

University Centre Doncaster

# BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies

## ***How Effective Is a Forest School Programme in Promoting Pro-social Skills?***

By Rhianna Gardom



I started my journey in Early Years in 2010. I found a course that I could do at home after finding it really unappealing to be in a classroom. I studied my level 2 childcare independently whilst working full time. I am now Preschool coordinator and every single day I leave work feeling that I have made a difference to the children and families that I care for. I am enrolled to begin the Early Years Initial Teacher Training in September. When looking for a dissertation subject it was clear that the newly launched Forest School programme on our site was appropriate. My family gave me the enthusiasm to work in such an environment where I could show the children all the amazing things that the Forest School can offer. I am very proud of what we have achieved as a setting and what Kelly Severn and the Forest School team continue to provide for the children in our setting and now outside agencies.

## **Abstract**

*The purpose of this research was to measure the impact a Forest School provision had on children's development of intra-personal and inter-personal skills. The researcher aimed to track progress against the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2017) alongside the development profile created to outline children's development in the Forest School environment. A variety of data collection methods were combined to capture different perspectives of the development of the children. Alongside observations conducted by the researcher, close collaboration with practitioners gained key information to complete behavioural questionnaires. Parents gave their perspective of their children's development through completing a very similar questionnaire and the Forest School practitioner also gave a perspective through the generation of individual reports. The researcher established that Forest School programmes promote the development of skills that cannot be taught in adult-led provision. Carefully chosen interactions and the child-led approach adopted in Forest School programmes helped children to achieve skills that they could use as a foundation throughout their lives.*

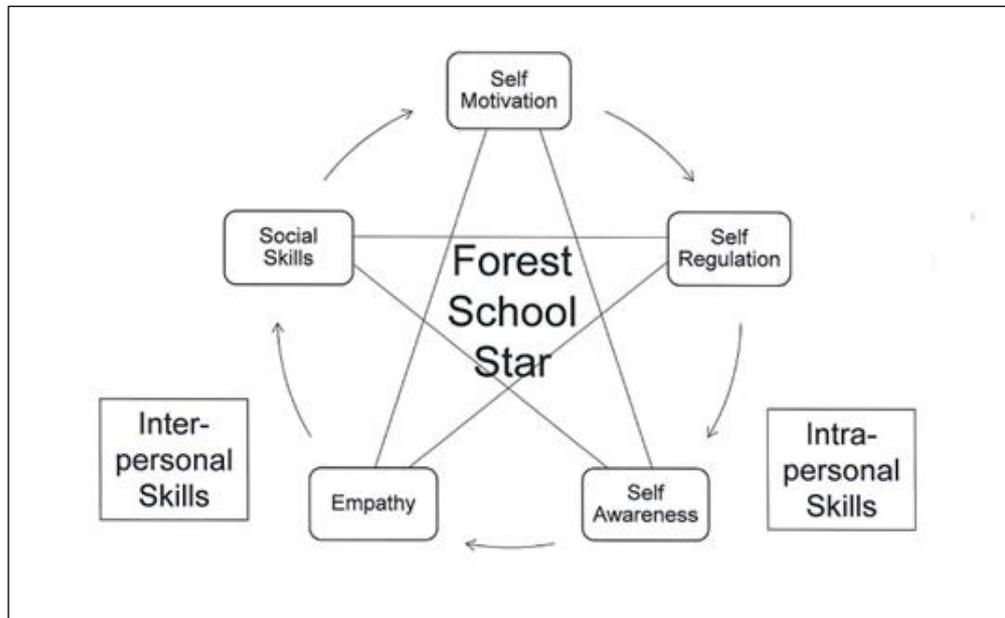
*The best classroom and the richest cupboard is roofed only by the sky  
(McMillian, c19)*

