit (Scott and Vare, 2020).

Forest School as a formal named practice in the UK (England) came about in 1993 when a group of practitioners from Bridgewater College in Somerset observed forest-based kindergartens in Denmark and recognised the positive development of children through outdoor play (Scott and Vare, 2020). Despite the UK having a rich history of connection to the outdoors for children, for example the Scout movement, this is the point where outdoor learning as a more organised practice in England that

drew focus away from goals and achievement and towards a more holistic framework was introduced (Scott and Vare, 2020).

Despite this, there are cultural differences that still exist and Forest School as a practice is very different in England as compared to other countries (including devolved UK nations). This is due to our more risk averse, results-based curriculum meaning that time spent outside is minimised educationally, especially as children become older, as opposed to the wider access that Scandinavian children have to the outdoors (Scott and Vare, 2020). Children in countries such as Finland commence more formal education later than their English counterparts, with policy recognising that informal learning practices are of high value to a child's development (Oates, 2023). The curriculum in England however, is largely based around competitive, neoliberal national standardisation (Demir and Done, 2022), with the attempts to introduce more informal learning practices such as Forest School losing out to dominant demand to teach a defined, target-based curricula in an attempt to improve standards of academic education from an early age (Harris, 2017). Alternate activities such as Forest School are therefore seen as outside the realm of what is considered proper learning and instead used as a reward or short-term enrichment activity (Waite and Goodenough, 2018).

It is evident that the devolved nations of the UK have invested more into its implementation, particularly in Wales through the Wales Council for Outdoor Learning, who actively promote and support a wide variety of research in relation to Forest School and a yearly outdoor learning week to engage schools and young people (Wales Council for Outdoor Learning, 2023). Scotland followed suit with FEI Scotland appointing a Forest School Coordinator in 2011 (Learning in the Leaves, 2023) but this is something far less promoted in England and, despite there being a voluntary Forest School Association for individual groups to access (Forest School Association, 2023), there remains no cohesive English national structure as in Wales and Scotland. In addition, although Forest School in England is increasing in popularity and increased access to the outdoors is being more endorsed, it has never received the level of national funding in England as seen elsewhere (McCree et al., 2018 cited in Garden and Downes, 2023), with schools having to take funds from existing budgets that are already stretched, as with my setting.

Finally, reflecting back on the cultural element, historically there has emerged a degree of tension between Forest School traditionalists who feel that practice should be unrelated to any form of academic learning and those who view outdoor learning as a bridge to improving progress in academic learning (Whincup et al., 2021). There is of course the danger of practice being distilled into a yet more target-oriented set of standards and progress tracking, with conflicts in expectations, pedagogy and values between staff attempting to take a more holistic approach and senior leaders and/or agencies such as Ofsted who demand statistical data as evidence of high educational standards (Whincup et al., 2021).

Theme 1: Special Educational Needs and Disabilities.

As discussed by Toal (2022) Forest School can aid children with SEND to develop key life skills, such as co-operative play, communication and development of friendships and, children with physical disabilities to feel more included in the outdoor environment. However, although Garden and Downes highlight the theme of SEND within the literature, they fail to include this area as a distinct category in their review perhaps due to the lack of literature, instead choosing to weave this into their review of other areas. Despite being narrow, comfortably slotting into the general themes raised by Garden and Downes, I would argue that this is a missed opportunity to critique what is available and demonstrate the need for more research in this area.

Children with SEND appear in the literature in one of two ways; either as part of wider research, an important part of the focus groups but not the sole focus (O' Brien and Murray, 2006; Otte et al., 2019), or as the primary focus with behaviours that need to be 'solved' or emotional needs that are met through access to Forest School (Bradley and Male, 2017 cited in Garden and Downes, 2023; Freidman et al., 2022; Richardson, 2014). Despite research being available, nevertheless it is still limited, with practitioners potentially having concerns surrounding competence and capability of certain participants which could lead to risks to physical safety (Button and Wild, 2019). Therefore, although not directly discussed within the research reviewed, this could connect to teacher perceptions of children with SEND, with children with additional support needs being seen as less capable than their peers dependent on adult subjectivities (Bruggink et al., 2016) and therefore more of a risk when

accessing Forest School activities. Such views ignore the positive literature describing very young children, sometimes with SEND, accessing Forest School, and the only way to show that activities are safe and of a high level of benefit is to carry out activities despite the perceived risks.

A key group of children that Forest School appears to support is those with Speech, Language and/or Communication Needs, with or without co-morbidity of need. Both Richardson (2014) and O'Brien and Murray (2006) highlight the increased confidence with speech and willingness to communicate verbally by the children observed by the researchers or the practitioners working with them as programmes progressed, which is attributed to an increase in self-esteem. However, although the research identifies reasons as to why self-esteem may increase, for example increased knowledge and understanding (O'Brien and Murray, 2006) and increased sense of power due to the autonomy that Forest School brings (Richardson, 2014), there is perhaps a need to delve deeper to highlight why verbal communication is improved in this environment. As discussed by Oates (2023) there is a misconception that in countries where children start school later, they spend their first years 'just playing', often in an outdoor environment. This ignores the importance of informal conversational opportunities where children are learning new words without the pressure of this being formally measured (Oates, 2023). Therefore, it may have been beneficial for researchers to include more deeply how informal oracy development can aid communication in more formal contexts.

The other area that is often highlighted is for children with SEND that may have behavioural and/or social interaction difficulties, most commonly those with Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). Bradley and Male (2017 cited in Garden and Downes, 2023) highlighted that participants experienced positive outcomes both academically and socially, with positive feedback from not just the children but also from parents and teachers. They also recognised that some children may struggle verbally and therefore offered the opportunity for them to draw their emotions in picture form. Despite Freidman et al. (2022) concurring with this, they do raise a note of caution highlighting that those children with ASD, already perhaps struggling with sensory overload or emotional regulation, can have their engagement impacted by things such as poor weather conditions and mood prior to the activity. This is a view echoed by Tiplady and Menter (2021) who recognise that for some, Forest School may be

too unstructured and offer too much choice leading to feelings of being frustrated or overwhelmed, and in some cases refusal to engage. Forest School as it stands as a practice is clearly not for everyone and we need to consider how or if activities can be developed to be even more inclusive. Therefore, as discussed by Bradley and Male (2017 cited in Garden and Downes, 2023), there still needs to be far more research carried out with SEND children.

Theme 2: Self Determination Theory and self-concept.

As discussed previously there is the view that Forest School research can be seen as undertheorised and, although there is evidence of the literature naming theorists whose arguments connect to Forest School as a practice such as Vygotsky, Dewey and Freire (Blackham et al., 2021; Streelasky, 2019; Mann, 2018; Davidson, 2001), this appears as a way to add merit rather than utilising any of their theories in action as a framework. Research by Barrable and Arvanitis (2018) and Freidman et al. (2022) have specifically used Self Determination Theory as a lens through which to research Forest School practice, with Freidman et al. of particular relevance to this research proposal as it relates to children with Autism who may struggle with current schooling practices.

