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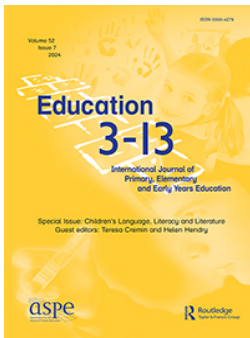
Foucault and power: UK forest school as a socially constructed space for early years teachers and forest school leaders

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines power dynamics between early years teachers and Forest School leaders within the Forest School environment, drawing upon a Foucauldian perspective. Building upon Maynard's (2007) work, the study explores encounters with Foucault's ideas in UK Forest School context to unravel socio-cultural dynamics and investigate how educators negotiate complex power relations. Four participants, comprising two early years teachers and two Forest School leaders, engaged in weekly Forest School sessions with their reception class, that is, children aged 4–5 years over the period of one year. Through thematic analysis, distinct themes of power dynamics, reimagining learning environments, and risk and resilience emerged. Adopting a Foucauldian lens sheds light on challenges encountered by educators in outdoor settings, revealing inherent power dynamics. This study contributes to discourse on theory-practice integration in outdoor education, emphasising the potential for Foucauldian analysis to deepen understanding of power relations within Forest School settings.

Introduction

This paper builds upon Maynard's (2007) exploration of power dynamics between two early years (EY) teachers and two Forest School (FS) workers within the Forest School environment, employing a Foucauldian perspective to dissect the clash of dominant discourses shaping their views on education, childhood, and nature. By examining encounters with Foucault within the UK FS context, this study of EY teachers in the FS setting seeks to unravel the intricate socio-cultural dynamics at play and explore how early years educators navigate and negotiate these complex power relations. At the heart of Foucault's philosophy is the concept of power as pervasive and productive, operating not only through overt forms of coercion but also through subtle mechanisms of control embedded within societal norms and institutions. Within the Forest School context, power dynamics manifest in various ways, influencing the distribution of authority, the construction of knowledge, and the negotiation of roles and responsibilities among educators and learners.

Arguably, Forest Schools, as situated within the broader cultural and social educational field, are not exempt from power dynamics (Maynard 2007). Initially inspired by Danish early years education, Forest School emerged in the UK through interpretations of early years practitioners (Knight 2011). Originating from Denmark, Forest School was introduced in England in 1993 through the initiative of Bridgwater College, Somerset, after witnessing Denmark's outdoor learning practices (Garden and

Downes 2021). This inception led to the establishment of numerous Forest School projects across Great Britain reflecting an increasing acknowledgment of its benefits for holistic child development and environmental awareness (Garden 2022). While initially designed for early childhood education, Forest School's influence expanded to encompass older age groups and children with additional needs like SEMH, resonating with movements advocating natural play, woodland culture, land rights, and child-centred learning (Cree and McCree 2012; DfES 2007). Despite its Scandinavian roots emphasising child-led learning, tensions arise in England due to the necessity of aligning sessions with the curriculum, potentially commodifying Forest School culture and diluting its essence (Morgan 2018).

Forest School practitioners, forming the Forest School Association (FSA 2021), shared beliefs and experiences, leading to the establishment of core values (Burr 2015) advocating for regular outdoor engagements, particularly within woodland settings, to nurture children's development. As the FSA expanded and practitioners gained experience, these values evolved, reflecting the dynamic nature of Forest School (Knight 2011). Recognising this fluidity is vital, as it underscores how practitioners continuously shape Forest School's trajectory. Whilst this presents challenges in defining its practices, it offers opportunities to scrutinise its theoretical foundations and core values in light of current evidence. Combining Forest School principles with Foucauldian philosophy (Foucault 1977) may provide critical theoretical insights into power, knowledge, and subjectivity within Forest School practice. According to Foucault (1977), knowledge is intimately intertwined with power and is produced and disseminated through various discourses. Institutions like schools and universities, including Forest Schools, are not just physical entities but are also constituted through hierarchical relationships. These relationships shape the distribution of power within these institutions or organisations.

The approaches to learning within Forest School are deeply rooted in a democratic learning style (Blackham, Cocks, and Bunce 2023). This educational method is grounded in a socio-constructivist perspective (Mackinder 2023) emphasising active participation in the learning process and fostering the development of a learning community. Within this community, meaning is co-created through interactions among pedagogues, fellow learners, and the natural environment. As Mackinder (2023) argues that the way adults perceive children significantly influences their expectations of what children can achieve and determines their approach to scaffolding or co-constructing learning experiences. When adults view children as capable individuals, they are more likely to engage in co-constructive practices, such as collaboratively developing a forest kindergarten.

