



## Education 3-13

International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rett20>

# The case for space in the co-construction of risk in UK forest schools

Angela Garden

To cite this article: Angela Garden (2022): The case for space in the co-construction of risk in UK forest schools, Education 3-13, DOI: [10.1080/03004279.2022.2066148](https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2022.2066148)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03004279.2022.2066148>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 23 Apr 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 359



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

# The case for space in the co-construction of risk in UK forest schools

Angela Garden 

IM Marsh Campus, Education, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

## ABSTRACT

This UK focussed theoretical paper builds on Harper's (2017. "Outdoor Risky Play and Healthy Child Development in the Shadow of the "Risk Society": A Forest and Nature School Perspective." *Child & Youth Services* 38 (4): 318–334) work in Canadian Forest Schools and the role that Forest Schools play in education by including outdoor risky play. It considers the conceptualisation of a risk-averse Western society, with a focus on healthy childhood development, and the childhood risks within Forest School that are present yet arguably small. There is the opportunity to re-conceptualise ideas around risk within the Forest School space through the framing of Massey's (2005. *For Space*. London, UK: Sage Publications) proposition that space is a product of relations-between and that space is always in the process of being made. Thus, children create and 'own' the Forest School space through their inhabitation of it. Children's well-being and the value of risk in their lives can be understood as a fluid, dynamic and relational process within their geographies. Conclusions include a value that risk-taking has within the Forest School space. The implications of Beck's risk society, its ongoing influence on societal beliefs and practices, inducing practitioners' fear of litigation over accidents and injury are highlighted.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 28 December 2021  
Accepted 5 April 2022

## KEYWORDS

Forest school; space; outdoor risky play; risk society

## Introduction

There is an increasing interest in outdoor education and especially in Forest School (Forest School Association (FSA) 2011). This theoretical paper contributes to the growing body of literature around the use of outdoor spaces and, in particular, Forest School; a regular and repeated form of outdoor learning (Harris 2017). It focusses on how the learning space at Forest School can highlight our perceptions and practices around risk for educators working with children outdoors. The discussion centres around risk and separate learning spaces with Forest School as children and leaders are removed from the physical constraints of the classroom. Space, risk and boundaries are arguably re-negotiated by Forest School leaders and children within the outdoor learning environment. Risk can be defined as a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernisation (Beck 1992). Beck's risk society impacts societal beliefs and practices. Over time, the perception and management of risk have been influenced by societal norms, the media, parental perspectives and increasing government accountability.

Forest School in the UK has been inspired by a Scandinavian approach to early years' education, which has a strong focus on the importance of 'place' for learning. The Forest School concept was

**CONTACT** Angela Garden  a.s.garden@ljmu.ac.uk

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group  
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

brought to England by the staff of Bridgwater College, Somerset after an exchange visit to Denmark in 1993. The current UK Forest School approach is underpinned by the FSA, set up in 2011 to support those involved. In contrast, the Danish udeskole approach is deeply ingrained in decades of practice within a very established early years' ethos (Williams-Sieghfredsen 2017). There is a significant level of heterogeneity within the activities undertaken under the Forest School banner. This is problematic when attempting to unravel what makes Forest Schools unique from other outdoor learning experiences (Garden and Downes 2021). There is no discernible definition of a Forest School, as it presents itself in different ways in different places (Knight 2011); however, there are some commonalities, for example, children tend to engage in Forest School over a period of time with sessions led by a qualified Forest School practitioner. Activities may consist of fire lighting, tool use, arts and crafts, den building, outdoor cooking and local environmental knowledge such as leaf or bug hunts. The focus is around raising children's confidence and self-esteem through small, repeatable tasks and nurturing their personal, social and emotional development through social and team-building tasks (Harris 2017). Forest School is separate to the classroom environment as children are taken to a new space outdoors, which may be a local woodland setting but could also be an area of the school grounds separate from the normal playground (Garden and Downes 2021).

Forest School space can be argued to be the product of interrelations with multiplicity and space as co-constitutive (Massey 1995); that is, each has casual powers over the other. Space, therefore, is always under construction. A co-constructive understanding acknowledges a relational dynamic between the children, culture, risk and the Forest School space that they inhabit and help to shape. The relationship between risk and the physical space can encourage or discourage risk-taking behaviours making the case for an alternative approach to space (Massey 2005). This comes from a position of children 'needing' to take risks and their 'natural' inclination to do so; for example, seeking out and creating encounters and activities that carry risk or uncertainty. This paper identifies risk-taking as both a moral activity within play and as a creative act. Despite this, however, the theoretical underpinnings of the UK Forest School approach remain weak, including crucially our understanding of the place of risk in Forest School practice.

Taking a UK focus, this paper builds on Harper's (2017) article which addresses the effects of a risk-averse Western society on healthy childhood development within Canadian Forest Schools. He proposes that Forest Schools are presented as idealised venues to investigate and understand the necessary balance between risk-taking and safety in child development. Risk-taking, he argues, is not well understood outside the context of the Forest School. Drawing on a social constructionist perspective in theorising risk and childhood, contemporary, hyper-sensitised concerns regarding children's vulnerability arguably emanate from both fears of the modern world, and the proclivity towards overprotection which these fears precipitate. A constructivist pedagogy underpins UK Forest Schools with 'meaning' established through theory (Harris 2017; Leather 2018). Constructivist educational theories allow children to create meanings via their interactions with others around them, including other children and adults, as well as the local environment. Thus, central to the Forest School approach is the premise of learners as co-constructors and not as mere receivers of knowledge and alongside this the construction of risk as positive and challenge as fuelling feelings of competence.