Children with SEND can develop a negative, fixed mindset surrounding perception of their own ability leading to lower self-esteem and poor self-concept (Wagner and Bunn, 2020). They can develop the perception that they are in some way different as their gaps in learning increase and believe that they *are* their diagnosis, unable to do anything without adult support (Carvalho and Skipper, 2020). SEND pupils can then feel disconnected with their environment, increasing disengagement (Skrzypiec et al., 2016), particularly as traditional methods of learning have not always succeeded, with the underlying subjectivities of teaching staff of SEND learners being less able also potentially impacting (Bruggink et al. 2016). In addition, there is also the potential for children living in an area of low socio-economic status, as with my setting, having an even poorer concept of their ability, or those outside of this area of society blaming learners themselves, attributing any difficulty to laziness rather than disadvantage (Tomlinson, 2013). It is important to note however that this may not be the case for all SEND learners and, as discussed by Wagner and Bunn (2020) there needs to be more research to explore the perspectives of SEND pupils to

understand the range of factors that can affect self-concept. Nevertheless, it is apparent that progress in learning can improve alongside increased autonomy leading to a positive self-esteem as learners feel more competent in their own ability (Skrzypiec et al., 2016; Wagner and Bunn, 2020).

Self Determination Theory promotes wellbeing through three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence and relatedness, supporting a learner's inherent motivation to learn and focusing on their intrinsic tendencies rather than through an environment of over control, over challenge, rewards, punishments and exclusion (Barrable and Arvanitis, 2018). Although, not a practical study Barrable and Arvanitis (2018) argue that because Forest School aims to promote areas such as autonomy, competency, collaborative learning and self-esteem through self-initiated learning activities, Self Determination Theory is ideally suited to offer an evidence-based approach for research. This also links to the idea that internalised self-concept can be reviewed by the learner as they potentially relate their new found knowledge to their ability within the classroom (Barrable and Arvanitis, 2018, Skrzypiec et al. 2016). However, although Forest School practice can link to Self Determination Theory through the constructivist approach, creating meaning by interaction with environment and other participants as well as relatedness and autonomy (Barrable and Arvanitis, 2018), there is still little active research in this area, with only one paper by Freidman et al. (2022) using this as a framework, as Barrable and Arvanitis offer a framework to be potentially utilised rather than actually carrying out research. Whilst, Freidman et al. found that Self Determination Theory did offer a useful framework to their research which concurs with the reasoning of Barrable and Arvanitis, what it also showed was that self-determination does not always lead to positive self-concept for some learners. Indeed, whilst parents and practitioners felt that Forest School did somewhat positively affect the mood of the Autistic learners taking part, it was also found by the researchers that some actions could be negatively self-determined, in turn leading to negative behaviours and feelings of negativity by the learners towards themselves (Freidman et al., 2022). Therefore, although Self Determination Theory as framework is useful, it is important that more practical research utilising this is carried out.

Theme 3: Academic attainment and literacy.

To raise literacy as a theme perhaps flies in the face of the traditionalists mentioned earlier, however it is important to raise as in my experience disengagement can often come about due to difficulties with traditional literacy skills being a barrier to accessing the curriculum. Although the majority of research reviewed does mention progression in cognitive ability, over time, some research has emerged specifically relating to increased academic performance overall (Scott and Boyd, 2014; Quibell et al., 2017; McCree et al., 2018 cited in Garden and Downes, 2023) and specifically focusing on Literacy (Otte et al., 2019; Streelasky, 2019). However, this is mostly ignored as a theme by Garden and Downes despite reviewing some of the same literature (e.g., McCree et al., 2018). As some children identified as SEND struggle to make progress within the current curriculum in England, including in literacy with the Government preferred way of learning to read being phonics, despite its failings for some children (Ellis and Moss, 2013), perhaps it is time to think of new ways to utilise Forest School as a practice that fits with our current education system. The sessions could still offer that same freedom and autonomy they always have, and academic practice need not be included within the sessions, but as children become more confident the research appears to show that there can be a significant impact on learning outside of the Forest School arena.

Although not described as a Forest School activity, coming under the banner of explorative fieldwork, Scott and Boyd's (2014) comparative research allowing children to explore nature to inform science assessment shares its nature-based activity with Forest School practice. Comparing a group which was taken out into the field and a group who remained classroom based, results showed a greater improvement in assessment scores for the learners who went out into the field than those who learned via text books only, demonstrating how relevance and immediacy (Mann, 2018) and funds of knowledge and identity from outside the classroom can aid learning (Esteban-Guitart and Moll, 2014). What is more, as the learner's knowledge and enthusiasm grew so did their willingness to write more extensively about their findings, demonstrating an impact on literacy levels as they learned new vocabulary (Scott and Boyd, 2014). This study links to a later study by McCree et al. (2018 cited in Garden and Downes, 2023), directly related to Forest School research with children termed as disadvantaged, which emphasised a clear positive impact on academic engagement, and in turn attainment, as they brought their new knowledge

base into the classroom. As mentioned earlier, this highlights how increased funds of knowledge brought from outside the classroom manifests as funds of identity, whereby the children tentatively moved from a negative, to more positive, sense of their own ability, having previously felt at a disadvantage to their peers (McCree et al., 2018 cited in Garden and Downes, 2023).

Despite being carried out with much younger children, there are papers that link directly to improvement literacy attainment. Quibell et al. (2017), much like Scott and Boyd, completed a comparative study between groups who accessed outdoor based activities and groups who completed classroom-based literacy learning only totalling 223 children aged 8-11 years across nine schools, focusing on reading, writing, science and maths. Information regarding attainment levels was taken from existing baseline assessment, with an exit assessment as well as interim assessments each week. Following the research, data showed that there had been a steady increase in attainment levels, with progression at the same rate several weeks following access, which may be due to the targeted nature of each subject which ran much like a school timetable, with focus on each targeted area (Quibell et al., 2017). However, it is this fixed nature and timetabling, more akin to an in-school set regime of subjects that opens this study up for criticism. Forest School by its very nature is about freedom and autonomy, with children discovering new knowledge and ideas which improves their self-confidence, transferring skills to other environments, with adults learning alongside and recognising children as competent and knowledgeable (Barrable and Arvanitis, 2018), rather than as empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge by the more knowledgeable adult (Freire, 2002). Although, children's attainment may improve with access to outdoor learning, they shouldn't *know* that this is the case, otherwise we are in danger of replicating a model that is not working for some children by merely reproducing what already exists albeit in a more practical outdoor setting.

Otte et al. (2019) and Streelasky (2019) offer research which is much closer to the traditional nature of Forest School and although both take literacy attainment levels before and after research, there is no timetabled regime just purely access to nature. However, both studies support the apparent positive impact on cognitive learning in literacy that Quibell et al. identified. Research was carried out over a much longer period for both studies, with Streelasky 8 months and Otte et al. a full academic year,

in comparison to Quibell et al's. intensified timetable of 6 weeks. This offers a direct comparison between the 'hare and tortoise' approaches to learning described by McCree et al., (2018 cited in Garden and Downes, 2023) showing that a less intensive academic approach can be just as impactful, with McCree et al's study carried out over three years. Furthermore, although Streelasky's study only included 15 children and Otte et al. had more with 20 classes across 15 schools, with 13 parallel comparative non outdoor nature classes, both identify an improvement in literacy via multi-model text expression and reading respectively. It is perhaps a reflection of the cultural differences mentioned earlier, with Streelasky's research taking place in a densely forested area of Canada, where being in nature is highly valued and Otte et al. in Denmark with the outdoor Udeskole, compared with Quibell et al. which was carried out in England with its pressures of measurable academic standards at the fore. Indeed, in British Columbia, the area of Canada where Streelasky completed her research, the Ministry of Education changed the curriculum in 2015 prior to the research, recognising the need for multi-modality of teaching.