Similarly, Scandinavian Forest School practices prioritise child-led learning, fostering greater engagement and richer learning experiences (Biesta 2012; Garden and Downes 2021), contrasting with the English emphasis on aligning sessions with the curriculum, generating tensions between structured and child-led approaches. This cultural shift towards commodification risks diminishing the potential of Forest Schools, shifting focus from risk, freedom, and exploration to controlled activities for curriculum enrichment, a phenomenon termed 'scolonisation' (Morgan 2018). Despite Forest School's rapid growth in the UK, concerns persist regarding genuine understanding and reflective practice, challenging the assumption that undertaking Forest School training guarantees deep engagement (Leather 2018).

A socially constructed space

Foundational to various outdoor learning theories, including Forest School, are philosophical underpinnings concerning experiential learning (Harris 2017; Garden and Downes 2023; Knight et al. 2023). Much of this is rooted in the ideas of educational philosopher Dewey (1997), who posited that learning is an active process involving direct experience, reflection, and application. Dewey also advocated for education based on democratic principles, where learning aligns with learners' interests and involves collaborative decision-making, problem-solving, and community-building. Central to Dewey's philosophy, and shared by many social constructivist learning theorists like Vygotsky

(1986), is the belief that social interaction is crucial to learning; a principle deeply embedded in Forest School practice.

Continuity is a fundamental aspect of social constructivist experiential learning theories (Mackinder 2023), wherein each experience and its iterations build upon previous ones, fostering the development of knowledge and understanding over time. This perspective underscores Forest School's core values, emphasising its long-term, ongoing nature rather than being a one-off or short-term endeavour. Coates and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) utilise concepts from social constructivist experiential learning to present their findings, focusing on how play opportunities within Forest School settings provide learners with hands-on and experiential learning experiences. Their analysis extends to a broader examination of how social constructivist learning theories highlight the learning processes within Forest School settings, particularly through social play, teamwork, and interactions between adults and children. Knight et al. (2023) similarly explore Forest School's evolution, rooted in social constructionist ideology, where ongoing discourse and dialogue shape its concepts and categories through language and experiential learning (Burr and Dick 2017).

Learning in Forest School encompasses a diverse range of activities, drawing from various theoretical concepts that extend beyond the traditional UK curriculum (Blackham, Cocks, and Bunce 2023). Forest School leaders, acting as facilitators rather than instructors, are influenced by theorists such as Dewey (1997), Freire (1972), and Vygotsky (1978). Dewey advocated for a democratic and child-centred approach to education, believing that children should be free to pursue their interests and that the outdoors could serve as a facilitative environment for learning. Similarly, Freire viewed students as active participants in the learning process, emphasising the role of the teacher in providing an introduction to the topic while allowing learners to experiment and discover ideas independently (Blackham, Cocks, and Bunce 2023). Garden and Downes (2023) argue that Forest School serves as a socially constructed space where cultural norms, beliefs, and practices intersect with theories of childhood development, such as Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky 1986).

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasises culture as a crucial mediator of daily activities, with laws, beliefs, and practices deeply embedded in individuals' cultural experiences (Vygotsky 1986). This suggests that the outdoors in the UK holds a distinct cultural value, characterised by apprehension towards activities like young children lighting fires or chopping wood (Knight 2013). Forest Schools, although less 'wild' than the Danish approach, challenge both children's and adults' fears of the outdoor environment (Dabaja 2023). For instance, children gain confidence to use equipment they would not normally handle and learn about wildlife through activities like digging for worms, enabling them to take risks and grow physically and emotionally in a secure setting, diverging from the typical school day. Forest School spaces can be understood as products of interrelations with multiplicity and space as co-constitutive (Massey 1995), wherein each entity exerts causal powers over the other. Consequently, space is in a perpetual state of construction (Garden and Downes 2023).

Massey's (2005) and Lefebvre's (1991) theories on the socially constructed nature of space hold significance within the context of Forest School practice. Embracing Massey's assertion that space is dynamic and shaped by social relations and power dynamics challenges conventional perceptions of outdoor learning environments. In Forest School settings, this perspective highlights that natural spaces are not static but are imbued with human interactions, cultural influences, and historical processes. Understanding the social construction of these spaces may encourage a more nuanced and responsive approach to Forest School practice. Integrating Massey's and Lefebvre's insights into Forest School practice encourages educators to critically examine and reshape the spaces in which they operate (Massey 2005; Lefebvre 1991; Garden 2022).

Forest Schools offer a distinct environment where novel interactions, rituals, and pedagogical approaches can be forged, potentially yielding positive impacts on participants' mental health and well-being (Manner, Doi, and Laird 2021). A co-constructive perspective acknowledges the relational dynamic between children, culture, risk, and the Forest School space they inhabit and help shape (Garden 2023). Within the UK Forest School framework, a constructivist pedagogy underpins the approach, with meaning derived through theoretical frameworks (Leather 2018). Children

actively engage in constructing meaning through interactions with peers, adults, and the environment, aligning with Forest School's emphasis on learners as co-constructors rather than passive recipients of knowledge.