A constructivist learning theory lens views development as grounded in people's values and knowledge, as they construct ways of understanding the world. Priority is given to the active mental life of the child, their understandings of the world and the subsequent ways that they act within it. The constructivist approach seems well suited to the Forest School approach, with experimentation and problem-solving through hands-on experience and practitioners shaping teaching methods to child-led learning. These pedagogies aim to be child-centred and flexible and allow learners the freedom to control their own learning experiences, largely through play and exploration within a local natural environment, preferably a forest space.

## ***The UK Forest School approach***

Forest School in the UK emerged from Danish influences incorporating Learning Outside the Classroom (LOtC) referred to as *udeskole* (meaning outdoors) and is inspired by the Scandinavian approach to early years' education, which has a strong focus on the importance of 'place' for learning. While initially it was created for early childhood education, the concept has expanded to include older age groups and children who have additional needs (O'Brien 2009). Forest School ethos and practice aim to be nourished within social movements such as natural play, woodland culture, land rights and child-centred learning (Cree and McCree 2012). The experiential and progressive ideology and outdoor focus of Forest School education resonate with many of the concerns concerning childhood and the impact of the curriculum reforms introduced by the English Foundation Stage (DfES 2006).

Scandinavian approaches to Forest School allow the children to lead the learning as, according to Biesta (2012), this encourages greater engagement from the children and richer learning opportunities. In England, however, the focus is on meeting children's needs that align with the curriculum, creating tensions between sessions being child-led or structured by the teacher. Forest School practitioners often view the aims of sessions to be encouraging holistic development, but, in reality, they often struggle with the concept of taking a step back and observing, compared to their usual pedagogy of adult-directed teaching. The culture within Forest School is increasingly becoming commodified and as a result, this is reducing the potential of Forest Schools. Within the UK, despite the rapid growth of Forest Schools, there are concerns that understanding is often not genuine, thus illustrating that undertaking Forest School training does not necessarily mean the development of deep and reflexive practice. Many researchers aim to uncover what makes Forest Schools unique compared to other learning experiences (Leather 2018).

Forest School can be seen as offering an alternative learning environment from which curricular links can be made, particularly with respect to science, maths and the arts (Cumming and Nash 2015). As well as offering a different context for learning, the learning approach associated with Forest School is understood as being quite different from that of mainstream school, that is, constructivist rather than instructional, and an alternative way of delivering the curriculum, which can be embedded into the schools' education framework as a whole (Cumming and Nash 2015). This, it is argued, can support children's motivation to learn and so Forest School is often positioned as complementing or supplementing classroom learning – a form of curriculum enrichment that allows children to develop key skills such as problem-solving (Slade, Lowery, and Bland 2013). It is Forest School's unique purpose that seems to distinguish it from other types of outdoor learning. Forest School increases children's connections with nature within the cultural and social context of an ever-urbanised and indoor society; it also aims to increase young children's motivation to learn (Kenny 2010; Waite, Bolling, and Bentsen 2016), mainly by stimulating their interests.

Forest School is a vehicle for the curriculum and not a curriculum in itself. Tensions can exist when the curricular goals and philosophy do not fully align with its ethos. As Mycock (2019) argues, Forest School pedagogy is often a mix of contradictory influences, including experiential learning; play-based learning; child development theories; environmental science and 'nature' studies. An 'ideal representation' of Forest School and what it entails can be quite different from reality. For example, Forest School education has been endorsed because it explicitly encourages 'risky' activities such as fire lighting, knife use and tree climbing, activities from which children are increasingly prohibited. As a result of these attitudinal and policy changes, as well as the increased competition between schools in the United Kingdom wishing to distinguish themselves through the Forest School badge, there has been a precipitous increase in the number of both private and school-based Forest Schools. With many providers claiming to offer Forest School education, and in an attempt to standardise this increasingly fragmented 'market' and to promote and 'professionalise' Forest School education, the FSA was formed in 2012.

The LOTC manifesto (DfES 2006, 2) illustrated the value the government placed on outdoor learning and the potential it has to enrich the curriculum. However, the government views children as products, expected to meet certain criteria, with far less concern for the means employed to help them learn and develop (Moss 2016). Moss (2016) argues that it is important for children to have the freedom to express themselves and that risk is a necessary part of their development. Children should be allowed to flourish in aspects other than testing and teachers should be able to engage children in exciting lessons that are not necessarily curriculum-driven.

The anti-modern representation of an idyllic and, invariably, rural childhood manifests itself in the highly influential work of Richard Louv, whose *Last Child in the Woods* ([2005] 2010) has been celebrated by organisations such as the National Trust (Moss 2012) which endorse Louv's 'diagnosis' that children are suffering from 'Nature Deficit Disorder'. Both Moss and Louv recognise that this is not a medical condition; the use of the term has become commonplace because it resonates with a more general pathologisation of children, characterised by the contested psychological condition Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Louv ([2005] 2010) suggests that to remain healthy, children do not just need good nutrition and adequate sleep but also need contact with nature.