What all the studies show, is that by children having access to a natural, freer environment it opens up learning in creative and collaboratively meaningful ways, showing that when their competency and agency are valued children's academic attainment improves as they wish to demonstrate their new knowledge in multi model ways (McCree et al. 2018 cited in Garden and Downes, 2023; Streelasky, 2019; Barrable and Arvanitis, 2018).

Theme 4: Secondary school aged children.

When interrogating the literature with regards to the age of children accessing Forest School, work with Secondary aged children is notable by its near total absence with Barrable and Arvanitis (2018) recognising this critically, stating that although Forest School is suitable for all children it is 'overwhelmingly' utilised with younger children (pp. 42). Although the absence of Forest School literature with regards to Secondary aged children is not surprising in the England, given the pressures of expected neoliberal teaching methods (Demir and Done, 2022) to secure increased attainment levels, it is surprising that there is a lack from other countries such as Denmark with their Udeskole tradition which aims to implement outdoor learning for children up

until the age of 16 (Waite et al., 2016). Although more in the mainstream in Denmark, the fact that Danish teachers report the same barriers to teaching Forest School as those in the England, for example lack of outdoor space, a crowded curriculum and danger of physical risk (Waite et al., 2016; Harris, 2017; Button and Wild, 2019; Shume and Blatt, 2019; Whincup et al., 2021), dispels the misconception that children in Scandinavian countries have unlimited access to nature-based activities regardless of age (Oates, 2023). It is important however to assess the literature, or lack of, available relating to Secondary aged children, due to the topic of this research proposal.

During the search for literature only three papers were identified as directly involving Secondary aged learners; Manner et al (2021), Mann (2018) and Davidson (2001). In addition, there was also a cross-over in age range between younger and slightly older learners by Otte et al. (2019) with the inclusion of children up to the age of 13 years in their Forest School literacy research. The inclusion of Davidson's paper, although now quite dated, is due to the lack of alternate research availability, but still offers a valid point of caution relating to Forest School activities successfully carrying over into other areas of life and education for older children due to the lack of research in this area.

Unlike research with younger children where it is carried out with mixed sex groups, apart from Otte et al., the other research papers have been carried out with boys or girls separately. There is no reasoning offered regarding this apart from Manner et al. believing that girls may feel more open talking away from peers, particularly surrounding sensitive subjects. However, whilst it is important for young people to feel comfortable in expressing their thoughts, there is the question as to whether this is limiting their social worlds, with one of the aims of Forest School to broaden social interactions.

For both adolescent boys and girls, the authors argue that Forest School improves social skills and emotional wellbeing in areas such as self-esteem and confidence, with activities offered seeming to have more relevance to their lives e.g., outdoor cooking and wood craft and, therefore, positively impacting on participants understanding of their own ability (Manner et al., 2021; Mann 2018). Manner et al. alludes to improved self-concept that could support in school learning with one

participant stating that they were more creative than they thought and another stating that they had hope for their ability to regulate their behaviour. In addition, Manner et al. infer that Forest School can also improve cognitive function and complement traditional class learning but conversely offer no solution to how this can be achieved long term. In addition, although Mann offers a concise argument that boys would be more engaged if schools incorporated outdoor learning into mainstream teaching, this is done by reviewing other literature and hypothesising the impact, rather than an active study, which is a missed opportunity to carry out actual research to prove the theory. Davidson also argues that it is dubious to try and measure this in connection to improving in school learning as this can be very much in the moment of outdoor learning.

With regards to participation, whilst Otte et al. had access to the largest cohort, therefore offering the most comprehensive evidence that Forest School has a positive impact on Secondary aged learners, it is important to highlight that out of the remaining three papers Manner et al. and Davidson completed work with only 9 and 3 participants respectively and for Mann the paper was a hypothetical offering. Although Manner et al's. work appears successful in the fact that it underpins other research by those with younger children regarding positive impact on emotional wellbeing, Davidson may be right in his caution when it comes to Forest School skills due to his use of such a small group.

There is, then, a distinct gap in the research available with Secondary aged children that this proposal will hopefully in some way inform, so that the positive outcomes that access to Forest School can bring both academically and emotionally can be acknowledged at all stages of learning (Waite et al., 2016).

Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework.

Vygotsky, particularly his Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD), has been linked to Forest School activities in previous research. However, this has been to show how certain theorists link with practice to add rationale and weight to the positive findings of the research, rather than as an underpinning framework and any research where Vygotsky is mentioned is in relation to pre-school or Primary aged children (e.g., Blackham et al., 2021; Streelasky, 2019). Although it can be argued that there is as yet not enough literature pertaining to adolescents, it is disappointing that a linking

conceptual framework is largely overlooked. Apart from a brief mention of Dewey by Davidson (2001) and Mann (2018), there is no conceptual theoretical linking to adolescent development which could enrich our understanding of educational engagement. Indeed, my second research question (To what extent can Vygotsky's theory of Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD) support development of Forest School activities to enable SEND children to be more engaged?) emerged by identifying this lack, leading to me read more deeply about ZPD and Vygotsky's views surrounding SEND learners, identifying a clear link between the two, that previous research has failed to do.

Although ZPD is most often connected to early stages of development in children, Vygotsky identified that there is development across lifespan and the principle of social collaboration described by him via ZPD is present in all stages of human development, with individuals acquiring new skills and knowledge throughout their lives via knowledgeable others (Eun, 2018). In addition, despite literature relating to Vygotsky's view of SEND being limited and, therefore dated, it is important that it is included when discussing ZPD and Forest School as it reflects that *all* children are able to progress given the right circumstance, with disability seen through a lens of social construction (Bøttcher and Dammeyer, 2012; Rodina, 2006; Gindis, 1995). This is an area of theory that has been somewhat overlooked in comparison to Vygotsky's other work (Rodina, 2006) but offers insight into what is possible for SEND learners with regards to progress if offered holistic, appropriately scaffolded activities. It may be that certain language used by Vygotsky such as 'defect', 'aberration', 'disorder' and 'abnormal' (Rodina, 2006), is somewhat unpalatable for a contemporary audience, hence it being under explored in current literature, but this overlooks the fact Vygotsky felt that it is society that underpins disability (Bøttcher and Dammeyer, 2012). Indeed, Vygotsky argued that additional needs such as supposed speech and language difficulties are exacerbated under traditional classroom learning conditions, which causes a secondary socio-cultural need due to distorted social connections, (Bøttcher and Dammeyer, 2012; Rodina, 2006; Gindis, 1995), further underpinning a deficit discourse as children are then seen as unable (Bruggink et al., 2016). Vygotsky also identified that cognitive development is not independently constructed by children but is mediated by adults via social

interactions (Bøttcher and Dammeyer, 2012; Rodina, 2006), therefore only a truly differentiated environment that adapts to the child using modified and alternative teaching methods rather than vice versa, will the child be able to progress in their psychological development (Gindis, 1995). The issue therefore is not the child's disability but the incongruence between that and supposed cultural norms, with schools often struggling to support children exhibiting supposed atypical development, leading to some learners being unable to participate without intensive support (Bøttcher and Dammeyer, 2012). Therefore, this proposal will aim to investigate to what extent ZPD can help us to develop Forest School activities to support engagement in Secondary aged children identified as SEND. Over time, although literature has shown that Forest School is of benefit to children with identified SEND due to the positive impact on their self-esteem (e.g., O'Brien and Murray, 2009; Richardson, 2014; Bradley and Male, 2017; Otte et al. 2019; Toal, 2022; Freidman et al. 2022), there has been no link to educational engagement to support attainment.