In the context of Forest Schools, poststructuralist ideas, particularly those of Foucault, provide a lens through which to understand power dynamics and knowledge construction within these educational environments. Foucault's emphasis on the pervasive nature of power challenges traditional views of authority, highlighting how power operates silently through social practices and relations (Foucault 1977). This perspective sheds light on how Forest Schools, by empowering children to direct their own learning and engage in risky play, challenge conventional power structures prevalent in traditional education systems (Maynard 2007). Furthermore, Foucault's concept of disciplinary power resonates with the regulatory mechanisms observed in Forest Schools, where children are encouraged to self-regulate their behaviour within the boundaries of the natural environment (Foucault 1977; Garden 2023). The notion of hierarchical observation also finds relevance in Forest School settings, where educators adopt a facilitative role, providing guidance while allowing children autonomy to explore and learn (Foucault 1977).

Methodology

Participants

In order to build on Maynard's (2007) study four participants, consisting of the two early years teachers (Teacher A and Teacher B) and two Forest School leaders (FS Leader A and FS Leader B) were selected for the study. The participants attended weekly Forest School sessions over the period of one-year with their reception class (children aged 4–5 years) run by the two Forest School leaders. The researcher who was also a Forest School leader and tutor conducted the on-site interviews.

Ethical considerations

Acknowledging my role as a Forest School leader, I recognise the potential for implicit biases in my research. My familiarity with Forest School philosophy may influence how I perceive and interpret responses, potentially skewing the findings to align with my own experiences and beliefs. To address this, I adopted structured interviews to delve into the experiences of teachers and Forest School leaders in the Forest School environment, which aimed to ensure consistency and minimise subjective influence. Additionally, I emphasised anonymity and confidentiality to encourage honest feedback from participants. Engaging in reflective practice (Harris 2021) and seeking peer reviews throughout the research process further helped mitigate the impact of my biases, striving for a more balanced and objective study.

Ethical approval was secured from the University Ethics Committee prior to commencement of the study. Adhering to the BERA Ethical Guidelines (2018), all participants provided voluntary informed consent. Participants were briefed in advance of the sessions, receiving letters of consent and information sheets outlining the study's purpose, ensuring confidentiality, and addressing data protection concerns. Quotes were digitally recorded during the interviews and subsequently anonymised to safeguard participant identities, aligning with the Data Protection Act 1998. The BERA (2018) Ethical Guidelines stipulate participants' right to withdraw from research without explanation, and this right was clearly communicated to all participants through the participant information sheet and consent forms.

Tool of data collection

The data collection process involved conducting structured interviews. An interview schedule of six questions was developed based on the reviewed literature. The questions were designed to unravel

the intricate socio-cultural dynamics at play and explore how early years educators and Forest School leaders navigate and negotiate these complex power relations. The questions were:

1. How do you perceive the distribution of power between you / they as Forest School leaders and / or as teachers during your sessions?
2. In your experience, how do the power dynamics between the Forest School leaders / teachers and the children influence the activities and learning experiences?
3. How does the flexibility of the Forest School environment allow for different forms of learning and engagement compared to indoor settings?
4. How do you feel the physical space of the Forest School influences the power dynamics between you as teachers / Forest School leaders, the children and the environment?
5. In what ways does the Forest School's natural setting impact the children's learning experiences and interactions?
6. How do you approach the concept of risk and resilience in Forest School and what role does it play in the children's learning experiences?

The interviews, which lasted an average of 30 minutes, were recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy and richness of detail for analysis.

Analysis of data

In this study, thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2023), served as the methodological framework for data analysis. Thematic analysis is a systematic qualitative research approach widely acknowledged for its ability to thoroughly examine textual or visual data, aiming to identify recurring patterns, themes, and insights. It was selected for this study due to its systematic and comprehensive nature, enabling the researchers to thoroughly explore the data derived from the experiences of early years teachers and Forest School leaders in the Forest School environment. To ensure rigour and reliability, strategies were employed such as transcribing interviews verbatim and acknowledging the researcher's biases (Blackham, Cocks, and Bunce 2023). The analysis process involved immersive reading of the transcripts, generating initial codes, and organising the emerging themes. Themes were identified based on evidence from the data, ensuring they were well-supported and aligned with the entire dataset. Each theme underwent in-depth analysis, with clear descriptions provided to ensure clarity. Finally, vivid extracts were selected to illustrate and support each theme in the findings, following guidelines outlined by Braun and Clarke (2023).

Findings and discussion

The primary aim of this research was to examine the experiences of early years teachers and Forest School leaders within a UK Forest School. Additionally, the research aimed to explore the potential value that Forest Schools bring to the practice of early years educators. By examining the experiences of these educators within the Forest School setting, the study sought to unravel the complex socio-cultural dynamics at play and investigate how they navigate and negotiate intricate power relations. Foucault's ideas challenge educators to reassess traditional notions of knowledge and learning environments, questioning hierarchical structures and exploring how alternative approaches inspired by Foucauldian principles could cultivate more egalitarian and empowering learning environments. Similarly, Blackham, Cocks, and Bunce (2023) found several distinct themes, including collaboration, creativity, and cultural boundaries. Through this study, distinct themes emerged of exploration of power dynamics, reimagining learning environments, and risk and resilience.