In addition, developmental theories often frame children's well-being in linear, sequential and decontextualised ways (Wexler and Eglinton 2015). Well-being is often viewed as an absence of good health, with a focus on mental health issues, including children's anxiety and depression. The World Health Organisation (WHO 2011) defines well-being as realising one's own potential, coping with everyday stress, working productively and making a contribution to one's community. While there is some reference in WHO's definition to political, historical, economic and other socio-cultural influences (Wexler and Eglinton 2015), it does not include co-constructive elements between the child and the space they inhabit at Forest School. A developmental perspective, on the other hand, fails to see the child, within society and inhabiting space or place, as an active agent. Children, rather than developing through static, pre-determined phases, help to create the Forest School space and the activities that take place within it.

Forest School presents ideological differences to education by directly challenging risk aversion in contrast to schools and teachers becoming increasingly risk-aware (Connolly and Haughton 2017) and this can create tensions in practice. Rules around risk within Forest School sessions can be contested; for example, what are the 'rules' and who decides? (Knight 2009). Sessions often include activities and games that encourage interaction through the use of tools and fire. Tension often exists, however, between Forest School practitioners and teaching staff accompanying children during sessions. A deficit discourse seems to exist, with teachers positioned as problematic (Harris 2017, 2018; Waite, Bolling, and Bentsen 2016). It is within this discourse that the ideological differences between Forest School and mainstream schooling are most explicitly in conflict (Kemp and Pagden 2018). Within this framework can be considered different perceptions of 'educational' risk and sociological understandings of risk within Forest School.

### **Risk in childhood**

The sociological conception of risk (Giddens 1990, 1991) is the identification of real and perceived risk as a result of industrialisation. Notions of a risk society or risk culture as posited by Beck (1992, 1999) and Giddens (1999) suggest that risk has become a central principle, guiding both individual and institutional behaviour in contemporary society. This heightened awareness of risk and efforts to imbue the management of, or containment of, risk are features of modern practice within education. This paradoxically positions the modern child simultaneously 'at risk' and needing protection while considering them to be also 'at risk' from the overprotection that this engenders. This tension reflects wider paradoxical representations of children within contemporary constructions of childhood (Connolly and Haughton 2017).

Drawing on a social constructionist position, we argue that the historical and cultural contingency of this vulnerability discourse highlights a certain social, historical and culturally contingent version of childhood that is 'at risk'. As uncertainty increases, risk becomes ubiquitous. Uncertainty in

educational practice with children and, in particular, with Forest School practice, emerges. The ways in which parents and children construct notions of risk outdoors means that we need to consider narratives that are culturally informed and to consider risk in children's lives within these broader contexts.

Contemporary discourses which sacralise children result in a reluctance to question the positive role of risk in children's education. The conceptions of the innocent and vulnerable child who must be protected are pervasive within society and may lead the practitioner and accompanying teachers to focus on risk when planning for and leading children's Forest School activities. This view of childhood derives from representations of the child as active or passive. The concept of the active child, whose agency is respected and whose capacity and rights are acknowledged and embedded in law, has its roots in Gillick competency and within the normative framework contained within the United Nations Conventions for the Rights of the Child (Freeman 2011). On the other hand, there are representations of the passive child, with romantic ideals of children's vulnerability and the concomitant need for adult protection, whose rights are protected by adults. A child may be viewed within education, therefore, as both at risk and a risk.

A 'childhood in crisis' narrative suggests re-conceptualisations of childhood and the child/adult relationship in late modernity, rather than the crisis as an asocial, universal, structural category. A position of reflexive modernisation (Kehily 2010) suggests that the change in our experiences of childhood is less to do with the objective condition of children than in the subjective perception of adults.

There has been an intensification of concerns over the safety and well-being of children in western societies. Concerns include technological and commercial exposure and premature sexualisation (Bailey 2011). Technological considerations were first highlighted by Palmer (2006, 2007) when discussing the position of a 'childhood in crisis'. According to a report for the National Trust (2014), children spend, on average, over 17 h every week watching television, and 11–15-year-olds spend about 7.5 h a day watching screens of one sort or another. Moss (2012) argues that fewer than one in ten children regularly plays in wild places and that children are unable to recognise common wild creatures and engage in physical 'risk'. Through recognising the unreasonable societal perceptions of actual childhood risks, we can more accurately estimate the minimal risks posed by Forest School practice to children.

### ***Forest School and risk***

'Risky' elements to Forest School practice for children, depending on age, include tree-climbing, use of tools such as knives to whittle, axes to chop wood, campfire management, flora and fauna, woodland crafts and navigating uneven terrain (Button and Wilde 2019). However, risk aversion seems to have become a key feature of contemporary childhood, with a heightened perception of risk having a significant impact upon professionals' practice and occupational identity. There is conflicting understandings and approaches to professional practice which inform how risk is understood and managed. According to Knight (2011), practitioners and teachers have greater concerns over the facilitation of risk-taking activities with children than their parents. At the same time, practitioners are under pressure to provide children with more opportunities for outdoor play and to take greater risks. Connolly and Haughton (2017) report that, whilst teachers' motivations to participate in Forest School are derived from a desire to expose children to formative risk-taking outdoors, there are tensions in how they manage and supervise risky activities. This meant that the Forest School pedagogy may not have been fully realised, due to the very institutional risk aversion which they were attempting to counter.

Solly (2015) highlights that practitioners' views about risk are the main influence on the extent to which children are allowed to take risks and the quality of children's experiences in Forest School. A 'risk-benefit assessment' with Forest School allows children and practitioners to assess and manage risks and benefits together (Gill 2010). In this scenario, harmful elements, such as poisonous flora or trip hazards, would not necessarily be removed but rather the focus would be on helping the child to understand and manage the danger or risks in that setting. This approach illustrates the concept of 'managed' risk. This paper argues that, by countering a risk-averse tendency in society, Forest School offers children the opportunities to take some risks within a 'safe' environment. Button and Wilde



(2019) argue that in natural, wild spaces, there are elements of risky play, where children can challenge their skills and experience, impacting positively upon their well-being. The low-stress environment means that there are more opportunities for children to develop their creativity, imagination, resilience and confidence.