Educational assessment in England with regards to children exhibiting supposed deficit, for example as in my experience working with Educational Psychologists, has been hugely influenced by Piaget's theory of development, with children expected to reach certain stages of development by a fixed point in age (Babakr et al. 2019; Lourenço, 2016). Nevertheless, Piaget has been more recently criticised for ignoring cultural and social factors that aid cognitive development and over or under estimating the ability and capacity in both infants and adolescents (Babakr et al., 2019), both issues that can underpin deficit discourse. Piaget voiced that he had no interest in the individual and that difference between individuals is far less instructive than understanding general mechanisms, cognitive function and intelligence (Piaget, 1971 cited in Lourenço, 2016). He believed that on reaching adolescence children should be fully meta cognitive and self-regulating in thought and action (Babakr et al. 2019; Fox and Riconscente, 2008), which again could lead to negative deficit discourse as children of all ages become increasingly able to manage their own risks learning and behaviour *over time* rather than at a fixed point, which Forest School can facilitate (Waite and Goodenough, 2018).

This view of development as fixed is very different to Vygotsky's ZPD, which recognises development in an individual as part of the social zone, with the individual

'borrowing' the knowledge and skills from a more knowledgeable other, for example an adult or more competent peer, in order to work towards completing a task independently through internalisation of visual practical demonstration and verbal discourse (Eun, 2018). Unlike Piaget, Vygotsky recognises social collaboration and culture as vital to an individual's development. Rather than being superior, the adult or more competent peer is seen as important to learning by using scaffolding as a tool to facilitate learning through encouragement, dialogue and demonstration, so that the child can move to the next stage, rather than dictating what the child should do (Eun, 2018). The use of the word 'zone' by Vygotsky denotes that development can be seen as continual rather than as a point on a scale, allowing us to view learning as a gradual, autonomous, agentic process, with individual human mental function developed via sociogenesis (Eun, 2018). Therefore, ZPD can be interpreted in the following ways: the distance between individualised performance and social performance, the difference between understood and active knowledge, with understood knowledge being acquired through instructional teaching methods and active informal social interactions, and the distance between individual and societal activity (Eun, 2018).

Forest School can be seen to provide opportunities for learners to be supported via ZPD underpinning practice due to its child led ethos, (Blackham et al., 2021) allowing children to develop their knowledge and understanding of the world through exploration (Toal, 2022) and by directing their own learning via process not outcome (Blackham et al., 2021). The aim of adults delivering Forest School is to facilitate learning opportunities rather than directive teaching, initially taking the role of what Vygotsky would describe as the knowledgeable other but then attempting to consciously share power with learners, allowing children opportunities to take the lead and teach peers as the knowledgeable other themselves, utilising practical skills and collaborative verbal and non-verbal dialogue to provide autonomy and recognise competency and agency in child participants (Barrable and Arvanitis, 2019). Due to concerns surrounding meeting deadlines for progress and ensuring that children are provided with specific defined knowledge to meet limited assessment regimes (Waite et al., 2016; Barrable and Arvanitis, 2018; Waite and Goodenough, 2018), confinements within classroom can hinder by presenting a barrier to peer interaction and sharing of ideas (Quibell et al., 2017). This can then be seen to impede

development for some children, particularly in adolescents presenting with apparent SEND needs, as they have not progressed in the same ways as their peers under the one size fits all Piaget model of development and, when they are not meeting the cognitive requirements of formal schooling being labelled as unable and as deficit (Tomlinson, 2013). Forest School in connection with ZPD however recognises that all children are able to progress both psychologically and cognitively by learning new skills and language under the right context, environment and pace for them, particularly those disengaged from learning (Quibell et al. 2017; Barrable and Arvanitis, 2018; Waite and Goodenough, 2018) by allowing children to gather what *they* need from the Forest School (Tiplady and Menter, 2021). For Vygotsky, informal conversational discourse, be it verbal or non-verbal, via gesture, body language or play, are vital for a child to progress (Holzman, 2018), which access to Forest School can aid, through language that is inquisitive, open ended and not directive, acknowledging perspective and interests to support development (Barrable and Arvanitis, 2019).

Oracy has become a recent buzzword, but it has enabled more focused research in the area, which recognises that it is just as, or more, important as reading and written literacy, with language being vital to the acquisition of other forms of literacy (Goh, 2016 cited in Mah, 2016; Rojas-Drummond et al., 2017). As discussed by Oates (2023), once they master new vocabulary children can become more confident in using this verbally and then be more willing to attempt to write it, making later decoding easier for reading as it becomes cognitively operational. This is supported by Scott and Boyd (2014) in their outdoor science field research, whereby as children became more verbally confident, this helped them to become more engaged in wider learning activities involving reading and writing during assessment.

As demonstrated by Manner et al., (2021) Forest School as a regular alternate practice, can aid adolescents psychologically, just as much as younger children, improving their self-esteem and understanding of their own ability and building a bridge to skills areas that the young people did not feel they previously possessed. However, this is one paper and it is important that more research is carried out to reinforce that adolescents can also thrive under an alternative context. Literature shows that Forest School also provides the building blocks for children to improve, or show their true ability cognitively (Scott and Boyd, 2014; Quibell et al., 2017; McCree

et al., 2018; Otte et al., 2019; Streelasky, 2019). Otte et al. (2019) demonstrated that adolescents' literacy skills can improve when given regular access to Forest School activities by including children up to 13 years, showing that they equally progressed in comparison to their younger peers. Again, this shows that there needs to be more research in this area to understand how adolescent children can become more engaged.

As described by McCree et al. (2018) by taking the slower 'tortoise' rather than quick 'hare' approach to learning and development, Forest School connects to ZPD and Vygotsky's view of SEND, with children learning at their own pace via collaboration and mediation, rather than direct instruction (Barrable and Arvanitis, 2019; Eun, 2018). It also ensures that children are able to take the development 'detours' that Vygotsky argued that they need to take to reach their full potential (Rodina, 2006). Indeed, the ethos of Forest School is child led, allowing for these detours as opposed to regimented process of state schooling apparent in England's education system (Waite and Goodenough, 2018), including the one size fits all phonics approach to literacy learning preferred by Government (Ellis and Moss, 2014), which, despite their age, is still used for Secondary aged SEND learners in my setting.

In my experience engagement in traditional classroom activities for children with SEND can be exacerbated at Secondary school level as teachers seem sometimes ill equipped to teach adolescents who find access to the curriculum challenging. At this stage they are expecting children to access the curriculum as per their chronological age, with adult subjectivities with regards to ability potentially having a negative impact (Bruggink et al., 2016). As described by Esteban-Guitart and Moll (2014), a Vygotskian perspective can help us see that regardless of supposed deficit, be it SEND, socio-economic, or cultural, individuals can accumulate knowledge and skills via their families and other social groups outside of formal education which are not always recognised by traditional teaching methods. However, these create relevance that can be connected to the curriculum (Esteban-Guitart and Moll, 2014), something which has also been identified via Forest School (e.g., Barrable and Arvanitis, 2019; Mann, 2018). Existing funds of knowledge that are valued within the traditional classroom setting, or those developed through alternate practice, can help children to feel more competent as they achieve, improving their self-esteem and helping to create a more positive self-identity (Esteban-Guitart and Moll, 2014).

