

Reimagining Learning: Power, Risk, and Place in Forest Schools

[Dr Angela Garden](#) – Head of Education Studies and Psychology, Liverpool John Moores University

Introduction

What happens when education steps outside the traditional classroom and into the forest? Forest Schools provide unique, dynamic spaces where children learn through exploration, autonomy, and engagement with managed risks. These spaces do more than redefine learning – they challenge conventional notions of power, safety, and the boundaries of education itself. Drawing on Foucault’s theories of power, Massey’s (2005) conceptualisation of space, and Garden’s (2022, 2023, 2024) pivotal research, this blog explores how Forest Schools transform the educator-student dynamic, foster growth through risk, and create relational, ever-evolving educational environments. These elements collectively offer a lens to rethink education beyond traditional classrooms, while also addressing tensions in reimagining educational practices.

Power Dynamics in Forest Schools

In traditional classrooms, the teacher typically assumes the role of the primary authority figure, determining what, when, and how children learn. Forest Schools, however, disrupt this hierarchical model, fostering environments where power becomes fluid and collaborative. Educators shift from authoritarian directors to facilitators, supporting rather than leading children’s learning journeys. This transition reflects a broader challenge of redefining educational spaces as shared and dynamic rather than fixed and top-down.

Foucault (1977) described power as a relational construct, constantly negotiated within social interactions. Forest Schools exemplify this dynamic. Garden’s (2023a) study of early years teachers and Forest School leaders highlights the tension educators face in relinquishing structured control. For many, stepping into an open, child-led environment creates a sense of vulnerability, as traditional markers of authority – desks, timetables, routines—are replaced by the unpredictable rhythms of outdoor exploration.

Yet, this fluidity empowers children to “own” their learning. For example, when children decide how to build a den or solve a group challenge, they actively shape the learning process. Garden (2024) observes that these moments of autonomy nurture creativity, leadership, and problem-solving skills. For educators, the challenge lies in navigating a delicate balance between stepping back and offering guidance to enable meaningful, self-directed learning.

In traditional classrooms, the teacher typically assumes the role of the primary authority figure, determining what, when, and how children learn. Forest Schools, however, disrupt this hierarchical model, fostering environments where power becomes fluid and collaborative. Educators shift from authoritarian directors to facilitators, supporting rather than leading children’s learning journeys. This transition reflects a broader challenge of redefining educational spaces as shared and dynamic rather than fixed and top-down.

Foucault (1977) conceptualised power as relational, constantly negotiated within social contexts – a lens particularly apt for analysing Forest School environments. Garden’s (2023a) exploration of early years teachers and Forest School leaders highlights the tensions educators

experience in relinquishing traditional authority. The removal of conventional markers of control, such as desks and timetables, coupled with the unpredictability of outdoor learning spaces, often leads to a sense of vulnerability for practitioners. Yet, this dynamic interplay between authority and freedom enables a reimagining of power relationships, where children are active participants, shaping their own learning.

For instance, when children collaboratively decide how to construct a den or solve a group challenge, they navigate the learning process on their terms, fostering autonomy, creativity, and problem-solving skills. Garden (2024) observes that these moments of self-direction empower children to take ownership of their learning, reconfiguring traditional power structures. For educators, however, the challenge lies in balancing the need to step back and empower learners with the responsibility to guide and scaffold experiences meaningfully.

Maynard and Water's (2007) examination of power dynamics between early years teachers and Forest School workers, employing Foucault's theories to explore how dominant discourses about education, childhood, and nature influence perceptions and practices. Forest Schools, situated within a broader cultural and educational field, are inherently shaped by power relations that manifest in various ways—affecting authority distribution, knowledge construction, and the negotiation of roles among educators and learners.