## **Introduction**

A Forest School (FS): *“allows everyone, particularly children and young people the opportunity to learn through experience within a woodland setting in a hands-on manner to develop their self-esteem and confidence”* (The World Outside, 2018). FS originated in Scandinavia and has become widely accepted across the world. In 1993, a group of early years (EY) practitioners brought benefits from the approach back to the UK. FS is now used widely, as a valuable method of learning for people of all ages. The UK FS approach is built out of a wider heritage and philosophy of outdoor learning. Based on the work of Froebel (1837, cited in ECT, 2018), FS is influenced by the Waldorf (1919, cited in ECSWE, 2017) approach to education. The earth and nature contribute to play and discovery, whilst learning about cycles of life and how to care for the world around us (Oldfield, 2001). Interference is kept to a minimum, and adults only scaffold learning (Bruner, 1978) allowing children to build independence with the child-led approach providing support to physical and spiritual development of each child (Fisher, 2016). FS ethos is created out of respect for young people, their innate curiosity to investigate and test elements, to push boundaries and learn (FSTC) enabling child’s right to play (UNICEF, 1989), and provides a wide range of experiences in an ever-changing world. FS practitioners believe, whole heartedly, in the need to access different environments with natural resources.

FS is a process based approach and is beneficial when run alongside the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) and Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE, 2017). Louv (2005) claims that when children have positive experiences in woodland environments they use their senses to reconnect with nature. The amount of time that children spend outdoors is rapidly reducing suggesting children’s ‘nature-deficit’ continues to grow. FS practitioners hope that more open resources and limited planned activities will facilitate children to learn to love the world around them again.

**Figure 1:** The Forest School Star



FS provides experiences to promote skills (Fig. 1) that cannot be taught, creating positive impacts for mental health. The case study setting has recently established a FS programme. Delivered in 6-week cycles, it is already demonstrating positive impacts. Further literature is examined in consideration of the research question, looking closely at existing knowledge of how FS programmes create the high self-esteem and social skills that is being reported in children, during and after taking part.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Environment and Managing Risk**

Interactive learning was promoted by Piaget (1952) Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1978) who developed recognition that learning, in EY, requires social factors. There is an enthusiasm for children to learn through active, first hand experiences (CACE, 1967) as well as for adults working in EY to be skilled in using a range of teaching methods and approaches to meet the needs of the individual (Ofsted, 2017). In EY the opportunity to make choices is crucial. Children access aspects of the EYFS through continuous provision, however children's autonomy in this environment is

hindered (Curtis, 2003); children need to choose their own toys and change resources according to their interest. In some EY settings this is not encouraged as continuous provision is laid out according to the practitioner's plan.

The outdoor environment aids motivation through a feeling of freedom and enjoyment, either with or without an adult (Curtis, 2003). The freedom of the outdoors gives children the opportunity to escape more 'adult controlled' environments. By providing quality environments and experiences outdoors, children will find opportunities to set goals and master life skills through experimentation (Field, 2010). Bilton (2014) claims that the environment plays a significant part in children's attitudes and behaviour; by allowing a child to access freedom they are encouraged to play and learn in various ways (DfE, 2017). Research in environments that are tailored this way shows children are more active, more absorbed and present positive attitudes to learning.

The major barrier to providing a range of stimulating environments in EY is the existence of the risk adverse culture in modern Britain. The Government (HCESC, 2005) has noticed the UK achieves lower levels of access to outdoor learning when compared with other countries. When a setting provides appropriate risk for the age and stage of each child it is promoting self-care (Knight, 2013); children can develop awareness of matching their skills to the demands of their environment (O'Brien and Murray, 2007). The EY would be the opportune place to build this as children are beginning to assess risk for themselves, alongside qualified practitioners, in settings with high staff: child ratios (Bernard, 1993).



Knight (2011) highlights how FS empowers some wilder, riskier play in creating an outlet for an innate need for risk (Gill, 2007). Whilst creating links to the EYFS (DfE, 2017) the adult responsibility is to enable the processes in a manageable and controlled way. Gill (2007) believes that if risk is not permitted