Identity can be problematic for children with SEND as they can negatively compare themselves to their peers in the academic sphere, becoming disengaged or disconnected, impacting on their progress further. This, then, reinforces a deficit discourse about their own ability as they fall back on their diagnosis as an excuse for not moving forward (Wagner and Bunn, 2020; Carvahlo and Skipper, 2020).

The use of scaffolding as a term to interpret ZPD (Eun, 2018), in my experience has also become a current buzzword for schools. However, there can be a lack of understanding surrounding what this actually means in practice. Leather (2018) describes how schools in England can be seen as still entrenched in Victorian values with adults holding the power, authority and the knowledge, with scaffolding open to interpretation as another tool for teachers to fill the child with what is considered the 'right' knowledge. Scaffolding however should be thought of as 'could' rather than 'should' (Barrable and Arvanitis, 2019). It is important that those facilitating Forest School activities do not use them as a vehicle to fast-track knowledge and progress, so that it becomes yet another banking form of teaching (Freire, 2002). This is something that Quibell et al's. (2017) research is in danger of, with elements akin to traditional school timetabling and subject content. It is vital, then, that there is a conceptualised framework applied to Forest School so that the original purpose of autonomous development is not lost.

More recently it appears that practical concerns regarding safety (e.g., Button and Wild, 2019; Harris, 2017) have overtaken conceptual understanding and, coupled with the increasingly commercialised aspect of training, the crucial philosophical ethos is becoming lost, with the danger that awareness of how engagement can positively link to other areas of education and culture will become minimised (Leather, 2018). Due to this, there can be confusion as to exactly what Forest School actually is in defined practice which can go on to cause tensions in how it should be implemented (Leather, 2018; Becker et al., 2017). However, this could be alleviated by applying some form of developmental concept to understand how activities can be adapted for Secondary aged children to become better engaged, in order to promote Forest School as a positive regular activity within a school setting. Although traditional Forest School practice can be seen as having a positive impact on the development of subject knowledge (e.g., Otte et al., 2019; Scott and Boyd, 2014), there is no link to theory in the outcomes potentially making it difficult for practitioners

to advocate that it is a useful practice outside of enrichment. Therefore, this research proposal will aim to connect ZPD to Forest School in an attempt to show that outdoor Forest School activities can have a direct impact on engagement without the need for a timetabled subject specific programme, as with Quibell et al. (2017). Forest School should be viewed as a vehicle for supporting engagement and potentially the wider curriculum rather than as an additional curriculum in itself (Barrable and Arvanitis, 2019).

Vygotsky's view that knowledge is socially constructed and that SEND is a social construction (Eun, 2018, Holzman, 2018; Bøttcher and Dammeyer, 2012; Rodina, 2006; Gindis, 1995) coheres with a critical epistemology. Over time, my epistemological view has developed to align with this view point becoming ever more critical of our current educational provision for adolescent children identified as SEND, where current assessment strategies for learning are limited to a narrow view of development or didactic teaching of knowledge that often falls outside of lived experience of learners (Isaacs, 2014) and which is clearly not working for some children I work with. Children are then interpreted as having SEND, due to the ways in which standardised assessment underpins a deficit discourse for certain individuals due to its rigidity of structure and lack of relevance to many of these learners, only valuing one type of knowledge (Levinson and Hooley, 2014). Rather than questioning the relevance of the national curriculum and its associated attainment levels, learners are viewed through a lens of being unable to cope, receiving potentially stigmatising labels such as Moderate Learning Difficulties, that, although designed to support, can also be perceived as discriminatory and used to identify individuals who don't fit the cultural 'norm' (Douglas, 2013). In addition, for certain groups, for example those of low socio-economic status (Tomlinson, 2013) differing cultural backgrounds, such as travellers (Levinson, 2007) or learners with English as an additional language (Behizadeh, 2014), the issue is felt to be more one of deficit within the child, and by extension the family (Tomlinson, 2013; Surushkina et al. 2021), rather than how learning is structured in schools.

Knowledge, then, can be viewed as a commodity and can be utilized as a tool of oppression with those who fit the 'norm' having power over those who fall outside of this (Freire, 2002). Current methods of mass schooling in England are based on industrial needs from over a 100 years ago and have been slow to change their

purely formal approach to teaching and assessment (Mann, 2018). However, in my experience when adolescents identified as SEND are offered alternative methods of teaching, such as outdoor learning, their development of new knowledge has had a positive impact on wider aspects of their learning as they utilise this new knowledge in the everyday, showing that what those in power think they know about children with SEND is very different to what is actually the case under differing contexts.

Ontologically, reality can be seen as objective, for example that to progress into further education, or to be functional as an adult in society as it is currently formed, individuals need to gain a certain level of qualification at GCSE and be able to decode written text (Isaacs, 2014). However, I work with children who come from working class backgrounds where, although not wishing to be generalistic, many families value more practical skills over the academic, bringing a wealth of knowledge to the school arena when opportunities arise to share this (Esteban-Guitart and Moll, 2014). In addition, many of those children from Eastern European Roma heritage that I work with often value more oral and visual traditions, where verbal storytelling, performance such as dance and art is far more valued than reading written text. This can then cause a clash between two cultures when children access Secondary school, with children then being labelled as unable or ill-disciplined, rather than looking to utilise their strengths to aid engagement. To contest the status quo, we need to recognise that learning is more than just reading and writing, and that individuals are multi-literate, and provide a socially and culturally responsive curriculum that recognises the different realities of learners, valuing their distinct knowledge (Cope and Kalantzis, 2015). It is important that we recognise that children are not one homogenous group and they all have different lived experiences (Kellett et al., 2010). Therefore, what I want to know ontologically is whether ZPD can support the development of Forest School activities to support engagement to offer the same benefits for Secondary aged children identified as SEND as it does for Primary school children. My methodological aim is to be a critical researcher in an attempt to address the evident educational inequities that exist for some children due to the intersectional barriers they face within education. By showing that Forest School activities as regular practice have the ability to engage SEND children this will show that they are successful, knowledgeable, agentic learners in their own right.

Chapter 4: Research proposal.

The title of my research proposal is 'Inside out: a case study on the impact of Forest School learning for pupils in a Secondary school specialist SEND class'. This is to reflect that the children will be moving from an inside environment to the outdoors and details explicitly what my research focus will be.

The aim is to gain consent for some, or all, of the 15 Key Stage 3 SEND students (12-14 years) I work with in a specialist class to participate in the research over a 4-month period, as all have difficulties accessing, or engaging with, the curriculum in some way. It has already been indicated by my setting that I would be supported with carrying out the research following this proposal, as these children are appearing to make little or no academic progress in line with national expectations and they are keen to explore if alternate practice can reduce barriers to engagement. In the available literature there are numerous indications that verbal communication skills and social skills can improve (e.g., Barrable and Arvanitis, 2018; Waite and Goodenough 2018; O'Brien and Murray, 2006), but that academic achievement can also be vastly improved (e.g., McCree et al., 2018; Otte et al., 2019). This research proposes that through practical Forest School activities geared towards providing high levels of immediate, positive formative feedback and by reinforcing strengths and building competencies on an individualised basis (Quibell et al., 2017), engagement can improve potentially impacting on other areas of the child's school life. However, if this is not the case it will at least show to what extent Secondary aged children can be better engaged so we can think outside the box when it comes to learning.