Sandseter (2009) argues that play and risk are interwoven, and thus risk must be appreciated. Such environments also assist in coping with real-life challenges and risks in childhood and enable the formation of skills for adulthood. Balancing the exposure to risk and need for safety correctly may even have a significant impact on children's long-term well-being (Solly 2015). Government policy (House of Commons 2010) has suggested that children need the opportunity to manage and take risks. Similarly, McCree and Cree (2017) argue that exposing children to risk and allowing them to manage their own risk empowers their self-regulated play. The Council for Learning Outside the Classroom (LOtC) (2012) states that preventing risk in play can have an adverse effect on children's management of hazards, the development of resilience and self-confidence and their ability to cope with change.

The proposition that risk-taking is of benefit to children's development can be explored through the concept of resilience. Resilience can be defined as the child's ability to process and overcome personal risks and dangers, and therefore there must be opportunities for risk-taking for resilience to develop. The building of resilience and confidence through Forest School contributes to the overall well-being of the child (Chawla 2015). The risks that are posed to a child in Forest School, through physical and emotional challenges, help the child to build resilience in overcoming such risks and taking on new challenges. Whereas previous generations of children in Britain were used to undertaking risky behaviours, such as roaming freely outdoors, tree climbing, using a pen-knife or simply exploring without adult supervision, these activities occur much less today (Gill 2013).

The work of Savery et al. (2017), which emphasises the importance of risk-taking activity in Forest Schools by younger children, can be situated within the substantial history of linking child development to outdoor play in early years settings (McMillan 2019). As such, risk is presented as an inevitable outcome of outdoor play and is, therefore, a necessary part of child development. Conversely, research conducted by Coates and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) alludes to the complexity involved in talking about risk within a primary school context. Here, the concepts of 'dignity of risk' and 'risky play' cannot be applied straightforwardly. Primary schools have not historically placed such a strong emphasis on play and thus the link between classroom-based activity and risk is a more complex one (Garden and Downes 2021).

A parallel discourse of risk that permeates childhood in crisis is that children are at risk from risk itself. By not allowing children to take risks, children are at risk from the absence of risk in outdoor play. Part of the reason that children are not taking part in outdoor risk exposure is due to children's technologically mediated, indoor, sedentary lifestyle. Adults' overprotection is caused by parental over-sensitivity to risk in believing that children need protection from the adult world. This protectionary impulse can be seen as limiting children's freedom and having a negative impact on their physical and psychological well-being by denying them the formative development inherent in risky experiences. Adults' attempts at protecting children and 'preserving childhood' are part of the problem, rather than the solution; consequently, childhood is at risk from both the encroachment and the protection of the adult world. This concern is evidence for Beck's general reflexive individualisation thesis (Beck 1992), and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (1995) illustration of how such reflexive individualisation colonises even the most intimate interpersonal relationships.

A dominant discourse relating to the putative crisis in childhood argues that children are at risk from denying them risk-taking experiences. Moss (2012) claims that within a 'risk' society, children now spend very little time out of doors. Parental or adult fears, therefore, impose a 'zero risk childhood', with children's time spent indoors 'reared in captivity' (Gill 2013), alongside technology as the babysitter (Palmer 2011).

Palmer's highly influential *Toxic Childhood* (2006) and *Detoxifying Childhood* (2007) consider the impact of the 'denial' of play, in particular, outdoor play. Palmer argues that, as a consequence of technological advancement and a reduction in traditional forms of play, combined with exposure

to consumerist messages, children's emotional, social and cognitive development is being compromised. He suggests that the antidote is nature and therefore a move away from technology. Palmer proposes that children's lives should be 'free range', rather than the sedentary, technologically mediated, nature-deprived 'battery' living they now experience.

As an antidote to both technological over-exposure and overprotection, there have been moves among parents, campaigners, policy advisors (Gill 2014), the DfES (2006) and advocates, such as Wild Nature, Playing Out and Project Wild Thing, to reintroduce risk-taking behaviours into the lives of children. In doing so, they aim to counter both the perceived cocooning of children and the pervasive negative understanding of risk, which is seen to emasculate not only children but parents and those who, while acting *in loco parentis*, are responsible for children's welfare and well-being. An educational initiative that has been offered as an exemplar (DfES 2006) in countering such ubiquitous risk aversion is a policy borrowed from Scandinavia-Forest School education. Proponents of this initiative argue that through exposing children to both nature and risk (Maynard and Waters 2007; Knight 2013), Forest School education can mitigate some of the perceived deleterious impacts that contemporary hyper-risk aversion can have on children's well-being. The 'safe' boundaries of Forest School allow risk to be explored and children to assess the levels of risk for themselves.

### The case for space in risk

The complex social arrangements that have underpinned the development of Forest Schools in the UK context, therefore, necessitate a theoretical approach that focuses on their potential as learning spaces *in situ* and the place of risk within this learning space, rather than measuring them against values that do not easily transcend geographical borders. Forest Schools can be viewed as distinctive spaces that sit within, and interact with, other connected spaces.