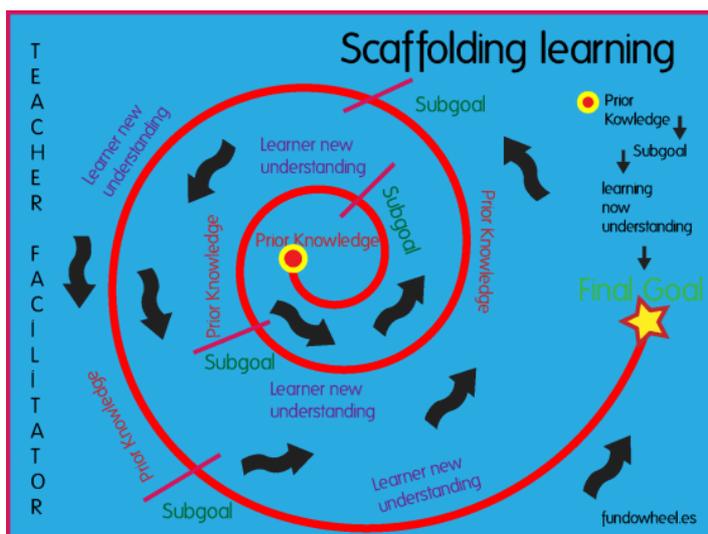
in this way children may go searching for it themselves, possibly causing themselves

more harm. In environments where risk is understood, children can continue to stretch the limits of their knowledge whilst also building character through independence.

**Providing Time and Resources to Build Personal Social and Emotional Development (PSED) and Resilience**

Creation of high levels of PSED in children gives a sound base for all future learning (Allen, 2011). When considering every child’s unique qualities (Early Education, 2012), those that work with children can affect a child’s intra-personal feelings and how they develop inter-personal relationships with others (Stern, 1985). By meeting the basic needs of children, practitioners unlock potential for better relationships, high esteem and self-actualisation (Maslow, 1943). When practitioners understand how to respond to individual needs these key relationships are built. Secure attachments with adults who encourage independence and scaffold learning (Bruner, 1978) give a secure foundation for learning social skills in communities (Fig. 2). Unlocked potential can be reached with high levels of involvement and well-being (Laevers, 2011) and experiential education is a good vehicle for this. Self-confident children are created through a combination of curiosity and exploration with a sense of belonging and security (Rockliff and Chinnery, 2015).

**Figure 2:** Scaffolding Learning



EY practitioners have a responsibility to provide varied and interesting experiences that aid learning through flexibility (Chamberlain *et al*, 2010). Resiliency can be built by providing autonomy in an environment of caring personal relationships.

Outdoor play is usually associated with physical development but benefits for PSED include noticed reduction of pressure and anxiety with positive effects on children's resilience, confidence and well-being (Blackwell, 2015). FS increases motivation and concentration (Murray and O'Brien, 2005). Children do not 'fail' but are encouraged to keep trying and confidence grows. As FS encourages children to own their strengths they become able to recognise value in relationships and pro-social behaviour is reported. All children are more willing to join in and talk to others (Bilton, 2014) when environments do not inhibit activities (Knight, 2013; Weinstein, 2018). In providing this experience and using natural materials FS practice can provide children with hands on experiences with loose parts that provide children with endless opportunities.

### **Positive Interaction and Resisting Interference**

Vygotsky (1978) and Bruner (1978) highlight a definitive need for interactions in EY. The social aspect of learning from others to meet full potential is recognised in practice worldwide. Rogoff (1990) wanted to see the progression of structured learning experiences move to a transfer of responsibility for continuation of learning. Fisher (1995) built



from this claiming that knowledge arises with the interaction of the learner to their environment. Time spent together increases value in play which can be lost if interrupted or fractured (Isaacs, 1954). Knight (2013) emphasises the community feeling of the FS that increases a child's self-control and behaviour with others. They become aware of what to expect and begin to learn about the social acceptances of the expanding world around them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). With consistent boundaries and care, individuality is valued creating a good base for self-image. The role of the practitioner in providing these experiences is the emphasis and value placed on child initiated play to foster curiosity (Dewey, 1938; Siraj-Blachford *et al*, 2002). Having an ability to construct and reconstruct knowledge through experimentation is key and is possible when the child's autonomy is given respect (Piaget, 1952). Practitioners can promote learning beyond cognition through

conversation and 'thinking out loud' enabling children to positively challenge concepts and build thinking skills (DfEE/QCA, 2000; Davies and Waite, 2004). The FS practitioner uses their initiative to create experiences for children where they can be free to develop relationships with the natural environment (Louv, 2005; Knight, 2013). Bird (2007), demonstrates how interaction with nature has a positive impact on society's problems such as obesity and stress.