This proposal aims to demonstrate that although Forest School can be a 'fun' activity for reward it may also to some extent aid learners with regards to academic performance, instilling a better motivation to learn when situations are challenging by the transferring the skills learned outside to inside the classroom (Becker et al. 2017).

As my proposal has developed, I have been particularly interested in how Forest School has aided progress in younger children (e.g. Streelasky, 2019; Otte et al., 2019; Scott and Boyd, 2014), and became intrigued to understand if this could be the case for the Secondary aged children I work with. This linked with my conceptual

underpinning of the research as I found that Vygotsky was regularly linked with Forest School practice. As I began reading more about his theories and views surrounding SEND children, I felt that the use of ZPD as conceptual framework would be appropriate to try and understand to what extent Forest School activities can be developed to suit Secondary aged learners. My aim is to position myself as a critical researcher demonstrating that there are other methods to becoming a successful learner.

My questions have developed vastly since studying Module 2, as they originally centered around male SEND learners and links to behaviour, engagement and male stereotype. For TMA01 of this Module I decided to switch focus to all SEND learners within my class who struggle to engage for a variety of reasons but the questioning was far too wide for a small-scale study, with seven initial questions. Following feedback from TMA02 and developing my reading, I have minimised this to work on two questions, one based on practice and another on conceptual framework, an important part to further develop Forest School practice:

1. To what extent would Forest School activities benefit Secondary school pupils with SEND, in the ways that they have been shown to benefit Primary aged pupils?
2. To what extent can Vygotsky's theory of Zones of Proximal Development (ZPD) support development of Forest School activities to enable SEND children to be more engaged?

Chapter 5: Research design, research methods, methods of analysis and ethical considerations.

Research design.

As a critical researcher my research design will follow a case study, action research approach with the aim to provide in depth data to influence or change existing practice.

As discussed by Cohen et al. (2018) action research offers a systematic, close examination review of the effects of practice, combining action and reflection to meet this aim and, as the research will take place in situ at the setting, will potentially be

more successful in implementing the changes in practice that are needed. Action research reflects Vygotsky's arguments surrounding the importance of oral engagement as it is dialogical and celebrates discourse, but also has the benefits of enhancing the competency of participants, as the participants learn new skills, seek to understand complex social situations and the processes of change within these by being participatory rather than passive subjects (Cohen et al. 2018). These are areas all encouraged by the Forest School approach.

A case study approach will offer more in-depth information as it allows for richer contextual and environmental data collection and can be far more nuanced as it provides the framework to not only focus on the whole group but individuals within that group to show how dynamics of the group and the environment can affect outcomes (Costley, et al., 2010). It will allow for a complete understanding of the research process, programme and activities, alongside cause and affect (why the research is needed, why certain things happen in the research and the outcomes of the research) by comparing and evaluating different aspects of the activities and the different environments where they take place (Open University, 2022a).

The aim is to have 2-3, 2-hour sessions per week with the children to ensure that they have enough time to engage in activities and for new tasks to be demonstrated. There is a large fixed, hard roofed canopy area outside where activities can still take place should weather conditions impact, although activities generally still take place outside unless weather is extreme.

Research methods and analysis.

At the start of each activity, I will position myself as a facilitator demonstrating each new activity or supporting a member of the group to do so. Following this, I will observe the participants' level of engagement and interaction, alongside environmental information, such as weather conditions, using a diary style log to record what is happening in each session, whilst still being available for them to speak to or ask questions. I will only directly step in if there is an issue of safety. As part of Forest School training, we were asked to implement this as part of the assessment criteria to pass the course so it is something that I am used to undertaking.

Observation will allow me to view participants as they interact and engage naturally with the activities, the environment and each other helping to assess how Forest School activities can be developed further to assist this set of Secondary aged SEND learners (Costley et al., 2010). By keeping a detailed diary log it will allow me to analyse how methods and activities develop over time, along with analysing and comparing group and individual engagement and progression (Costley et al. 2010). For ease of recording and analysis the log will be split into categories of observation such as activity, environmental area, weather, behaviour, engagement and interaction (for individual child and group) and a reflection at the end of each session.

Participants.

In the first instance, should consent be gained, the participants in the research will be from a group of children already accessing a specialist SEND intervention class within the school, all who have difficulties with engagement and a range of diagnoses. Should the offer of participation be declined, I am able to go out to a wider cohort of SEND learners in the school who are known to me through my role.

Although there is evidence that Forest School can be very successful in engaging SEND learners (Toal, 2022; Freidman et al., 2022; Bradley and Male, 2017; Richardson, 2014) it is important to raise that there are potential barriers that could affect the research. As discussed by Tiplady and Menter (2021), for some children the freedom and choice offered by Forest School could be counterintuitive and be too overwhelming leading to negative behaviours or withdrawal. Due to the risks involved there are inevitably some boundaries, for example rules of tool use and use of space, that need to be followed which some children may struggle to follow (Button and Wild, 2019) and if children do not adhere to these they may need to be withdrawn.

Forest School is conducted in all weather conditions if it is safe to do so, however as discussed by Freidman et al. (2022), these can sometimes make children reluctant to participate. There is also the possibility that engagement in the research could be affected by events outside of the research space that could affect the mood of participants (Freidman et al. 2022). As the participants are also from a highly urban area, they may also be nervous about being outside in a more natural environment

and undertaking tasks outside of their comfort zones, but it has been evidenced that if this can be overcome, children from urban areas can go on to thrive (Elliott, 2015 cited in Garden and Downes, 2023).

Due to Forest School traditionally being carried out with younger children, it is important that the tasks offered do not make them feel infantilised. The majority of tasks are age universal (fire lighting, cooking, nature hunts, outdoor crafting, tree climbing) but it will be important that these older students feel that they have autonomy over what they do. There will be no barriers to tasks however, so if a child does want to undertake an activity that is considered more for younger children (e.g., a mud kitchen) they can.

Risk.

Risk can be a barrier to practitioners implementing Forest School activities on site, instead relying on external settings and providers. There can be fear of blame should something adverse happen for example, due to adverse weather conditions, falling from height, use of tools and regular use of fire, however it can also be argued that children need to be exposed to some forms of supervised risky behaviours in order to go on to sensibly manage hazards and risk as into adulthood (Button and Wild, 2019, Waite and Goodenough, 2018). Children, even older children, are now more regularly seen through a lens of vulnerability but risk can be seen as a fluid term dependent on individual subjectivities (Waite and Goodenough, 2018) and it is important to raise again that despite the risks Forest School activities are often carried out with young children.

Despite the developmental importance of children being exposed to a certain level of risk, it is important that any participation that exposes individuals to risk are properly risk assessed and that stakeholders such as school leadership teams, staff supporting sessions, parents and the participants are reassured that all activities are appropriately planned and risk assessed (see Ethical Appraisal Form; Appendix 2). As part of this research, parents and participants will receive information regarding activities as part of the consent process and updated risk assessments will be produced prior to the research for each activity that will be made available on request. Although the paperwork involved, such as risk assessments, can be seen

as a barrier (Harris, 2017), these are a vital part of ethical research and a responsible part of practice where risk is involved.

Ethical considerations.