In considering outdoor space, the less predictable nature of the Forest School space may make the outdoor space more dynamic than an approved play space such as a playground; a space that is often designed to prevent injury. The idea of 'risky play' in the Forest School space can be described as play that fits within the category of physical play and is described as active, exciting and having elements of risk (Kleppe, Melhuish, and Sandseter 2017). Risky play can be argued to be a necessary component of healthy child development and the promotion of physical, social and mental health in children (Brussoni et al. 2015). A narrative of blame and litigation is responsible for educational practitioners' anxiety. The main concerns were how children's parents would react, the professional responsibilities of the practitioner and uncertainty about who would be blamed for any incidents (Button and Wilde 2019). Beck's risk society can be argued to hold a firm influence over societal beliefs and practices, including practitioners' fear of litigation (Harper 2017).

Forest Schools are often presented as idealised avenues to investigate the balance which is needed between risk-taking and safety in child development (Harper 2017). Forest School is an environment in which the risk of injury is present but minimal. The conceptualisation of risk within Forest School may not be well understood. The idea of Forest School as a range of narratives played out in time and space links to Massey's ideas; this understanding necessarily requires a redefinition of the ontological question of time and space rather than a dualism between our experiences of an external world, predicated on matter, and our internalised thoughts, predicated on time. This is not to say that the two operate indistinctly, for each has its own characteristics. This redefinition of the relationship between space and time in Forest Schools necessarily creates a more dynamic account of reality. Rather than a timeless, closed system, space becomes a 'discrete multiplicity [that is] imbued with temporality' (Massey 2005, 55).

In terms of the Forest School space, both time and space are internal facets that form the basic structures of cognition. According to Massey, there is confusion between time and space, which emanates from a sense that they exist independently of us. Such an approach ignores the work of Kant, which is central to most modern paradigms of thought. For Kant, time and space are *a priori* functions, that is, they form the architecture by which we make sense of the world: we see



objects in space but only make sense of them through difference, as they change through time (Massey 2005, 57).

Massey's approach considers the distinction between space and place, where place is the positioning of static objects such as those in nature, and space is the multiple interactions that occur between such objects (Agnew 2011). Outdoor learning spaces are used and valued within Forest School with Forest School practice becoming increasingly embedded within mainstream schooling (Harris 2017) situated at a point of intersection between formal and alternative forms of schooling. Place, therefore, provides a little possibility for diverse outcomes and agency, whereas space provides the opportunity for multiple trajectories to exist within the same context. The place for risk can, therefore, be considered within the concepts of place and space with the outdoor learning space freeing teachers from the norms and conventions of the classroom.

Viewing Forest School as a 'third space', as initially conceptualised by Bhabha, acknowledges the interconnectedness of different spaces (Potter and McDougall 2017). Forest School is a collection of places, for example, fire circle, trees and paths, and therefore the space is continually recreated and always subject to the possibility of change. The slight shifting of 'cultural borders' within the construction of risk arguably occurs as relationships between adults and children are re-defined within the Forest School space. Relationships with the children and expectations of behaviour are adapted while skills and approaches to teaching are subtly altered (Harris 2017). A more interactive and 'relaxed' style of teaching or leadership may pave the way for differing approaches to risk within the outdoor space. The insertion of risk into this dynamic means risk acts as this 'third space'. If we consider teachers, rangers and children as actors in this dynamic, they progress on multiple trajectories of space, place and risk. It is, therefore, possible for an individual to operate multiple trajectories through the same space.

## Discussion

This paper contributes to knowledge in the field of outdoor education by considering risk and the influence of space within UK Forest School practice. Cultural perceptions of risk within UK culture mean that adults can feel anxious about children's safety and thus conclude that particular activities are deemed to be too risky for their children. For example, Mertl (2015) argues that in the UK there is the underlying assumption that children will not be safe outside unless there is adult surveillance. This risk-averse culture and attitudinal changes towards childhood risk have increased over the past 30 years (McDowall-Clark 2013). The perception of the child as vulnerable implies that children need adult protection and guidance (Connolly and Haughton 2017), thus leading to a reduction in outdoor, unsupervised play for children (Play Safety Forum 2017).

The specific pedagogy, however, which underpins Forest School needs better articulation, and therefore it can be difficult for those not directly involved with Forest School to recognise its value (Leather 2018). The environment enhances children's engagement and awareness of nature and contributes to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD). If practitioners are not aware of the goals or how to promote sustainability, this is a missed opportunity to create advocates for the future (Gurholt 2014).

Fears about risk tend to be projected onto certain groups, with those groups defined as the dangerous, 'risky' other. Concepts of space include cultural objects constructed through social, political and historical processes. The importance of space and place in relation to concepts of riskiness lies not simply in their value as metaphor but in their materiality. Risk can be conceptualised differently according to the place the actors inhabit. Activities viewed from the safety of a classroom are likely to be perceived differently from those same activities in Forest School; for example, children cooking over a fire or using tools to whittle.

Teachers are more likely to accept risk in Forest School because they take their positions as classroom teachers in the Forest School setting. An aversion or sensitivity to risk can be highlighted by teacher directions in the Forest School space as such as 'don't run' and 'be quiet'. More experienced

practitioners in the Forest School space are less anxious about the risks of delivering Forest School sessions with young children (Button and Wilde 2019). An understanding of the underpinnings or theoretical basis of Forest School needs to be fully understood by teachers for the space to be fully utilised. Harper (2017) argues that a restructuring of the conversations around the place of risk leads to a return to a societal acceptance of reasonable and meaningful risk-taking by children. This, in turn, leads to shifts in the perception and practice of Forest School practitioners to engage children in outdoor risky play without fear of litigation and to fully recognise its value for children's development. A reconceptualisation of risk in childhood is arguably needed to allow children full exploration of capacity and curiosity in outdoor risky play in Forest School.