It can be argued that planned continuous provision is more adult led and therefore tailored to outcomes, rather than learning processes, as in FS. This is not EY practitioners or a settings failure as Government give value to performance related

attainment. As EY becomes more influenced by standards and increasing verification of 'doing a good job', the FS approach is re-teaching practitioners how to gain the best opportunities for all.

### **Research Findings**

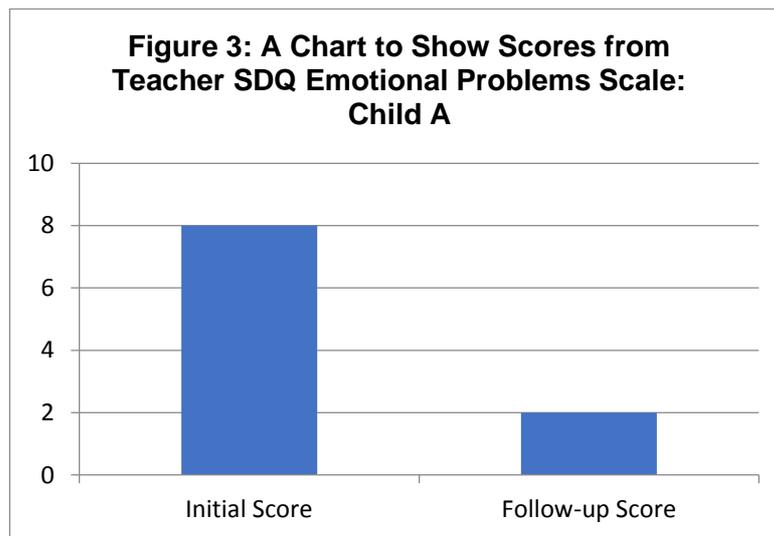
#### **Research Overview**

The research was conducted through a case study of 4 children who accessed the FS environment over the course of a 6-week intervention programme. The researcher wanted to look closely at the difference in the behaviours seen in the FS environment and the continuous provision of the setting.

#### **Children's Emotional Benefits**

The evidence for emotional benefits is quite sparse at the beginning of the study. The children made good progress in this scale from the 'teacher' Strengths and

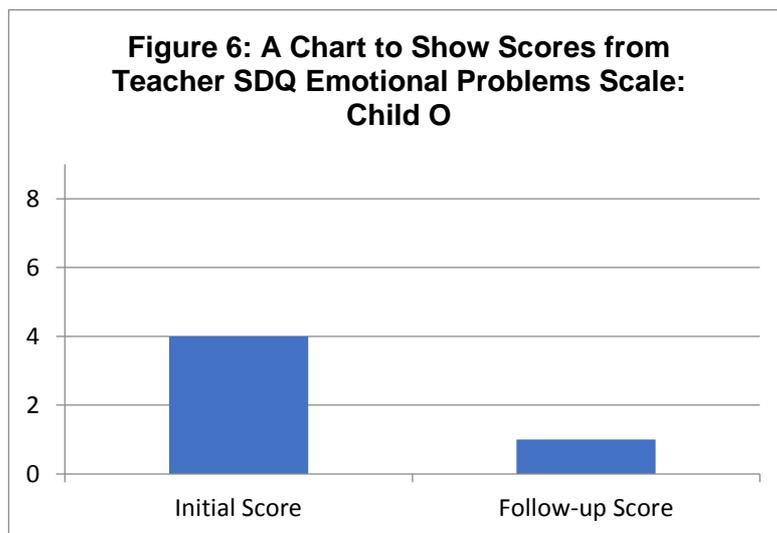
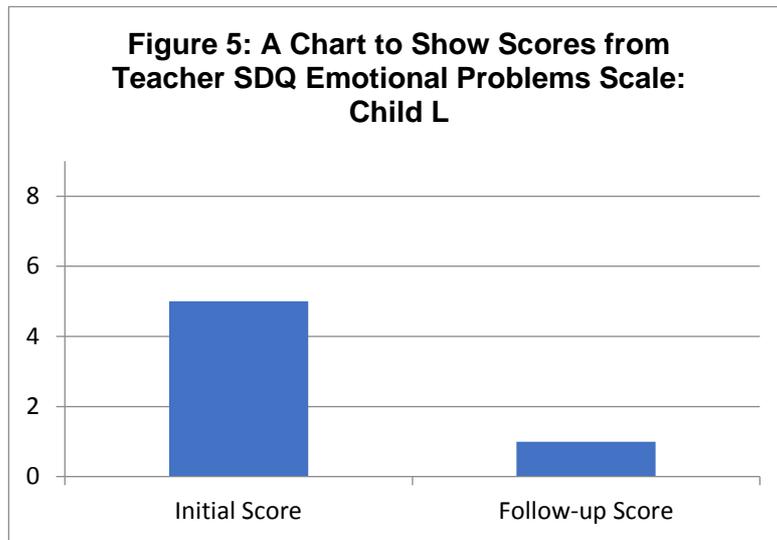
Difficulties Questionnaires, ranging between 3 and 6 points progress. However Child B made no progress due to both 'teachers' and 'parents' identifying that he has no emotional problems. Goodman (1997) categorises the SDQ scores into provisional bandings for 2 to 4-year olds based on large population survey 'norms'. If a child is scoring between 0-2 they are considered close to average (like 80% of children), scoring 3 is slightly raised (12%), 4 is high (4%) and between 5-10 very high (4%).