The philosophy underpinning Forest Schools aligns with Dewey's (1997) democratic and experiential learning principles, which view education as a collaborative and interest-driven process. Vygotsky's (1986) sociocultural theory further underscores the importance of social interaction in learning, a cornerstone of Forest School practices. In these settings, the natural environment becomes an active participant in the learning process, mediating relationships and experiences. Massey's (2005) and Lefebvre's (1991) theories on the socially constructed nature of space further illuminate how Forest School spaces are co-constituted through interrelations, power dynamics, and cultural influences.

Garden and Downes (2023) argue that this process, termed 'scolonisation,' reflects broader societal apprehensions about the outdoors and a reluctance to embrace its less structured, inherently risky nature. Despite these challenges, Forest Schools remain a socially constructed space where power, knowledge, and subjectivity are constantly renegotiated. The interplay of educators' and learners' interactions with the environment creates opportunities for reflective practice and a reimagining of educational norms. By embedding Foucauldian concepts into Forest School practices, practitioners can critically examine and reshape these spaces, fostering equitable and transformative learning environments.

Risk as a Pathway to Growth

In an increasingly risk-averse society (Beck, 1992), where even playgrounds are sanitised to prevent harm, Forest Schools reframe risk as a vital component of development. Activities such as climbing trees, lighting fires, and using tools encourage resilience, problem-solving, and confidence in children.

Garden's (2022) research explores the nuanced approach to managing risk in Forest Schools, emphasising its role as a relational process. Risk here is not about recklessness but about opportunities for growth. Educators guide children through risky activities, creating a safe framework for them to learn from consequences. For instance, whittling wood with a knife fosters physical coordination and emotional regulation – skills that extend far beyond the Forest School setting.

However, practitioners face societal resistance. Concerns from parents and policymakers about injuries or litigation often result in overly cautious approaches that dilute the benefits of risky play. Garden (2022) underscores the importance of educating stakeholders to shift perceptions of risk from something to be avoided to an essential part of learning. Risk, as Massey (2005) suggests, emerges from the interactions between children, peers, and their environment, deepening their connection to the space.

The integration of risk as a pathway to growth is a compelling concept, particularly in the context of Forest Schools. In today's society, where risk is often perceived negatively, it's refreshing to see how Forest Schools embrace risk as a vital aspect of child development. This approach encourages resilience, problem-solving, and confidence, providing opportunities for children to engage in activities such as climbing trees or using tools, which can help them grow both physically and emotionally.

Garden's (2022) research highlights the relational process involved in managing risk, emphasising that it's not about recklessness but about creating structured opportunities for learning through consequences. The idea that risk is not inherently dangerous but part of a safe learning framework challenges prevailing societal norms that often restrict risk-taking in educational settings. This reframing is crucial, as it underscores the benefits of risky play for building resilience and emotional regulation.

The growing interest in outdoor education, particularly Forest Schools, aligns with these ideas. Forest Schools provide an environment where risk is negotiated in a more natural, dynamic space, away from the constraints of the classroom. This "third space," as Bhabha describes it, allows for multiple trajectories of learning to unfold, each shaped by the interplay of time, space, and risk. By engaging in risky play within the outdoors, children gain opportunities to test boundaries, assess their capabilities, and develop essential life skills.

Furthermore, as Beck (1992) suggests, modern society's aversion to risk has led to a form of protectionism that prevents children from developing resilience through risk-taking. This overprotection, often driven by concerns over safety and litigation, undermines the very developmental benefits that risk exposure can offer. The challenge, then, is not just to manage risk but to redefine it as an essential element of childhood development. Forest Schools provide a valuable model for reintroducing risk in a controlled yet supportive environment, where children can explore, learn, and grow in ways that might otherwise be stifled in more traditional, risk-averse settings.