The learning space at Forest School is materially different from the classroom environment (Peacock and Pratt 2011). Learning spaces have their own practices, norms of behaviour, objectives and goals. Indeed, these cultural borders and the crossing of them are important to consider as children move from one space into another. The transition to the outdoors moves children into a space that is freer in terms of movement and possibly expectations of behaviour. In the Forest School space, children do not need to contain their energy levels or movement in the same ways that they would in an indoor classroom environment. As Fiskum and Jacobsen (2013) argue the restraints of the classroom environment can be very stressful for some pupils, including those with ADHD with the outdoor environment conversely reducing stress and improving concentration levels.

Enabling children to explore the outdoor space concurs with the proposal that children have a desire to master their environment. By not allowing children the opportunity to take risks, their natural curiosity is diminished. This reiterates the need for a reconceptualised approach to Forest School practice in UK contexts (Harris 2017). Forest Schools, through allowing opportunities for choice and control, provide children with a more flexible and responsive learning environment, motivating them to take risks and to gain a sense of accomplishment. This is closer to the philosophy of Danish schools, which aim to increase the child's sense of confidence (Harris 2017). The physical environment can be associated with feelings of secure attachment, promote the principles of nurture and provide a kind of ritualised routine. The familiar background of the scene (trees, fire circle, pathways) may be comforting and provide a sense of calm. This can reduce anxiety and build connections and relationships particularly for children with SEMH (Garden 2022).

Consideration of the physical space can mean there is a need to redefine how we conceptualise the notion of space within Forest Schools. Space is how individuals view the extension of learning beyond the confines of the classroom, not just the physical space (Garden 2022). The idea of Forest School as a range of narratives for children played out in time and space links into Massey's ideas and this understanding necessarily requires a redefinition of the ontological question. Rather than a dualism between our experiences of an external world, predicated on matter, and our internalised thoughts, predicated on time with both having their own characteristics. This redefinition of the relationship between space and time in Forest Schools necessarily creates a more dynamic account of the real. Rather than a timeless, closed system, space becomes a 'discrete multiplicity' (that is) imbued with temporality' (Massey 2005, 55).

The 'third space' (Bhabha 2012) of Forest Schools, therefore, provides a link between the familiar contexts of school and home. Such a model of education provides scope for interaction between home, school, Forest School and opportunities for children to engage in 'risk'. This paper contributes to knowledge in the field of outdoor education by presenting the case for space in the co-construction of risk. Forest Schools and risk can, therefore, be conceptualised as a 'third space' with the potential for a space to be established that provides opportunities for children to engage in risk-taking activities that they may not have the opportunity to do otherwise.

The more theoretical lens offered by Harper's positional paper on Forest Schools and risk is significant (2017). In this work, the concept of risk is presented as both a benefit of Forest Schools and as a barrier to them. In the first instance, the risk is presented as a deficit: it is something that has been reduced for young people through lower levels of exposure to outdoor environments compared to previous generations. Harper contrasts risky activity with a 'risk society' (2017, 318). This term refers

to the historically specific conditions that have led to a society 'accustomed to ever-present and growing perceptions of risk' (2017, 319). Harper posits that this reduction in tolerance to risk is undesirable and leads to negative social outcomes. Reasons for the deficit tend to focus on a more risk-averse culture and the increase in opportunities for indoor, technology-based activities (Elliott 2015). Harper presents a society that is over-aware of risk and in which perception of risk is skewed: what is construed as risk is of minimal danger in relation to other aspects of everyday life. This milieu, Harper argues, is detrimental to healthy child development (2017). Garden and Downes (2021) argue that while such a theoretical approach provides the freedom to provide a clear rationale for the need for risk in Forest Schools, it provides little traction for change, as practitioners attempt to accommodate various demands on their roles. Indeed, it is more likely that such papers are aimed at policy-makers rather than practitioners. As such, it is not clear what Forest Schools do in terms of beneficial risk. Furthermore, when the discourses of 'dignity of risk' and 'risky play' are deleted from specific contexts, their value is also removed concomitantly and the opportunities to transfer Forest School activities as risk-enhancing become limited. Broader theoretical approaches have the potential to expand our understanding, but rarely have an impact at a practitioner level.