Child A moved from a score of 8 (very high) to a score of 2 (average). The 'parent' SDQ also reported a fall from 8-4. During the observations the researcher documented evidence of progress in emotional development over the initial study period. Child A recorded no emotion seen at 'baseline' but in the 'summative' he progressed to Emerging and Developing in 5 areas. Child B had no score in the emotional problems scale for both SDQ perspectives but Child B is learning to manage his feelings and behaviour when interacting with others. Child B is developing his emotions as he learns to cope with frustration and transfers skills developed in FS to calm his behaviour in continuous provision. This leads to comforting peers in continuous provision at week 6, a significant difference when compared to week 1.

Child L moves from a very high score on this scale to an average score. The reduction is supported by the 'parent' SDQ results although, the scores are a little higher, reduced from 9 to 4. Throughout the observations Child L gains confidence in

the FS environment. The FS practitioner corroborates this scoring secure in most statements on the assessment.



Child O's initial score on the emotional problems scale is considered high. It is the lowest initial score for the research sample although the follow-up score is 'typical'. The 'parent' SDQ is also 'typical' moving from 7-4. When observing Child O enjoyment is present in the FS from week 1. There is very little evidence of emotional impacts in continuous provision for Child O but the FS assessment demonstrates no emotion initially with a move to emerging in most aspects in 'summative'.

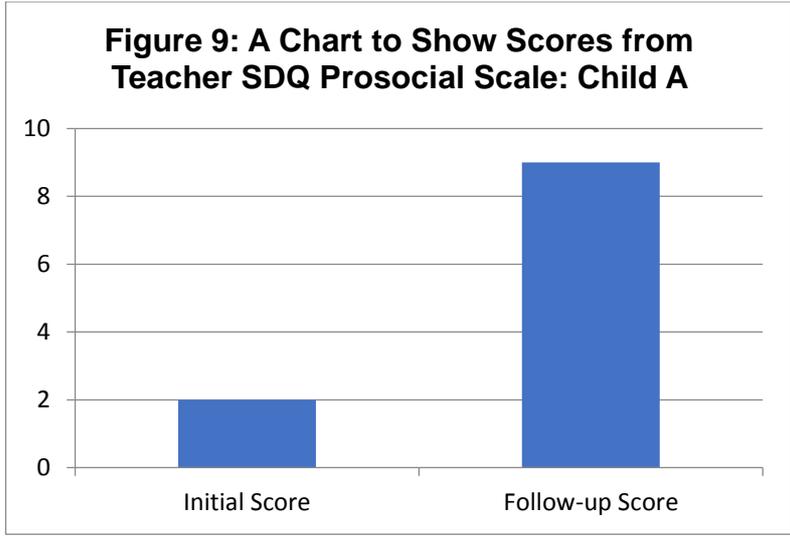
With awareness of how high levels of PSED in children provide a foundation for all future learning (Allen, 2011) the FS environment is demonstrating an improvement in emotional development for all these children. With the provision of healthy relationships between the practitioner and the child, children move to being more confident in expressing themselves in other environments.