Exploration of power dynamics

The exploration of power dynamics within Forest Schools draws on Foucault's insights to examine relationships between educators, learners, and the natural environment. Leather (2018) critiques the lack of conceptual understanding among teachers, stressing the need for a shared vision. Barfod and Bentsen (2018) highlight the pressure on teachers to switch between pedagogical paradigms. Teachers' understanding of the Forest School ethos significantly influences the effectiveness of these sessions.

> I feel like the power distribution between Forest School leaders and teachers during our sessions is pretty balanced. However, there are moments when tensions arise, especially when there's a difference in opinion on how to manage certain activities or situations. (Teacher B)

> In my experience, there's usually a collaborative approach between teachers and Forest School leaders. However, there can be tensions when there's a lack of communication or understanding about each other's roles and responsibilities. (FS Leader A)

Maynard (2007) notes that classroom regulations communicate specific power dynamics and expected behaviours. Outside the classroom, especially in open woodlands, children are less visible and controlled, challenging traditional authority. In these settings, Forest School leaders often assert authority, encouraging informal interactions and freedom (Foucault 1977). Teacher A echoes this shift:

> From my experience, the Forest School leaders definitely take the lead in asserting authority within the outdoor setting. They're the ones who set the tone for the activities and create an environment where children feel empowered to explore freely and interact with adults in a more informal manner. (Teacher A)

However, Teacher B points out tensions:

> In our sessions, the Forest School leader definitely holds the primary authority. They set the agenda and outline the key activities, while we as visiting teachers follow their lead. While this structure ensures consistency, it can feel like our ideas don't matter as much, leading to a bit of frustration when we see opportunities for improvement that are overlooked. (Teacher B)

Additionally, Blackham, Cocks, and Bunce (2023) found that power dynamics frequently emerge around the child-led approach of Forest Schools, contrasting with the more controlled traditional UK teaching style (Leather 2018). Conflicts between teachers and Forest School leaders often revolve around managing risk, as Teacher A illustrates:

> During Forest School sessions, the power dynamics can get quite complex. There's often a bit of tension between us as visiting teachers and the Forest School leaders. We both have our own perspectives on how things should be done, especially when it comes to managing risk. For instance, Forest School leaders might emphasise letting the children take more risks to foster independence, while we might feel the need to step in more frequently to ensure safety. (Teacher A)

Knight et al. (2023) assert that Forest School disrupts conventional power dynamics by granting children more autonomy. This collaborative approach necessitates trust and shifts away from hierarchical relationships. Teacher B and FS Leader B both elaborate on these tensions:

> During Forest School sessions, the power dynamics between teachers and Forest School leaders are quite noticeable and often stem from our different roles and perceptions of risk. As teachers, we are used to having a certain level of control and authority in the classroom, which includes a structured approach to managing risks. However, in the Forest School setting, the leaders prioritise a more hands-off, child-led approach where the children are encouraged to take risks and learn from them. For example, we might step in and guide the children more directly to ensure their safety, whereas I feel like the Forest School leaders sometimes see our interventions as unnecessary interference. (Teacher B)

> The power dynamics between us and the teachers are subtle but significant. While we aim for a collaborative and empowering environment, tensions can arise when children challenge boundaries. (FS Leader B)

As Mackinder (2023) states in Forest School, co-constructing, unlike scaffolding involves adults and children working together through a symmetrical or negotiated balance of power that develops intersubjectivity. In this dynamic, the adult values the child's preferences and ideas, engaging in a dialogue where the adult listens to the child as an equal, thereby giving voice to the child. These shifts in power dynamics may foster a sense of ownership over learning and alleviate anxieties among teachers and parents regarding children's outdoor engagement (Garden 2022).

Reimagining learning environments

The study highlights how Forest Schools and natural outdoor spaces offer a reimagined learning environment for early years pupils and their teachers. Unlike traditional classroom settings, these spaces provide both physical and ideological separation, allowing for the exploration of alternative pedagogical and environmental ideas (Potter and McDougall 2017). Positioned within a 'third space,' as conceptualised by Bhabha (2012), Forest Schools bridge the gap between the structured classroom environment and the dynamic home life setting (Garden and Downes 2023). In Forest School environments, the fluidity of space allows for a multiplicity of interactions among participants, including pupils, educators, and facilitators. These interactions are not confined by traditional classroom structures but rather unfold organically within the natural surroundings (Garden 2022). As Teacher A and B both state:

