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Practitioners' perspectives on children's engagement in forest school

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ABSTRACT

Forest school is a pedagogical practice widely used in the U.K., and increasingly in other parts of the world. This paper contributes to the growing body of research on forest school by focussing on how children engage with and respond to forest school. It draws on practitioners' experience of working with children to examine their perspectives on how children react to forest school. While practitioners felt the majority of children enjoyed forest school, they identified six specific groups of children who benefit. The findings are related to existing research to explore how the learning environment enables children to experience individual learning journeys at forest school.

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Introduction

Forest school is a popular form of outdoor learning, originally derived from nature kindergartens of Scandinavia. The current practice in the U.K., which has in turn been exported to many countries including Canada and Australia (Harris 2022), is based on regular (weekly or biweekly) two-hour sessions of child-centred learning in an outdoor (ideally woodland) environment. Although neither part of the national curriculum nor centrally funded, forest school has proved a popular form of pedagogy, especially (but not exclusively) among primary and early years settings. However, there is as yet no agreed theory on how forest school benefits children (Harris 2022). This paper reports the findings of a study which aimed to discern how children engage and respond to forest school. Drawing on the experience of forest school leaders, this research used semi-structured interviews to gather their perceptions of how children engage with forest school, and the different ways children may respond to this form of pedagogy. This paper explores how a single pedagogical approach can be supportive of the variety of children which make up a typical class.

Forest school

Forest school was first introduced to the U.K. in the early 1990s and is now a pedagogical practice which draws on the ethos of Scandinavian kindergartens (e.g. Danish Udeskole, Swedish 'come rain or shine' kindergartens [Sobel 2014]). There is an established forest school training programme and accreditation process for forest school leaders, coordinated by the Forest School Association (FSA), which also defines six principles of forest school (FSA, n.d.). In 2015, the FSA asserted that there were 12,000 trained practitioners (Mycok 2020).

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Existing research on forest school highlights their role in supporting children's holistic development, claiming it impacts on children's confidence and self-esteem; development of social and team working skills; development of language and communication skills; that it improves motivation and encourages concentration; contributes to children's knowledge and understanding; and improves physical motor skills (Elliott 2015; Mackinder 2017; Maynard 2007a; O'Brien and Murray 2007; O'Brien 2009; Slade, Lowery, and Bland 2013; Tiplady and Menter 2021). Researchers noted the importance of child-led and play-based learning, and pursuit of risk and adventure within forest school (Maynard 2007b; Ridgers, Knowles, and Sayers 2012). Some research focusses on how forest school impacts on specific children: those with specific needs around personal, social and emotional development (Bradley and Male 2017; Cudworth and Lumber 2021; Harris 2018; Manner, Doi, and Laird 2021; McCree, Cutting, and Sherwin 2018; Roe and Aspinall 2011; Swarbrick, Eastwood, and Tutton 2004; Tiplady and Menter 2021); or how it can contribute to children's nature connection and environmental awareness (Barrable and Booth 2020; Cudworth 2020; Cumming and Nash 2015; Harris 2017; 2021; Mycock 2020; Smith, Dunhill, and Scott 2018). Two recently published reviews provide summaries of existing literature (Garden and Downes 2021; Harris 2022).

Rickinson et al. (2004, 56) have argued that it is important to deepen our understanding of outdoor learning practices. Fundamental to forest school are the principles of child-led, play-based, experiential outdoor learning (FSA, n.d.). Dewey (1938, 43) highlights the individuality of experiences by noting that 'an experience is always what it is because of the transaction taking place between the individual and, what at the time, constitutes the environment'. When applied to children at forest school, this suggests that each child's experience of forest school will be unique depending on their own personal circumstances and how they interact with the forest school session: the environment, the other people, and the activities. Each group of children attending forest school will bring a range of competencies, experiences, and attitudes to forest school sessions. Some children may have experienced forest school before (e.g. at a different school or nursery), some may be confident in playing outdoors, whereas others may have had less experience of outdoor play and time in nature. Their prior life experiences may impact on how they respond to challenge, risk, creativity or novelty offered at forest school sessions. Therefore, as with many experiential learning experiences, each child's experience of forest school will depend on their previous experiences (Ord and Leather 2018). Each 'encounter' (Boniface 2006; Brown 2004) at forest school will be a result of a child 'trying and undergoing' activities.

