

What inspired you to choose your dissertation topic, and how did you narrow down your focus?

I had always been interested in the geography around education, and particularly how the role of space and place influences the education children and young people receive. Therefore, at the very beginning I was reading quite widely on the topic and one paper, sadly I can't remember which, mentioned forest schools. I had no idea what they were, so I attempted to do a quick search for information. This quickly turned into an extremely deep search moving away from google to specific school websites, education policies and hunting for academic articles. It became noticeable to me early on that research on forest schools, especially from a geographic discipline and in Scotland, was very limited but it was also clear that further insights could be really beneficial as forest schools appeared to be a growing concept across the UK. Therefore, after some discussion with my supervisor, some provisional ideas were set.

I then reached out to various schools and providers to check they would be on board with research because without forest schools to observe or experts to interview, this topic would not have been possible. Once I knew the realms of what would be feasible and understood where the gap in research was, I decided my research aim was to explore the ways forest schools influence children's relationship with people and place in Scotland. From here, I developed my research questions which guided the whole process.

How did you find the dissertation experience? What were the highs and lows (challenges and rewards)?

I honestly loved the whole dissertation experience, and I will treasure memories from it for a long time!

Personally, the biggest challenge was time management. Due to the amount of time I spent travelling around Scotland for observations, I kept feeling that I was wasting time. It wasn't until analysing my data (months into my research) that I began to see that my observations, and the travelling that comes with that, was not 'wasted' but instead incredibly valuable. Additionally, due to limited research in this area, I had to read wider than I would have liked to find information and when I didn't use a paper I read, I thought of this as wasted time. Again, it took a significant amount of time to understand this was not wasted but was guiding the direction of my research and helping me see directions for future research.

In terms of highlights, the opportunity to engage deeply with a topic of genuine interest is an extraordinary privilege. There is such a distinct joy in not only observing but immersing yourself in first-hand what you are researching and getting to hear from individuals with their own lived experiences. Children have such a unique voice and story to tell so getting to capture this as authentically as I could, by telling their story of forest school, was maybe my greatest highlight of all. Also, overcoming even small challenges, such as those I mentioned, helps you realise that writing a dissertation is a mental battle as opposed to an academic one. Realising part of the way through the experience that I actually could do it, was the extra boost I needed to continue giving it my all.

What advice would you give other undergraduate students undertaking a (GCYFRG-related) dissertation?

I have three key points: biggest, most important and most encouraging.

First, my biggest advice is chose a topic you will enjoy. There will be many moments you want to give up but if you at least enjoy your research topic, it is much easier to find motivation again. This should also be the case for what methodology (both data collection and analysis) you chose, for example if you don't like analysing quantitative data, don't collect it.

Second, my most important advice would be that the children and young people that you are going to work are significantly greater experts than you are, so allow that to be showcased. If you give their experiences and voices the time and energy they deserve, your research will be so much richer and so much more enjoyable. Similarly, adults within your focus are going to have valuable insights so asking a question such as 'Is there anything else you want me to know?', at the end of any formal or informal conversation is a great way to ensure you don't miss key outcomes of research questions.

Finally, my most encouraging advice, is that believe that you can do it because I promise you can. You have all the skills you need, you just need to know that you can use them without someone telling you exactly how to. The admin, the reading, the collection, analysing, writing, it is all daunting. However, when you break the whole dissertation down it is much more manageable and honestly can be really fun.