> This setting allows us to break away from the usual routines and constraints. For instance, we can focus more on hands-on, experiential learning. The physical separation from the classroom helps in creating a different mindset so that both the children and we, as teachers, become more open to experimenting with new approaches. It's lovely to be in an environment where we can prioritise discovery and interaction with nature over the curriculum-driven focus of the classroom. (Teacher A)

> In Forest School, my teaching approach shifts from structured lessons to facilitating exploration and discovery. It's more about guiding the pupils and less about strict control, which really lets them take the lead and learn from the environment. (Teacher B)

FS Leader A similarly highlighted:

> The flexibility of the Forest School environment really opens up different forms of learning and engagement compared to indoor settings. Out here, children can move freely and interact directly with the natural world, which sparks their curiosity and creativity in ways that a traditional classroom just can't. (FS Leader A)

Leather (2018) posits that Forest School is a socially constructed phenomenon with its essence moulded by the individuals involved both individually and collectively, imbuing it with unique meanings understood by those within the community. The transition to outdoor environments, such as Forest Schools, facilitates the reimagining of learning environments and the exploration of alternative pedagogical and environmental ideas. As individuals move outdoors, they may encounter a crossing of 'cultural borders' (Peacock and Pratt 2011), leading to a subtle redefinition of the relationships between pupils and teachers. Within this dynamic context, teachers' skills and approaches to teaching are subtly altered, as highlighted by Harris (2017), reflecting the adaptation to new pedagogical and environmental concepts. FS Leader A reflected on her observations of the teacher role in Forest School:

> When we're outside, traditional boundaries shift, and you see a more collaborative and interactive dynamic emerge. The relationships between the pupils and teachers change as there's a more collaborative and interactive dynamic. Teachers' skills and approaches adapt in these settings, allowing us to be more flexible and responsive, and letting pupils take the lead in their learning experiences. (FS Leader A)

In Forest School settings, practitioners often prioritise personal, social, and emotional development over national curriculum topics, recognising the value of experiential learning and holistic development (Harris 2017). This emphasis on alternative pedagogical priorities reflects a shift away from traditional classroom-based learning paradigms. Furthermore, the separation from the demands of the

national curriculum allows for a more relaxed and open learning environment, fostering creativity, exploration, and experiential learning (Kraftl 2013). As Teacher A states:

> Being away from the demands of the national curriculum in Forest School sessions makes everything more relaxed and open. Without the pressure of sticking to a strict curriculum, the pupils have the freedom to be creative and explore. You can really see them thrive in this kind of environment. It's less about hitting specific targets and more about discovering and learning naturally. (Teacher A)

Kraftl (2013:, 62) underscores the concept of 'going beyond the familiar' by portraying Forest School as a form of alternative education, diverging from the norms and regulations of traditional schooling and institutional spaces. Forest School occupies a distinctive intersection between formal and alternative educational models, offering a reimagined learning environment that challenges conventional approaches. Similarly, Harris (2017) emphasises the imperative of rethinking learning methodologies within the UK educational context with Forest Schools having the potential to dismantle power dynamics, fostering a communal atmosphere conducive to interactive and learner-oriented teaching approaches. Here, the emphasis shifts from national curriculum topics to personal, social, and emotional development, reflecting the priorities of outdoor education (Harris 2017). As Teacher B states:

> These sessions really make us rethink how we teach. Instead of just giving out information, we get to be more like guides, helping the children explore and learn on their own. It's amazing to watch them interact with nature in ways they can't inside a classroom. They really connect with the environment, and we see a whole new side of their learning and growth. (Teacher B)

Moreover, the physical layout of Forest School settings serves as a foundation for recognising the intrinsic value of nature in outdoor education (Harris 2023; Garden 2023). It is crucial to acknowledge that the outdoors is not a neutral or objective space; rather, it is shaped by cultural factors such as race, class, gender, and history. The outdoor space of Forest School may hold diverse meanings for children, influenced by their cultural backgrounds, social status, and personal experiences (Massey 2005). Thus, facilitating children's understanding of the world involves helping them comprehend not only their physical environment but also the broader community in which they live. Harris (2023) found significant benefits for children who struggle with traditional classroom environments. Children who find classroom-based tasks and settings challenging tend to enjoy the hands-on, outdoor learning style offered by Forest School.

In contrast to scaffolding, co-construction places emphasis on regarding the child as an active participant in their own learning journey. Both adults and children engage in a collaborative and balanced relationship, fostering intersubjectivity. As Mackinder (2023) states, Forest School adopts a shared learning process where the leader learns alongside the children, fostering a sense of trust between the children and the leaders. The adult values the child's preferences and ideas, facilitating dialogue where the child's voice is afforded equal importance. As Teacher B states:

> In Forest School sessions, it's not just us adults calling the shots. It's more like a team effort between us and the pupils. We listen to their ideas and preferences just as much as they listen to ours. It's all about working together and respecting each other's voices. The children feel confident to speak up, and we make sure their ideas are taken seriously. It's a real give-and-take that fosters a sense of mutual respect and understanding. (Teacher B)

Together, they identify goals and negotiate a pathway through the activity, with a focus on the process rather than just the outcome (Mackinder 2023). The advantages of outdoor spaces for nurturing creativity are further supported by the insights of Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (2005), who assert that outdoor environments offer avenues for exploration, discovery, and innovative thinking (Garden 2023). Moreover, the 2023 Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework (DfES 2023) highlights the importance of Expressive Arts and Design in children's development. This aspect of learning cultivates children's artistic and cultural awareness, enriching their imagination and fostering creativity.