Concerning children's engagement with forest school, Waite and Goodenough (2018) argue that the different 'cultural density' of forest school shapes the learning environment and experiences of children at forest school. Cultural density is defined as 'the nature, thickness and dominance of habitus and norms of practice in places' (Waite 2013, 413). It is argued that the forest school setting contrasts significantly with the school and indoor classroom, which are spaces of norms of practice and behaviour, and it is argued that the more informal outdoor learning of forest school 'opens a space ... to experiment with other ways of being, supporting creative learning' (Waite 2013, 419). This allows those leading sessions the freedom to be more relaxed about achieving set outcomes in a set time, and gives children the space to explore and experiment at their own pace.

The above arguments around cultural density are supported by Harris' (2018) work on the outdoor learning space at forest school. She argues that the space provides three fundamental freedoms: from the physical constraints of walls, ceilings, and being compressed within a classroom; from the behavioural constraints associated with classroom behaviour (e.g. noise, movement); and from the constraints of the national curriculum. Instead, it is argued, the outdoor learning space provides freedom to move and express oneself in the larger, outdoor learning space, freedom to engage with and make the most of the affordances of the natural environment, and freedom to enable children time to follow their own interests. Similarly, Tiplady and Menter's (2021) study of children with severe social, emotional and behavioural issues which impacted on their mental wellbeing noted that the flexibility of forest school, in terms of the space, the activities,

and the individual support received from activity leaders, allowed children to each pursue and therefore experience the sessions in individual ways, and so 'take what they need' from forest school.

Sharma-Brymer et al. (2018) recognise that forest school does not develop all children in a uniform way, but instead aims to present a conducive environment to children, in response to which each will develop in their own individual way. Sharma-Brymer et al. (2018) have explored the relevance of the ecological dynamics approach (Brymer and Davids 2014) to forest school. They identify the value of this theoretical framework for understanding how children interact with the environment (in its broadest sense: the place, the people and the affordances offered by the environment) while at forest school. Fundamentally, the ecological dynamics approach recognises that people are a complex mixture of physical, emotional, cognitive and spiritual attributes and abilities. Their work centres on the affordances (Gibson 1997) offered through forest school, which may be emotional, social or cognitive, and the ability of children to engage with, and take, opportunities offered by that learning environment. They also highlight the importance of the practitioners in guiding, supporting and enabling children to make the most of the affordances available to them, noting that as each child is individual, the affordances available to them might vary.

Murphy (2020) considers the relevance of Bronfenbrenner's ecological model to Forest School. This model highlights the many different factors influencing children, from the activities and relationships within the family and home, through wider spheres of influence (school, community, and culture, politics and governance), some of which are more likely to be experienced as they grow older. It highlights the potential of forest school to be an influencing factor on children's development in their early years or primary education, (however it should also be remembered that this is an activity at best practised for two hours each week, and therefore its influence must be considered in the wider context and constraints of the myriad other influences facing children).

Barrable and Arvanitis (2019) identify key elements of forest school practice which support children's self determination and engagement with learning, via autonomy, competence, and relatedness. They discuss how ideally forest school offers autonomy, choice, opportunities to develop communication and competence, the affordances of nature, scaffolding of risk and some structure and guidelines for behaviour (though different from a classroom setting), and feedback. It also offers opportunities for children to engage with, and develop relationships with other children, their teachers / practitioners, and with nature.

Several researchers identify the role of the forest school leader (practitioner or teacher) in supporting a child-led learning approach, providing opportunities and choices from which children can choose to learn, and facilitating that learning process (Barrable and Arvanitis 2019; Harris 2017; Sharma-Brymer et al. 2018; Tiplady and Menter 2021). The session leader is in a unique position to support children in their activities, to encourage and to guide.

Taken together, these studies (Barrable and Arvanitis 2019; Harris 2017; Sharma-Brymer et al. 2018; Waite and Goodenough 2018 and Tiplady and Menter 2021) suggest that it is the flexibility, and individuality of children and the learning space that shape the outcomes of forest school. This contrasts with a more process and output-oriented model of some outdoor learning (Loynes 1998; Pierce and Beames 2022) where children engage in a specific activity with a clear end goal. These studies all acknowledge the diversity of children attending forest school, and the role of the practitioner in offering choice and affordances for children to engage in a variety of ways at forest school.