Consent:

Informed consent from all parties is essential before commencing any form of research (BERA, 2018 [see Ethical Appraisal Form; Appendix 2]). Consent cannot be considered valid unless it is informed by sharing information with regards to data collection and storage, research methods, risk assessments and ongoing consent and that this is understood by all stakeholders (The British Psychological Society, 2021). Consent from school leaders, parents and the children themselves needs to be obtained and as a site of multiple interests which may well not coincide, there may need to be ongoing negotiation or adaption of the research proposal before any research can take place (Costley et al., 2010). The proposal will initially be shared with school leaders and only when agreement is reached will parents and participants be approached. To ensure that consent is informed, there will be a letter sent home outlining the research to the responsible adults, outlining the research with consent form attached so that they can clearly state whether or not they give consent. There will also be a more detailed research outline sent alongside the letter, which will be in two versions-one for adults and one for child participants. It will be stated that even if consent is initially given, this can be withdrawn at any time and my contact details (setting email address and telephone number) will be shared with parents/carers. It will be made clear how the children can contact or approach me at any time to withdraw consent. Parents/carers will also be invited to an information event prior to the research taking place to inform their decision and the participants will also have an information session, with use of language and presentation needing to be carefully considered so that both can understand all aspects of the research (Sherwood and Parsons, 2021). Participants and parents/carers will be invited to ask questions at any stage of the research so that informed consent is ongoing.

Should a child not wish to consent, or wishes to withdraw consent, this outweighs any wish made by adults that they take part (The British Psychological Society, 2021). Conversely, even though as a researcher I may feel that a child is agentic and can give individual consent there could be tensions if parents and carers do not

wish them to be involved (Sherwood and Parsons, 2021). In this instance however it is important that to maintain respect between the setting and home and the integrity of the research that the decision is respected and followed (Sherwood and Parsons, 2021; Stutchbury and Fox, 2009), alongside any decline or withdrawal from participants, although this may cause the unintended consequence that the child feels undermined (Collings et al., 2016). I would also need to respect that it is the participants right to be active or passive in the research activities, and should consent be refused before or during the project, that their data is not used in the final account no matter how useful it may prove and is destroyed (BERA, 2018).

Trust is an important part of research and it is important that this is maintained by being open and transparent at all times (The British Psychological Society, 2021), with ethics as a robust ongoing process rather than a way to gain public support and favourable opinion (Open University, 2022b).

Data storage and access:

Responsible data storage will mean ensuring that information is kept securely and only used for the original purposes outlined to the stakeholders and participants in the original consent contract, following legal requirements as per GDPR and predating legislation (BERA, 2018 [see Ethical Appraisal Form; Appendix 2]).

Information will be kept securely on a password protected and encrypted device kept within the setting in a locked office. Note taking during research sessions will also be in digital form, again password protected and encrypted and linked straight to the main data device (computer) and again locked within a secure room following each session. Data can be shared at any point therefore to maintain integrity it is an important responsibility to think of the language used when writing observation notes so as not to cause upset or harm (The British Psychological Society, 2021).

Information relating to any safeguarding concerns should they arise will not be shared with parents but with the appropriate safeguarding professionals in school and will not be recorded in the observation notes. Data will be destroyed or amended if requested by the participants and it would be unethical and could cause distress if not done so (The British Psychological Society, 2021). All stakeholders will have access to data when requested and the final report which will be shared.

Participants have the right to and, will be given, anonymity and the setting will remain anonymous as this is crucial for the safeguarding of children (BERA, 2018). Children will be given an identifying letter or number that will only be known to the individual participant and myself so that they cannot be identified. The setting will not be identified in anyway, including geographical area, curriculum and entry numbers as this will make it easier to identify through search engines and school literature provided to, or accessed by, the community (BERA,2018).

The credibility of research can only be maintained if the researcher can be considered and proved as trustworthy, with a data that can be reflected as accurate for all stakeholders (The British Psychological Society, 2021).

Power:

Any research needs to be undertaken respectfully, recognising the dignity, privacy, autonomy and diversity of an individual, group or community (BERA, 2018), in this case a school community. Although it can be argued that there are maximum benefits through being an insider researcher due to the knowledge of the setting it is important to minimise any potential harm that may be unwittingly posed due to that familiarity, particularly when working with groups and individuals that could be perceived as vulnerable (BERA, 2018), in this case children identified as SEND (see Ethical Appraisal Form; Appendix 2).

I will need to think reflectively how my own subjectivities may impact, as although I may feel that Forest School activities may be of benefit, learners still need to be free to participate how they choose even if this affects the research outcomes (BERA 2018). This point leads to the issue of power relations between myself as a teacher and the learners and how this would impact on my relationship with them when carrying out the research as they would be used to the demands that are normally placed on them due to my role in relation to their day-to-day learning (BERA, 2018). In this case they will be far freer to express themselves and lead activities rather than having to follow tighter classroom boundaries that are normally in place. Forest School activities are a negotiated process between adult and child, rather than dictated by the adult as the expert, shifting the power differentials to be child-led once activities are agreed (Barrable and Arvanitis, 2019; Blackham et al. 2021). As discussed by Breeze (Open University, 2022c) although it may be felt that there is

already trust as the participants and I are already known to each other, this could also pose a challenge as they may still see me as an authority figure despite the difference in activity and may look to please. Leather (2018) raises that it could be easy for an adult to slip back into the usual dictatorial role, especially when things are not going as they feel they should but outside of physical and emotional safety concerns I hope to minimise this by following the Forest School principles and ethos from my training.

Postscript: Narrative critical reflection.

One of the main areas that I developed from the end of Module 2 and across this module is the development of my research questions and title. In my EMA for Module 2 I had focused on the stereotype of SEND male learners and how Forest School could bring relevance to their learning.

I was pleased with my grade but began to reflect that I was in danger of stereotyping these learners myself. Following more reading I then decided to shift to literacy learning for both male and female learners and whether Forest School could improve their literacy skills as this is an issue in my day-to-day practice. For TMA01 I made a list of seven questions but in the feedback discussion with my tutor we both agreed that these were far too many and that I was asking the same questions as other researchers. I was able to reduce the number of questions to two; one relating to practice with Secondary aged learners and another relating to Vygotsky as the conceptual framework, which had been missing from my initial questions.

Following submission of my dissertation for chapter 2 during my feedback discussion I changed the questions from 'how' and 'does' questions to 'to what extent' to make the potential answers more nuanced and open.

As my writing progressed it became clear that it was focusing on engagement overall rather than literacy. Following chapter 3 submission my tutor and I agreed that my focus should switch from literacy, as this had been done before, to engagement of Secondary SEND learners as this is where the true gap lies. This led to a slight change in my title but also a change in my second question. I had fallen into the trap that I have criticised other researchers of doing with theorists, linking Vygotsky to research without looking to see how his concept of ZPD could support the

development of learning, but once I made the change it made my writing and aim much clearer.

The second area that I focused on was the structure of my writing. Feedback from TMA01 was that my writing was far too linear and descriptive, which reflected in my grade of 65. I then went back and looked at previous essays where my grades had been higher and I had been far more critical in my writing. I went back to my learning journal to see how my thoughts had developed to try and do this for TMA2. I also looked at exemplars of extended proposals. After doing this I was able to achieve a grade of 78 for TMA02.

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Appendices:

Appendix 1: Reflection grid.