### **Practitioner Interaction and Types of Play**

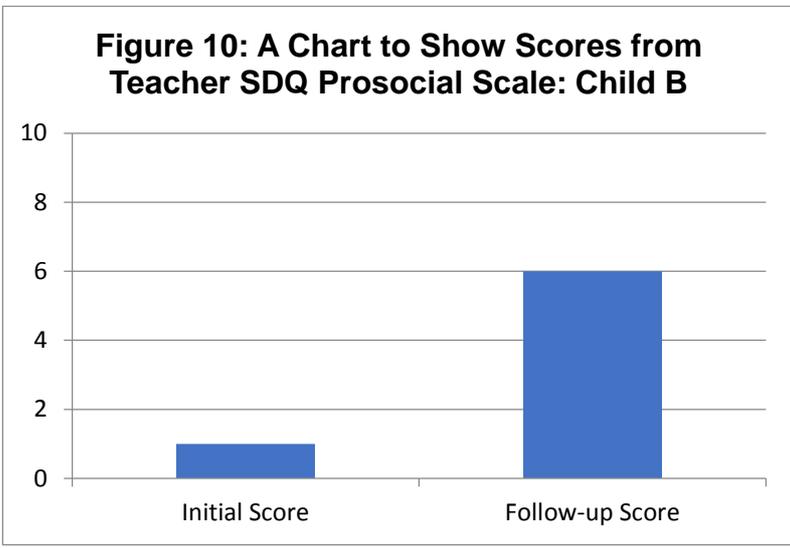
The FS programme implements a range of interaction to ensure that different learning styles (Gardner, 1993) are given equality, allowing the holistic approach of FS to work well. There is evidence of more child-led experiences with communicative and social play, initially in FS, but this is then disseminated across later weeks in the indoor continuous provision environment. FS play and interaction promote pro-social behaviour. The relaxed nature of the FS approach allows children to explore as they chose, instead of achieving planned outcomes. As practitioners began to see the effects of this in the indoor continuous provision a more child-led approach began to emerge in this environment, leading to more pro-social interaction and further development of PSED, instead of interference from practitioners (Blackwell, 2015).

### **Pro-social Evidence**

The children have all made progress in the pro-social scoring by the 'teacher' SDQ, the majority were in the banding that demonstrated the most development with a range of between 7 and 4 points progress. If a child scores between 5-10 on the pro-social scale they are considered close to average (like 80% of children), scoring 4 is slightly lowered (12% of children), 3 is low (4% of children and between 0-2 very low (4% of children). Expected progress is to gain more points on this scale as pro-social behaviours are increased after the intervention.