## Disclosure statement

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

## ORCID

Angela Garden  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8055-6962>

## References

- Agnew, J. 2011. *The SAGE Handbook of Geographical Knowledge*. London: Sage Publishing.
- Bailey, R. 2011. *Letting Children be Children: Report of an Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood*. By Independent Review of the Commercialisation and Sexualisation of Childhood, Reg Bailey, Great Britain Department for Education.
- Beck, U. 1992. *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*. London: Sage.
- Beck, U. 1999. *World Risk Society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Beck, U., and E. Beck-Gernsheim. 1995. *The Normal Chaos of Love*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bhabha, H. K. 2012. *The Location of Culture*. Oxfordshire: Taylor & Francis.
- Biesta, G. 2012. "The Future of Teacher Education: Evidence, Competence or Wisdom? Rose." *Research on Steiner Education* 3 (1): 18–21.
- Brussoni, M., R. Gibbons, C. Gray, T. Ishikawa, E. B. H. Sandseter, A. Bienenstock, G., ... M. S. Tremblay. 2015. "What is the Relationship between Risky Outdoor Play and Health in Children? A Systematic Review." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 12 (3). doi:10.3390/ijerph120606423.
- Button, J., and A. Wilde. 2019. "Exploring Practitioners' Perceptions of Risk When Delivering Forest School for 3- to 5-Year-old Children." *International Journal of Play* 8 (Issue 1): 25–38.
- Chawla, L. 2015. "Benefits of Nature Contact for Children." *Journal of Planning Literature* 30 (4): 433–452.
- Coates, J. K., and H. Pimlott-Wilson. 2019. "Learning While Playing: Children's Forest School Experiences in the UK." *British Educational Research Journal* 45 (1): 21–40. doi:10.1002/berj.3491.
- Connolly, M., and C. Haughton. 2017. "The Perception, Management and Performance of Risk Amongst Forest School educators." *British Journal of Sociology of Education* 38 (2): 105–124. doi:10.1080/01425692.2015.1073098.
- Cree, J., and M. McCree. 2012. "A Brief History of Forest School-Part 1." *Horizons* 60: 32–34.
- Cumming, F., and M. Nash. 2015. "An Australian Perspective of a Forest School: Shaping a Sense of Place to Support Learning." *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning* 15 (Issue 4): 2015.
- DFES. 2006. *The Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto*. Accessed November29, 2020. <http://www.lotc.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/G1.-LOtC-Manifesto.pdf>.
- Elliott, H. 2015. "Forest School in an Inner City? Making the Impossible Possible." *Education 3-13* 43 (6): 722–730. doi:10.1080/03004279.2013.872159.
- Fiskum, T. A., and K. Jacobsen. 2013. "Outdoor Education Gives Fewer Demands for Action Regulation and an Increased Variability of Affordances." *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning* 13: 76–99.

- Forest School Association (FSA). 2011. *Full Principles and Criteria for Good Practice*. <https://forestschoollassociation.org/fullprinciples-and-criteria-for-good-practice/>.
- Freeman, M. 2011. *Human Rights: An Interdisciplinary Approach*. New Jersey: Wiley.
- Garden, A. 2022. "Forest School as a Space for Risk for Children with Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties." In *Policy, Provision and Practice for Special Educational Needs and Disability. Perspectives Across Countries*, edited by P. Wood, Chapter 9, 136–149. London: Routledge. ISBN:9780367724993.
- Garden, A., and G. Downes. 2021. "A Systematic Review of Forest Schools Literature in England." *Education 3-13 International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education*, 1–17. doi:10.1080/03004279.2021.1971275. Published online August 25, 2021.
- Giddens, A. 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Giddens, A. 1991. *Modernity and Self-Identity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Giddens, A. 1999. "Risk and Responsibility." *The Modern Law Review* 62 (1): 1–10. doi:10.1111/1468-2230.00188.
- Gill, T. 2010. *Nothing Ventured: Balancing Risks and Benefits in the Outdoors*. English Outdoor Learning Council. <http://www.englishoutdoorcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/Nothing-Ventured.pdf>.
- Gill, T. 2013. "Keynote Address." Annual Conference of the Forest School Association, March 12.
- Gill, T. 2014. "The Benefits of Children's Engagement with Nature: A Systematic Literature Review." *Children, Youth and Environments* 24 (2): 10–34. *Greening Early Childhood Education* (2014).
- Gurholt, K. 2014. "Joy of Nature, Friluftsliv Education and Self: Combining Narrative and Cultural–Ecological Approaches to Environmental Sustainability." *Journal of Adventure Education & Outdoor Learning* 14 (3): 233–246.
- Harper, N. J. 2017. "Outdoor Risky Play and Healthy Child Development in the Shadow of the 'Risk Society': A Forest and Nature School Perspective." *Child & Youth Services* 38 (4): 318–334.
- Harris, F. 2017. "The Nature of Learning at Forest School: Practitioners' Perspectives." *Education 3-13* 45 (2): 272–291. Taylor & Francis.
- Harris, F. 2018. "Outdoor Learning Spaces: The Case of Forest School." *Royal Geographic Society* 50 (2): 222–231.
- House of Commons. 2010. "Transforming Education Outside the Classroom." Accessed December 22, 2014. [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchiltsch/418/41807.htm#a8](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm200910/cmselect/cmchiltsch/418/41807.htm#a8).
- Kehily, M. J. 2010. "Childhood in Crisis? Tracing the Contours of 'Crisis' and its Impact upon Contemporary Parenting Practices." *Media, Culture & Society* 32 (2): 171–185.
- Kemp, N., and A. Pagden. 2018. "The Place of Forest School Within English Primary Schools: Senior Leader Perspectives." *Education 3-13* 47 (2): 1–13. July 2018.
- Kenny, R. 2010. *Forest School and the Early Years Foundation Stage – An Exploratory Case Study*.
- Kleppe, R., E. Melhuish, and E. B. H. Sandseter. 2017. "Identifying and Characterizing Risky Play in the Age One-to-Three Years." *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal* 25 (3): 370–385. doi:10.1080/1350293X.2017.1308163.
- Knight, S. 2009. *Forest Schools and Outdoor Learning in the Early Years*. London: Sage.
- Knight, S. 2011. *Risk and Adventure in Early Years Outdoor Play: Learning from Forest Schools*. London: Sage.
- Knight, S. 2013. *International Perspectives on Forest School: Natural Places to Play and Learn*. London: Sage.
- Leather, M. 2018. "A Critique of Forest School: Something Lost in Translation." *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education* 21 (1): 5–18.
- LoTc (Council for Learning Outside the classroom). 2012. *Implications of No Risk*. [www.LoTc.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2010/12/implications-of-no-risk.pdf](http://www.LoTc.org.uk/wpcontent/uploads/2010/12/implications-of-no-risk.pdf).
- Louv, R. [2005] 2010. *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature Deficit Disorder*. London: Atlantic Books.
- Massey. 1995. "Thinking Radical Democracy Spatially." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 13 (3):283–288. doi:10.1068/d130283.
- Massey, D. B. 2005. *For Space*. London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Maynard, T., and J. Waters. 2007. "Learning in the Outdoor Environment: A Missed Opportunity?" *Early Years* 27 (3): 255–265. doi:10.1080/09575140701594400.
- McCree, M., and J. Cree. 2017. "Forest School: Core Principles in Changing Times." In *Children Learning Outside the Classroom from Birth to Eleven*, edited by S. Waite, 222–232. London: SAGE.
- McDowall-Clark, R. 2013. *Childhood in Society for the Early Years*. 2nd ed. London: SAGE.
- McMillan, M. 2019. *The Nursery School*. London: Wentworth Press.
- Mertl, S. 2015. "Bans on Tobogganing a Symptom of a Risk-Averse 'Bubble-Wrap Generatio'". *Canada News*. <https://ca.news.yahoo.com/blogs/dailybrew/tobogganing-a-target-of-the-risk-averse-004349672.html>.
- Moss, S. 2012. *Natural Childhood*. London: National Trust. Accessed November 22, 2020. [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/document-1355766991839/](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/document-1355766991839/).
- Moss. 2016. "Why Can't we get Beyond Quality?" *Contemporary Issues in Early Childhood* 17 (1): 8–15. doi:10.1177/1463949115627895.
- Mycok. 2019. "Forest Schools: Moving Towards an Alternative Pedagogical Response to the Anthropocene?" *Discourse Studies in the Cultural Politics of Education* 41 (5): 1–14. doi:10.1080/01596306.2019.1670446.
- National Trust. 2014. *Reconnecting Children with Nature: Findings of the Natural Childhood Inquiry*. Accessed November 22, 2014. [www.nationaltrust.org.uk/document-1355773744553/](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk/document-1355773744553/).