This paper explores this further through empirical work with forest school practitioners who are experienced in leading many sessions with many cohorts of children. They were asked to reflect on how they felt children engaged with forest school. In doing this, it explores the variety of ways children engage with and respond to forest school sessions, and addresses the question how does a single pedagogical intervention impact on the variety of children to make up a typical primary school class?

Method

This empirical research was conducted in two stages, taking an inductive approach using qualitative methods. The research protocol was approved through the University's ethics committee.

In phase one, 71 children from a rural primary school in Hertfordshire were observed as they attended forest school (in groups of approximately 15, each for 5–6 weeks) as an 'enrichment activity' on Friday afternoons. These observations provided the basis for the development of further research questions:

What are children learning at forest school? (see Harris 2017)

What is significant about the outdoor learning space at forest school? (see Harris 2018)

How do children engage with and respond to forest school?

The aim of the second phase of research was to increase the scope of research to include more children and schools. To achieve this, the data collection moved from observations of children attending sessions to semi-structured interviews with forest school practitioners, who could draw on several years' of experience leading forest school with a range of children of varying ages (generally EYFS/ KS1/KS2 but sometimes older children), needs (e.g. SEND) and from a range of schools. In doing this, it expands the scope of the research from a case study to wider set of forest school practitioners, schools and children, so drawing on a larger and more diverse set of observations from which to draw conclusions. This is in contrast to much of the research on forest school which draws on small samples size, often from individual settings (Harris 2022).

Many forest school leaders are members of forest school cluster groups: regionally organised groups of practitioners who meet periodically for networking, to exchange ideas for best practice, and arrange continuing professional development. Together this community of practice (Wenger 1998) hold a wealth of experience and can play a role as conduits of evidence (Waite and Goode-nough 2010), drawing on their experience of leading multiple cohorts of children through many forest school sessions, and provide valuable perspectives for research (e.g. Tiplady and Menter, 2021; Cudworth 2020).

Drawing on the network of forest school cluster groups, twenty practitioners agreed to be interviewed in this study (13 women, 7 men), coming from 3 areas drawing on urban (5), peri-urban (8), and rural (7) schools. Two were teachers based at schools, 13 external providers of forest school, and 5 were based at education centres or environmental trusts. All practitioners interviewed had been practising for more than three years in a range of schools and settings.

The semi-structured interview schedule was developed following the results of phase one research, with questions aimed at drawing on practitioners' experiential knowledge to delve further into the three research questions identified above. Semi-structured interviews took between 25 and 40 minutes and were conducted by telephone, recorded and transcribed.

Thematic Analysis of interview transcripts was done in several stages, following guidance from Braun and Clarke (2006), and echoing approaches used by other researchers in this field (Ärle-malm-Hagsér 2013; Cumming and Nash 2015; Kemp 2020; and Tiplady and Menter 2021).

Stage 1: Initial immersion in the data, reading though all interviews to become familiar with breadth and depth of content.

Stage 2: First round of coding to identify comments relating to the three main research questions above.

Stage 3: Focussing specifically on material relating to the research question 'How do children engage with and respond to forest school?' a further phase of sub-coding took place, to identify sub-themes emerging from the data.

Stage 4: Analysis of each sub-theme (see results Section 1–6).

Stage 5: Identification of any further issues (see discussion).

Stage 6: Illustrative quotes were identified for use in this paper.

Results

Practitioners felt that all children responded well to forest school.

the most standard reaction you get is actually them really loving for the first time having the freedom and the choice and just responding very positively. You know, that would be the response in, sort of, about 75% of the pupils we have

average 99% children enchanted in the woods

Forest school leaders stressed the experience of forest school was different for all children. Leaders said 'it touches people differently' and that each child was on a different learning journey. Practitioners recognised that what children needed 'depends on where they are coming from'.

it's fantastic to see how universal it is and that each participant will be taking something completely different away from the whole experience.

So that while the quotes above indicate practitioners perceived children were responding positively, forest school leaders stressed that the experience of forest school was different for all children. Although words such as 'transformational process' were used, the transformations were different. 'Every child is responding in a different way and every child I suppose it gets different benefits', with practitioners saying children 'take what they need'.