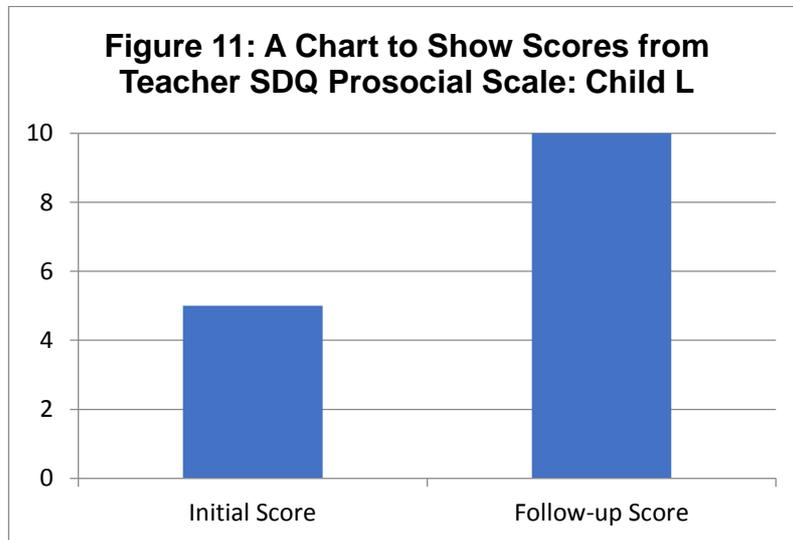


Child A demonstrated pro-social behaviour from week 2 in the FS environment as he begins to talk to peers. In week 3 he actively seeks out peers in FS and practitioners in continuous provision. In week 6 Child A speaks to peers with confidence both in FS and in continuous provision. Child A has made significant development in pro-social aspects on the 'teacher' SDQ (Figure 9) and reinforced with the 'parent' SDQ gaining 4 points on the scale moving from 5-9. The FS assessment moves from emerging in pro-social statements to developing and secure.

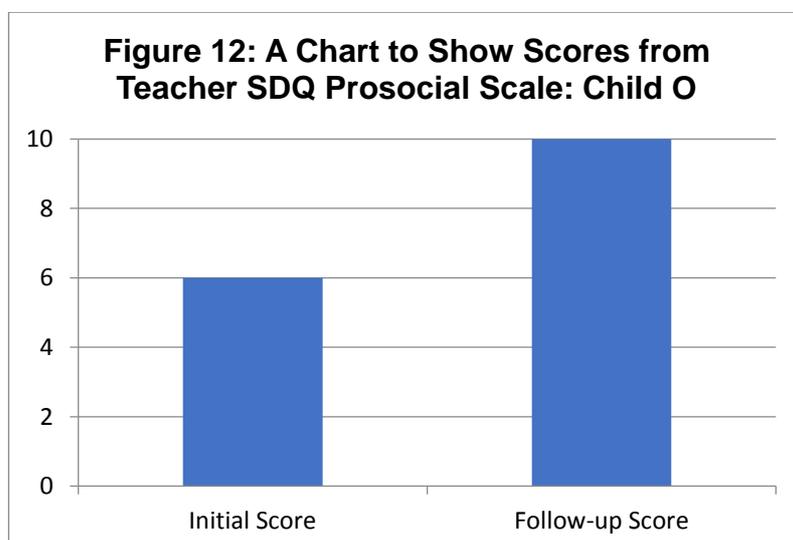


In week 1 Child B demonstrates pro-social behaviour. At FS he seeks the attention of others as he notices aspects of his environment. Child B speaks to others with confidence and encourages his peers in week 2. In week 4 this progresses to

effective collaborative play during indoor continuous provision. Child B builds his pro-social ability each week. This is reinforced with the 'parent' SDQ as he progresses from 7 to 10 points. The FS assessment demonstrates that progress is continuing.



In week 1 Child L makes no attempt to try and interact with others while accessing play opportunities in the continuous provision, compared to week 3 when Child L uses the term 'we' in FS and works closely with peers in continuous provision, even praising others. In week 6 progress is further reported as Child L works with peers and practitioners confidently in FS and in continuous provision, he uses his pro-social skills to help a peer solve problems during an activity. With Child L 5 points difference is seen on the scale as he moves from 5-10. This progress is supported with the 'parent' SDQ score moving from 7-10 points. The FS assessment also notices progress from emerging and developing to secure in all.



Although, the pro-social scale is not the biggest development for Child O he demonstrates the development over the course of the programme as he changes from a reported lack of social behaviour in continuous provision in week 1 to assisting peers to complete a story board in week 6. Over timeframe Child O develops pro-social behaviour as he plays hide and seek with peers in week 2; in week 3 he works with a group to hang the hammocks. The positive difference in the 'teacher' scores is corroborated with the 'parent' SDQ as scores increase 5 points from 3-8. The FS assessment highlights progression from either not seen at all or emerging at the 'baseline' to progressing at least 1 stage in the 'summative' assessment.

The FS experiences have encouraged children to identify and acknowledge their strengths and they have all demonstrated aspects of pro-social behaviour. Evidence shows that all the children have been more willing to join in and talk to others. The FS practitioners have created a positive impact on the intra-personal feelings of children and this has enabled the development of inter-personal relationships with others. Children have confirmed through behaviour in observations of both environments how the FS has impacted their development. It is only when practitioners understand how to respond to individual needs key relationships can be used to build PSED and further pro-social behaviours.