In the study by Blackham, Cocks, and Bunce (2023), the theme of space emerged organically during the interviews, even though it was not directly addressed in the interview questions.

Participants frequently brought up space, indicating its significance in their experiences and perspectives. This aligns with Kraftl's (2013) argument that spaces are not merely static objects like buildings but are dynamic and fluid entities shaped by human interaction and construction. This suggests that participants recognised the importance of space in influencing their engagement with Forest School and the ways in which they interacted with the natural environment:

> In our Forest School sessions, you can really tell that the space itself makes a huge difference. The pupils and even us teachers interact with the natural environment in a much more engaged way. It's like being outside in nature opens up all these new possibilities for how we learn and play. Everyone seems more connected and involved just because we're not stuck inside a traditional classroom. (Teacher B)

> The Forest School setting changes my approach to teaching compared to a traditional classroom environment. However, there are tensions when trying to balance the freedom of exploration with the need for structure and safety. (Teacher A)

Massey (2005) posited that space is not a fixed, static entity but rather a relational construct continually shaped by social relations and practices. Outdoor spaces, in particular, offer dynamic and stimulating environments conducive to collaboration and collective action (Garden 2022). Similarly, the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework, Development Matters (DfES 2023) underscores the importance of Personal, Social, and Emotional Development (PSED) in children. It highlights those interactive experiences with peers facilitate the cultivation of strong friendships, cooperation skills, and conflict resolution abilities. These attributes, nurtured through personal, social, and emotional development, are recognised as vital components of children's overall well-being and successful growth.

Risk and resilience

Garden (2022) highlights a prevalent risk-averse culture in which children are raised, prioritising harm and injury prevention, thereby limiting opportunities for beneficial risk-taking, particularly in outdoor play. As Teacher B notes:

> There's so much emphasis on preventing harm and injury that it sometimes feels like we're curtailing the children's opportunities for beneficial risk-taking, especially in outdoor play. Initially, I was really concerned about the potential for accidents and felt the need to constantly intervene. (Teacher B)

This societal inclination has stifled children's natural inclination to take risks and develop innovative solutions to challenges (Lindon 2011). Stringent education policies further exacerbate this issue, with educators being held accountable for children's safety, leading to risk aversion and fewer opportunities for risky activities (Knight et al. 2023).

Knight (2011) emphasises the tension between evidence supporting risky outdoor play and the reluctance of some practitioners and policymakers to provide such opportunities, attributing this hesitancy to a cultural attitude toward risk. Forest School, however, offers a unique platform for children to engage in supported risky behaviours through play (e.g. climbing trees), creative activities (e.g. woodworking using knives), and social connections (e.g. sitting around a fire) (Coates and Pimlott-Wilson 2019; Garden 2023b; Knight 2011). Forest School Leader B reflects:

> At Forest School they get to climb logs, which helps them develop physical skills and confidence. They also participate in creative activities like woodworking with knives, which teaches them responsibility and precision. Plus, there's a social aspect, like sitting around a fire, where they learn to interact and connect with others in a different setting. (FS Leader B)

Knight et al. (2023) argue that Forest School challenges the norms of the UK education system by confronting the aversion to risk-taking. By redistributing power from adult practitioners to children, Forest School empowers children to take charge of their own learning through creative endeavours and risky play within a supportive environment. This helps alleviate teachers' and parents' concerns about children's outdoor activities. Garden (2022) further argues that teachers are more inclined to

embrace risk in the Forest School environment. However, promoting children's opportunities for exploration in a Forest School context necessitates a reconceptualisation of risk. As Forest School leader A states:

> The flexibility of the Forest School environment is key to its success. However, tensions can arise when trying to balance the need for free exploration with safety regulations and parental concerns. (FS leader A)

Foucault's insights emphasise the significance of space and place in understanding risk, highlighting their materiality rather than just metaphorical value. In Foucault's framework, the perception of risk is context-dependent. Activities deemed risky in a conventional classroom might be re-evaluated in a Forest School environment, such as children engaging in cooking over a fire or using tools for whittling (Garden 2023). As Teacher B reflects:

> At first, I was really scared about letting the children take risks in Forest School. I worried about them getting hurt using sharp tools or climbing trees. But over time, I saw how these experiences help them grow and become more confident. (Teacher B)