Thus, while practitioners interviewed believed that all children benefitted from forest school, they went on to identify six specific issues which they felt forest School supported. Although listed separately below, it is acknowledged that these are not discrete issues, and instead that for individual children, there may be some connection between one issue and another, for example overcoming shyness and increasing confidence may support increased communication.

1. Overcoming shyness and increasing confidence

The most commonly noted change (12 out of 20 respondents) was in shy and quiet children who seemed to 'come out of their shell' and develop confidence. Some said this group benefitted the most.

Practitioners observed that quieter children who might 'disappear' in the classroom tended to come out in forest school and gain confidence quite quickly, though another practitioner suggested some had a 'more measured response' and would remain separate from other children unless leaders facilitated.

Practitioners noted shy children 'relaxed'.

really quiet girls – and it does tend to be girls, who have learned how to be good very early and are very worried about not being good – finding a real chance to open up and be themselves when they get out in the woodland.

Several practitioners specifically mentioned growing confidence, saying they saw children 'become more confident working in outdoors'.

Forest school 'brings them out of themselves, gives them space and all the positives ... Really letting them develop how they feel comfortable.

They perceived the key to this was the forest school ethos of 'building them up rather than making them feel they have got to succeed ... Short achievable tasks and activities'. Practitioners suggested that success in this new environment provided a sense of achievement, and so supported those lacking confidence and self-esteem.

2. Communication and talking

Practitioners noted 'greater communication, especially for silent / non-talkers, and noted that it was good for developing language skills, especially among 'elective mute children ... and EAL children [who were] very underconfident in class about talking but suddenly seem to find their voice in forest school'. The development of language skills helped those who were non-communicative due to lack of language or vocabulary.

3. Calming anxious children

Many practitioners (8 out of 20) specifically commented on the calming and relaxing effect of being outdoors. In general, there were children who found it harder to concentrate indoors, and found the outdoors calmer.

inside children find it hard to concentrate because so much going on in one space ... outdoors the surroundings are still and green.. calmer.

Practitioners felt that those who were anxious in the classroom found it more peaceful outside, and noted this was especially significant for children who were autistic, were diagnosed with ADHD, or who found the noise of the classroom distracting. It was suggested this might be due to ability to move more outdoors.

4. Behaviour and focus

A group clearly identified were those with challenging behaviour.

Children I am told that are actually going to be really difficult outside, because they are difficult within the confines of the classroom, I have no problems with outside.

Those who struggle in classroom with concentration and engaging in lessons and things really seem to thrive outside.

Within this group were some who were not able to sit still in a classroom. Children who found the classroom environment and classroom-based tasks challenging, enjoyed the learning style offered in forest school.

5. Disaffected learners and school avoiders

Disaffected children, often school avoiders or those disengaged in the classroom, found forest school was enjoyable, and provided something to look forward to at school. Practitioners noted a 'massive effect on children who aren't getting that sense of achievement from being in school'.

It was noted that for those children who were less successful in a classroom setting, the outdoor environment provided different opportunities and required a different skill base, so that 'underachievers in school achieve more outside because more confident and able ... can throw, den build, builds confidence'.

Forest school leaders who had experience of working with those children who had almost been excluded from school noted that those children who were currently not accessing the curriculum responded positively to forest school over the longer term.

6. Cultural and social integration

Practitioners also noted more mixing between children, and in particular, that it helped specific groups of children (e.g. traveller children, or groups from specific migrant communities) to integrate more with the rest of the class.

helps with building peer groups

rugged and robust (traveller boys) do well. Those good at sit down paper and pencil tasks don't.

girls from Pakistan come out of their shell.

Discussion

The question of how many sessions were required to see a response was addressed by some of the forest school leaders interviewed. Some children were said to respond immediately, but the time for a response depended on the child, with some saying 6 weeks was a tipping point, after which children would take off, but also that some children might require longer.

A concern raised was how the experiences at forest school were integrated with the classroom setting. There were concerns that 'external providers barely have time to get to know children, especially if a short programme e.g. 6 weeks', and also do not see the children in the classroom setting. This was described by one practitioner as follows:

I think one of the problems with doing what we do, being a Forest School leader is that ... because we're an outside service, we go in and we do the job, we do the leading, we do the session and we're actually letting the teachers and the readers do the observations and the study of how it's impacting the children The problem is that we tend to get to second or even third hand awareness of that.