Category	Feedback received, targets achieved and areas of development worked on	How did this shape my dissertation?
Knowledge and understanding	TMA01 feedback discussion-there was no evidence of an emerging conceptual framework through my writing or research questions.	Through reading I had identified Vygotsky as being linked to Forest School but not being used as a conceptual framework. Over time I developed my second research question to focus on the extent that Vygotsky's ZPD could help to develop Forest School activities but also linked this to Vygotsky's views of SEND. Directly compared to how learning is currently taught, for example neoliberal and focused on Piaget's views of fixed stages of development. Developed my second research question to move away from literacy attainment to engagement and development of practice.
Critical analysis and evaluation	TMA01-feedback discussion. Writing is too linear and descriptive. I had fallen back on using	In my literature review I have directly compared and contrasted my work with a review completed

	<p>the words of other researchers as opposed to using research to formulate my own arguments.</p>	<p>in the same year (Garden and Downes 2023) to form a critical analysis and evaluation literature and themes, including their review. I have utilised some of the same literature as Garden and Downes as I had read some of the same research prior to starting Module 3, but also went on to read some of the literature cited by Garden and Downes to use in later chapters of my dissertation. I have used this as a way to identify gaps in literature and link themes to my research.</p>
<p>Links to professional practice</p>	<p>Feedback from chapter 2 submission-I had been far too ambiguous with linking to professional practice in England and had stated the UK when in fact Forest School practice is very different in the devolved nations. I needed to be clearer that it is practice it is educational practice in England that is the issue,</p>	<p>Made it clearer throughout my dissertation, but particularly in chapters 2 and 3, that England has a distinct neoliberal education system, that impacts on my current practice and the engagement of SEND children. Highlighted that devolved nations have very different attitudes</p>

	not just chapter 2 but in previous writing for Module 2 and TMAs for this module content. I needed to be clearer that it is practice in England that needs to change not other devolved UK nations.	and values towards Forest School, being more positive towards its contribution to education but this is problematic in England where it is seen as enrichment.
Structure, communication and interaction	Feedback from chapter 3 submission-some sentences were very convoluted meaning that although argument was strong it could be difficult to read in places. This led to word count being nearly 800 words over for this chapter when more succinct sentence structure could greatly reduce this.	I went back over my chapter 3 several times to restructure some of my sentences to make my arguments clearer. This enabled to significantly reduce the extra word count for this section.

Appendix 2: Ethical Appraisal form.

E822 Ethical Appraisal Form

Masters: Education, Childhood and Youth

NB: it should be noted that The Open University is unable to offer liability insurance to cover any negative consequences students might encounter when undertaking 'in-person' data collection. It is therefore very important that you follow appropriate research protocols which should include seeking Gatekeeper permissions to undertake any data collection



Because ethical appraisal should precede data collection, a completed version of this form should be included with TMA02 for those developing a Small-Scale Investigation (SSI) and as part of the EMA submission for those completing an Extended Literature Review and Research Proposal (EP) form of the Dissertation.

within your setting and adhering to ethical principles for the safety of yourself and your participants.

Fill in section 1 of this document with your personal details and brief information about your research.

For section 2, please assess your research using the following questions and click yes or no as appropriate. If there is any possibility of significant risk please tick yes. Even if your list contains all "no" you should still return your completed checklist so your tutor/supervisor can assess the proposed research.

Section 1: Project details

a.	Student name	Emma Johnson
b.	PI	██████████
c.	Project title	Inside out: a case study on the impact of Forest School learning for pupils in a Secondary school specialist SEND class.
d.	Supervisor/tutor	Anita Pilgrim
e.	Qualification	Masters in Education
f.	MA pathway (where applicable)	Inclusive Education
g.	Intended start date for fieldwork	April 2024
h.	Intended end date for fieldwork	July 2024
i.	Country fieldwork will be conducted in <i>If you are resident in the UK and will be conducting your research abroad please check www.fco.gov.uk for advice on travel.</i>	England

Section 2: Ethics Assessment		Yes	No
1	Does your proposed research need initial clearance from a 'gatekeeper' (e.g. Local Authority, head teacher, college head, nursery/playgroup manager)?	x	
2	Have you checked whether the organisation requires you to undertake a 'police check' or appropriate level of 'disclosure' before carrying out your research? ¹	x	
3	Have you indicated how informed consent will be obtained from your participants (including children less than 16 years old, school pupils and immediate family members)? Your consent letters/forms must inform participants that they have the right to withdraw from the study at any time. ²	x	
4	Will your proposed research design mean that it will be necessary for participants to take part in the study without their knowledge/consent at the time (e.g. covert observation of people in nonpublic places)? If so have you specified appropriate debriefing procedures? ³		x
5	Does your proposed design involve repetitive observation of participants, (i.e. more than twice over a period of more than 2-3 weeks)? Is this necessary? If it is, have you made appropriate provision for participants to renew consent or withdraw from the study half-way through? ⁴	x	
6	Are you proposing to collect video and/or audio data? If so have you indicated how you will protect participants' anonymity and confidentiality and how you will store the data?		x
7	Does your proposal indicate how you will give your participants the opportunity to access the outcomes of your research (including audio/visual materials) after they have provided data?	x	
8	Have you built in time for a pilot study to make sure that any task materials you propose to use are age appropriate and that they are unlikely to cause offence to any of your participants?		x

¹ You must agree to comply with any ethical codes of practice or legal requirements that maybe in place within the organisation or country (e.g. educational institution, social care setting or other workplace) in which your research will take place. If required an appropriate level of disclosure ('police check') can be obtained from the Disclosure and Barring Service (England and Wales), Disclosure Scotland, AccessNI (Northern Ireland), Criminal Records Office (Republic of Ireland), etc.

² This should normally involve the use of an information sheet about the research and what participation will involve, and a signed consent form. You must allow sufficient time for potential participants to consider their decision between the giving of the information sheet and the gaining of consent. No research should be conducted without the opt-in informed consent of participants or their caregivers. In the case of children (individuals under 16 years of age) no research should be conducted without a specified means of gaining their informed consent (or, in the case of young children, their assent) and the consent of their parents, caregivers, or guardians. This is particularly important if your project involves participants who are particularly vulnerable or unable to give informed consent (e.g. children under 16 years, people with learning disabilities, or emotional problems, people with difficulty in understanding or communication, people with identified health problems). There is additional guidance on informed consent on the Masters: Education and Childhood and Youth website under Project Resources.

³ Where an essential element of the research design would be compromised by full disclosure to participants, the withholding of information should be specified in the project proposal and explicit procedures stated to obviate any potential harm arising from such withholding. Deception or covert collection of data should only take place where it has been agreed with a named responsible person in the organisation and it is essential to achieve the research results required, where the research objective has strong scientific merit and where there is an appropriate risk management and harm alleviation strategy.

⁴ Where participants are involved in longer-term data collection, the use of procedures for the renewal of consent at appropriate times should be considered.

9	Is your research likely to involve discussion of sensitive topics (e.g. adult/child relationships, peer relationships, discussions about personal teaching styles, ability levels of individual children and/or adults)? What safeguards have you put in place to protect participants' confidentiality?	x	
10	Does your proposed research raise any issues of personal safety for yourself or other persons involved in the project? Do you need to carry out a 'risk analysis' and/or discuss this with teachers, parents and other adults involved in the research?	x	
11	Will financial inducements (other than reasonable expenses and compensation for time) be offered to participants?		x
12	Will the study involve recruitment of patients or staff through the NHS or the use of NHS data?		x

If you answered 'yes' to questions **12**, you will also have to submit an application to an appropriate National Research Ethics Service ethics committee (<http://www.nres.npsa.nhs.uk/>).