- O'Brien, L. 2009. "Learning Outdoors: the Forest School Approach. International Perspectives on Outdoor and Experiential Learning." *Education 3-13 International Journal of Primary, Elementary and Early Years Education* 37 (1): 45-60.
- Palmer, S. 2006. *Toxic Childhood: How The Modern World Is Damaging Our Children And What We Can Do About It*. London: Orion Publishing.
- Palmer, S. 2007. *Detoxifying Childhood Detoxing Childhood: What Parents Need to Know to Raise Happy, Successful Children*. London: Orion Publishing.
- Palmer, S. 2011. "Keynote Address." The Institute of Outdoor Learning Forest School Special Interest Group Conference, Liddington Hall, Swindon, October 8.
- Peacock, A., and N. Pratt. 2011. "How Young People Respond to Learning Spaces Outside School: A Sociocultural Perspective." *Learning Environments Research* 14: 11-24.
- Play Safety Forum. 2017. *Play Safety Forum Statements*. <https://playsafetyforum.wordpress.com/statement/>.
- Potter, J., and J. McDougall. 2017. *Digital Media, Culture and Education, Theorising Third Space Literacies*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sandseter, E. B. H. 2009. "Affordances for Risky Play in Preschool: The Importance of Features in the Play Environment." *Early Childhood Education Journal* 36 (5): 439-446. doi:10.1007/s10643-009-0307-2.
- Savery, A., T. Cain, J. Garner, T. Jones, E. Kynaston, K. Mould, L. Nicholson, S. Proctor, R. Pugh, E. Rickard, and D. Wilson. 2017. "Does Engagement in Forest School Influence Perceptions of Risk, Held by Children, Their Parents, and Their School Staff?" *Education 3-13* 45 (5): 519-531. doi:10.1080/03004279.2016.1140799. Routledge.
- Slade, M., C. Lowery, and K. Bland. 2013. "Evaluating the Impact of Forest Schools: A Collaboration Between a University and a Primary School." *Support for Learning* 28 (2): 66-72. doi:10.1111/1467-9604.12020.
- Solly, K. 2015. *Risk, Challenge and Adventure in the Early Years*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Waite, S., M. Bolling, and P. Bentsen. 2016. "Comparing Apples and Pears?: A Conceptual Framework for Understanding Forms of Outdoor Learning Through Comparison of English Forest Schools and Danish Udeskol." *Environmental Education Research* 22 (Issue 6): 868-892. ECER Mini Collection: New Ethical Challenges within Environmental and Sustainability Education.
- Wexler, L., and K. A. Eglinton. 2015. "Reconsidering Youth Well-Being as Fluid and Relational: A Dynamic Process at the Intersection of Their Physical and Social Geographies." *Handbook of Children and Youth Studies*, 127-137.
- World Health Organization (WHO). 2011. *World Report on Disability*. <https://www.who.int/publications/i/item/9789241564182>.
- Williams-Sieghfredsen, J. 2017. *Understanding the Danish Forest School Approach: Early Years Education in Practice*. London: David Fulton Books.