Thus although practitioners may identify what they perceive as changes in the children attending the forest school sessions they lead, they do not have detailed prior knowledge of the children and their needs, nor the ability to follow up on the observed activities and experiences within the classroom.

Conclusions

This research sought to examine in more depth the way in which children engage with and respond to the opportunity of forest school. Drawing on the experiences of 20 practitioners, who all had experience working with children who came from a range of schools, settings, and environments (rural/ urban/ periurban), it allowed the research to expand beyond small-scale or case study work.

At a general level, practitioners felt that all children responded well to forest school. Children enjoyed themselves, had fun, engaged in physical activity, connected to nature (Harris 2017; Harris 2021). The space and mobility in the sessions allowed for greater social mixing, and tasks sometimes involved teamwork, so children were encouraged to communicate, negotiate, and develop social skills. Children learned new vocabulary as they came across new things and new activities. As children were presented with new challenges, they learned to assess and manage risk, and gained a sense of achievement, which may contribute to increased self-confidence. It is acknowledged that the research is based on practitioners' perceptions of what children were experiencing, and not the children's voices themselves. As Leather (2013) has discussed, self confidence and self-esteem are complicated concepts, and there are questions concerning the ability of teachers or forest school leaders to identify and measure a change in these qualities.

Practitioners also noted particular groups of children that benefited from forest school. Those who were shy or lacked confidence were seen to speak up and believed to gain in confidence, something also noticed by Manner, Doi and Laird (2021), working with adolescent girls, Roe and Aspinall (2011) in their work with teenage girls, and McCree, Cutting, and Sherwin (2018) working with boys. The development of language skills helped those who were non-communicative due to lack of language or vocabulary. Swarbrick, Eastwood, and Tutton (2004) also noted that forest School seemed to encourage quieter children to be more vocal. Practitioners also noted more mixing between children, and in particular, that it helped specific groups of children to integrate more with the rest of the class. Many practitioners noted the calming and relaxing effect of being outdoors, and this was especially significant for children with special education needs, as noted in

other research (Bradley and Male 2017; Harris 2018). Children who found the classroom environment and classroom-based tasks challenging, enjoyed the learning style offered in forest school. Disaffected children, often school avoiders or those disengaged in the classroom, found forest school was enjoyable, and provided something to look forward to at school, which was similarly found by Tiplady and Menter (2021). Success in this new environment provided a sense of achievement, and so was believed to support those lacking confidence and self-esteem.

As Sharma-Brymer et al. (2018) argue, a well-designed forest school is not a programme which uniformly develops all children, but instead the presentation of a conducive environment to all children: each will then respond and develop in their own individual way. Each child is unique arriving at Forest school with their own characteristics personalities, experiences, and skills (Sharma-Brymer et al. 2018) based on previous influences (Murphy 2020). Forest school offers a variety of activities and challenges, and the results presented in this paper indicate that children engage with and respond to forest school in a variety of ways. The change in cultural density (Waite and Goodenough 2018) and freedoms offered by this outdoor learning space (Harris 2017) create a flexible environment in which children can exercise autonomy and choice (Barrable and Arvanitis 2019). Amongst the opportunities and activities offered children will find things easy, hard, new, or challenging depending on their own prior experiences, personalities, and preferred learning styles.

Forest school provided opportunities which all children can take (e.g. good communication skills can improve further). The variety of opportunities it offers may mean all children take away something of benefit. Practitioners hoped that the reported benefits arising from forest school would be transferred back to the classroom setting: greater confidence, communication, and engagement are all valuable attributes to bring to the classroom setting, and if they result in a more conducive learning environment in the classroom, then this is good for the whole class. This was noted by teachers who felt that classes who attend forest school were calmer and more engaged in learning.

The findings of this study suggest that Forest school offers something to all children, but not the same thing for all. Forest school is not a process which provides a standard output (Loynes 1998), rather it is an arena in which a wide variety of children can each enter with their own needs, and each gain individually, so supporting both personal growth, and providing a collective benefit for the class as a whole.

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