This underscores Foucault's argument that power operates subtly through social practices and relations, influencing how risks are perceived and managed across different spaces. The decline in outdoor exploration and adventurous play among contemporary children, often attributed to heightened parental vigilance, underscores the significance of Forest School's approach to embracing risk (Gill 2014). Contrasts in outdoor education practices between nations such as Denmark or Norway and the UK highlight profound cultural disparities in attitudes towards risk and outdoor learning, shaping children's perceptions and experiences (Williams-Siegfredsen 2017). FS Leader A, having visited Forest School settings in Norway, reflects:

> The differences in outdoor education practices between countries like Norway and the UK really highlight the cultural disparities in attitudes towards risk and outdoor learning. In Norway, for example, there's a much more relaxed approach to letting children take risks and engage with nature, whereas in the UK, we tend to be more cautious. These contrasting attitudes shape how children perceive and experience outdoor learning. (FS Leader A)

The observed children's reactions to getting muddy reflect these cultural influences. Teacher B notes that younger children often only get muddy when they 'lose their inhibitions', suggesting that overcoming initial hesitations and embracing the messiness of outdoor play is part of the resilience-building process inherent in Forest School experiences:

> Younger children usually only get muddy when they lose their inhibitions. It's interesting to see how, at first, they're hesitant and a bit unsure about diving into messy outdoor play. But once they get past that initial hesitation, they really start to embrace it. (Teacher B)

These cultural influences manifest in children's reactions to getting their hands muddy, mirroring societal views on outdoor play and cleanliness. The concept of resilience, grounded in a child's capacity to navigate personal risks and challenges, underscores the importance of Forest School activities (Harper 2017). These activities, characterised by their embrace of risk and challenge, can nurture resilience and confidence among children (Chawla 2015). Engaging in activities like using sharp tools or climbing trees allows early years children to confront fears and develop a sense of purpose and responsibility in their exploration of the outdoor environment (Chawla 2015). As Forest School leader B states:

> Activities like using sharp tools or climbing trees are crucial for building resilience and confidence in kids. They help them confront fears and develop a sense of purpose and responsibility while exploring the outdoors. (FS Leader B)

In cultural-historical activity theory, the utilisation of tools holds significant importance within socio-cultural environments (Van Oers 2013). Natural environments offer an abundance of elements, such as sticks and stones, that serve as tools. When children engage in play with these natural objects,

they must use language to convey the meaning they attribute to them, potentially enhancing their language development (Prins et al. 2023).

Teacher A observes how Forest School encourages children to take risks by interacting with tools and materials they may not encounter in traditional educational settings. The children's apprehension about using a sharp tool like a bow-saw to saw a branch and create a 'tree cookie' highlights their initial doubts. However, they eagerly embrace the opportunity to try something new, demonstrating the value of Forest School in facilitating experiential learning and risk-taking, although the teacher's initial apprehension was reflected upon:

> At first, I was pretty nervous about allowing the children to take risks and letting go of some control. In Forest School, children get to interact with tools and materials they wouldn't normally see in a traditional classroom. I remember being especially apprehensive when (FS Leader) A introduced the bow-saw. Watching the children use a sharp tool to saw a branch was nerve-wracking at first. The children were hesitant too, but they quickly embraced the opportunity to try something new. (Teacher A)

This echoes Waite's (2011) findings, suggesting that children develop a sense of purpose and responsibility through their exploration of the outdoor environment. This aligns with Chawla's (2015) concept of a confident child, who is not only curious and adventurous but also capable of navigating challenges and setbacks with resilience.

Conclusions

Adopting a Foucauldian lens facilitated the interpretation of the interviews with the early years teachers and Forest School leaders, shedding light on the challenges and perceived threats they encountered when engaging with Forest School in outdoor environments, especially when operating beyond the confines of the school 'enclosure'. On a personal level, this approach aided in understanding my own evolving and sometimes contradictory sense of self as a Forest School leader. Moreover, by revealing the inherently political nature of knowledge, it elucidated why certain ideas and norms, along with their corresponding notions of truth, correctness, and normalcy, often wield such pervasive influence, constraining our thought processes, speech, and actions.

Forest Schools, with their blend of personal and shared meanings, serve as conduits for the exchange of ideas and practices. This perspective sheds light on the challenges and perceived threats encountered by teachers when engaging with Forest Schools in outdoor environments, particularly outside the traditional school setting. Moreover, it provides insight into the evolving and sometimes contradictory sense of self experienced by individuals in these contexts while also highlighting the inherently political nature of knowledge. Maynard (2007) documented instances of apparent discord between the perspectives of teachers and Forest School practitioners, a conflict that seemed to be amplified by the non-traditional setting in which it unfolded; outside the confines of the typical classroom. This encounter beyond the classroom's boundaries appeared to interweave the subjectivities of both educators and children within the physical structure and relational dynamics inherent to the educational institution (Foucault 1977).