## **Resilience**

There is some evidence of resilience being built across the course of the programme. The FS assessment reported emerging and not seen to developing and secure in resiliency statements. Child B assesses how best to climb the tree deciding that the other tree may be better suited in FS right from week 1. In week 5 at FS Child B recognises the need to practise getting down the tree. More evidence was seen in week 6 as Child B reassures peers *'we can do it again tomorrow though if you want to'*. The FS assessment has not seen much evidence since 'baseline'. Child L shows evidence of resilience in week 4, when climbing a tree *'Look Miss R I can get up now I've been practising and Miss A only helped me once, look!'*. Evidence was found in continuous provision during week 6 when Child L helps a peer to match the numbers explaining each time how she needs to look for 2

numbers not just 1. The FS assessment recorded emerging and developing in all of the sample initially to secure in all after the FS programme was attended.

Child O consistently questions what he is doing and encourages others to see him in week 2 at FS *'I can do it you can see me I can do it look, look at me'*. In week 3 at FS he continuously adjusts the hammock when helping to tie it with the practitioner. The FS assessment shows that areas not seen or emerging in baseline records moved at least one positive step.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

There has been much evidence collected that demonstrates that FS programmes support the development of children's pro-social skills. The most significant finding from the research is that the majority of the children made the most progress on this scale. Some other children made most progress on the peer problems or emotional problems scales, this is possibly due to the severity of these scores on the initial SDQ. It does however suggest that with further exposure to the FS programme may develop stronger pro-social skills. Children are currently demonstrating how they have been able to deal with social situations more capably and are now learning what to expect when placed in different scenarios.

All children have showed progress in the pro-social scale and the researcher concludes that during observation of the FS environment the practice was much more relaxed and child-initiated. The FS practitioner showed great passion in the outdoors and this was different to what was observed in the setting's continuous provision. Although, it was clear to see that the practitioners and children do have very good relationships and work well together, the researcher found that on occasion the language and the questioning from the practitioners during indoor provision put the children off rather than encouraging continuation of their play. Although the involvement of the children in the continuous provision improved greatly towards the end of the programme and children's confidence had become more visible, the practitioners continued to structure aspects of the environment. As time progressed in continuous provision, subtle changes were noticed in various children, from a calming effect, to increased confidence and seeking out others. The researcher can therefore conclude that the FS programme has shown a positive

impact on the children's disposition when undertaking activities in the continuous provision. The impact on attainment, especially in the prime areas of the EYFS (DfE, 2017), is quite dramatic. The evidence reveals that the pro-social skills of all the children involved have made a marked difference in both environments since the beginning of the programme.

The researcher has provided evidence based data that supports existing theory that confirms the FS approach does provide key experiences for children that positively supports their development. In addition, parents also supported these findings. The researcher does not in fact need to generalise the findings of this study as data clearly evidences the theory and the outcomes of this research which can be used as a tool in enriching the local understanding of how FS improves pro-social behaviour and skills in children.

In some ways the ethos of the FS is not met fully at this setting as the FS programme should be longer and continue for up to a year. When used as an intervention, models tend to use a 12-week programme, and currently the setting implements a 6-week programme. With an extension to the programme length the impacts on emotional and pro-social behaviours could monitor the on-going impacts further (Blackwell, 2015).

The researcher proposes training for all the practitioners at the setting to increase their understanding of the FS approach and refocus practitioners on the setting's value of building relationships and a child-led approach.

Practitioners, and research such as this study, will promote and advertise the benefits of FS. Providing advice for schools about the benefits to children involved in FS interventions would encourage them to possibly consider investing 'pupil premium' money towards accessing FS education. With more support from the Local Authority for FS the practice will reach more children and provide a greater impact on all involved. From findings in this research study the FS programme is effective in promoting pro-social skills by providing a safe, secure, natural, child-led environment. The researcher concludes with a quote from McMillian (c. 1925)

*The best classroom and the richest cupboard is roofed only by the sky.*

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