Space and Place in Outdoor Learning

Forest Schools are not merely physical locations – they are relational and continually evolving spaces. Massey's (2005) concept of space as a "product of relations-between" is particularly relevant here. Children actively shape and transform these spaces through their interactions, making them deeply personal and meaningful. Garden's (2023b) exploration of children using iPads in Forest Schools illustrates this beautifully. By documenting their experiences through photos and videos, children create narratives that reflect their engagement with nature. Themes of 'soft fascination' (the restorative power of gentle attention) and 'place attachment' (emotional bonds with a specific environment) emerge, highlighting the transformative potential of these spaces. Contrary to assumptions that technology detracts from outdoor learning, Garden (2023) demonstrates how it can enhance reflection and personalisation of experiences.

Despite these benefits, access to Forest Schools remains inequitable. Garden and Downes (2023) highlight the socioeconomic barriers that limit participation for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Without deliberate efforts to address these disparities, Forest Schools risk perpetuating exclusivity rather than fostering inclusivity.

Forest Schools are not merely physical locations – they are relational and continually evolving spaces. Massey’s (2005) concept of space as a “product of relations-between” is particularly relevant here. Children actively shape and transform these spaces through their interactions, making them deeply personal and meaningful. Garden’s (2023b) exploration of children using iPads in Forest Schools illustrates this beautifully. By documenting their experiences through photos and videos, children create narratives that reflect their engagement with nature. Themes of ‘soft fascination’ (the restorative power of gentle attention) and ‘place attachment’ (emotional bonds with a specific environment) emerge, highlighting the transformative potential of these spaces. Contrary to assumptions that technology detracts from outdoor learning, Garden (2023) demonstrates how it can enhance reflection and personalisation of experiences.

Practical Takeaways:

For Educators:

- Foster a learning environment where children are encouraged to make choices and take ownership of their educational experiences, promoting autonomy and engagement.

For Researchers:

- Investigate the interplay between power dynamics and risk management in Forest Schools to understand how these factors influence learning outcomes and inclusivity.

For Policymakers:

- Develop policies and funding initiatives that expand access to Forest Schools, especially for underserved communities, and promote education on the developmental benefits of managed risk to address societal apprehensions.

Conclusion

Forest Schools are more than just an alternative to classroom-based education; they represent a radical rethinking of how power, risk, and place intersect in educational practices. By embracing the fluid dynamics of power and authority, fostering growth through managed risk, and creating spaces that are constantly reshaped by children’s interactions, Forest Schools offer a richer, more complex understanding of what learning can be. Ultimately, they encourage a reconceptualisation of education that values autonomy, creativity, and resilience. For educators, parents, and policymakers, the challenge is to recognise the value of these spaces and ensure that all children, regardless of their background, can experience the transformative potential of Forest Schools.

References

Beck, U. (1992) *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London, UK: Sage Publications

Dewey, J. (1997) *Experience and Education*. USA: Kappa Delta Pi

Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Pantheon Books

Garden, A. (2022). The case for space in the co-construction of risk in UK forest schools. *Education 3-13*, 51(8), 1281–1292 <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2022.2066148>

Garden, A. (2023a) The University Forest School Space in England: Taking seminars outdoors for early years undergraduates. *Education 3-13*, 1–16 <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2023.2280720>

Garden, A. (2023b) Constructions of Space: Exploring photographic images in Forest School. *Prism*, 5, 97–112 <https://doi.org/10.24377/prism.article418>

Garden, A. (2024) Foucault and power: UK forest school as a socially constructed space for early years teachers and forest school leaders. *Education 3-13*, 1–14 <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2024.2404687>

Garden, A., & Downes, G. (2023) New boundaries, undecided roles: Towards an understanding of forest schools as constructed spaces. *Education 3-13*, 52(8), 1542–1553 <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2023.2170187>

Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*. London, UK: Blackwell

Massey, D. (2005) *For Space*. London, UK: Sage Publications

Maynard, T., & Waters, J. (2007) Learning in the outdoor environment: A missed opportunity? *Early Years*, 27(3), 255–265 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09575140701594400>

Vygotsky, L. S. (1986) *Thought and Language*. USA: MIT Press