Applying Foucauldian analysis to Forest Schools offers valuable insights into the educational philosophy underpinning these settings (Foucault 1977; Maynard 2007). By empowering children to challenge prevailing discourses and construct their own understanding of the world through hands-on experiences, Forest Schools advocate for a more fluid and dynamic approach to learning. However, there are challenges and limitations in this approach. Firstly, the complexity of power dynamics in outdoor settings may pose difficulties in capturing and analysing subtle power dynamics (Foucault 1977). Additionally, there is a risk of oversimplifying power relations, overlooking nuanced interactions between educators, children, and the natural environment. Future research directions could involve longitudinal studies to track changes in power dynamics over time (Foucault 1977; Maynard 2007), comparative analyses across different educational contexts to understand variations in power relations, and investigations into the impact of power dynamics on children's learning outcomes. Moreover, teachers' reluctance to embrace risk within the Forest School environment

due to their entrenched roles as classroom instructors presents a challenge (Button and Wilde 2019). It becomes imperative for teachers to fully grasp the theoretical foundations of Forest School practices in order to effectively harness the potential of this space.

Garden and Downes (2023) posit that the conceptualisation of space in Forest Schools can be elucidated by considering the expected behaviours of all participants, that is, children, teachers, and Forest School leaders, and their negotiation of roles within the environment. They suggest that these roles are contingent upon the specific context of Forest Schools. For instance, the role of 'teacher' is traditionally defined within the classroom setting and its associated practices. However, within the Forest School context, roles become more fluid and subject to negotiation. Thus, Forest Schools represent liminal spaces where new roles emerge and existing roles undergo renegotiation. The concept of space is intricately linked to social, political, and historical processes, serving as a cultural construct shaped by power dynamics. Forest Schools represent a unique space offering distinct learning and engagement experiences outside the confines of traditional classroom norms (Coates and Pimlott-Wilson 2019; Garden and Downes 2023).

The findings of this study support the idea that whilst multiple Forest Schools may take place in the same physical environment, each one acquires unique meaning through the interactions and experiences of the individuals and groups inhabiting the space. Consequently, as participants form connections and engage with the environment, the meaning of their Forest School experience evolves through shared constructions and interpretations. This co-constructed space not only facilitates learning but also fosters a sense of community among Forest School participants, highlighting the social and relational aspects inherent in outdoor educational settings. It is crucial to recognise that a space only transforms into a place once we engage with it and establish social interactions within its boundaries (Garden and Downes 2023). In their study, Blackham, Cocks, and Bunce (2023) emphasise that the value of the Forest School space extends beyond its physical attributes, encompassing the meaning collectively constructed by participants within the environment.

The research underscores the potential of outdoor learning spaces, such as Forest Schools, in empowering early years educators and deviating from the norms and regulations of traditional learning environments (Kraftl 2013). The potential of outdoor spaces to foster creativity and innovation in early childhood education has been underscored by Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (2005). Lefebvre posits that outdoor environments offer fertile ground for exploration and invention, serving as catalysts for creativity across various domains, including the arts, literature, and sciences. Meanwhile, Massey (2005) draws attention to the power dynamics inherent in outdoor spaces, highlighting how different groups possess varying levels of access to and control over these environments. In the realm of outdoor learning, disparities in access and opportunity can perpetuate existing inequalities. Massey's insights prompt reflection on how factors like socioeconomic status and geographic location influence individuals' access to outdoor learning experiences. Research has shown that children from low-income families often have limited access to outdoor learning opportunities compared to their wealthier counterparts. Specifically, children from less affluent families often face unique barriers that prevent them from fully experiencing the positive impacts of nature. To ensure that all children can benefit from nature-based interventions, efforts should be directed towards understanding and mitigating these barriers. This might include providing accessible green spaces, offering nature programmes in urban areas, and creating policies that support equitable access to nature for children from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds.

In conclusion, Maynard's (2007) analysis illustrates how Foucauldian philosophy (Foucault 1977) enriches our comprehension of the intricacies of outdoor education, particularly within the realm of early years teaching. By revealing the power dynamics inherent in the interactions between early years teachers and Forest School leaders, Maynard prompts us to critically examine how dominant discourses influence educational practices in natural environments. This study thus contributes to the ongoing discourse on the integration of theory and practice in outdoor education, highlighting the potential for Foucauldian analysis to deepen our understanding of power relations within educational settings. Forest Schools, particularly within the context of early years education, epitomise

an educational approach that aligns with Foucault's concepts of power and resistance. Through their emphasis on autonomy and decision-making, Forest Schools provide young children with opportunities to explore risks and exercise agency over their learning. In doing so, they challenge the traditional power dynamics often present in mainstream educational settings. The findings of this study underscore the significance of early years educators and Forest School leaders acknowledging the power dynamics inherent in outdoor learning environments and their implications for creating inclusive educational opportunities.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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