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# The University Forest School Space in England: taking seminars outdoors for early years undergraduates

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## ABSTRACT

Outdoor natural spaces are seen as not only physical locations but also shaped by human interactions, cultural practices, and political processes. University seminars were conducted in the on-campus Forest School. Focusing specifically on the development of early years educators in England, the exploration of outdoor natural spaces reveals a multifaceted dimension that extends beyond mere physicality. A convenience group of 25 participants comprising early years undergraduates were selected for a focus group that took place around a campfire after a series of seminar discussions. Thematic analysis of the data revealed the themes of collaboration, creativity, and cultural boundaries. Drawing upon Lefebvre and Massey, this research highlights the potential for new educational spaces beyond the traditional indoor classroom and the benefits of incorporating nature into early years learning environments.

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## Introduction

In England, there is a growing concern about the diminishing connection between children and the natural environment. This concern is exemplified by the recent publication of the government's 25-year Environment Plan, which acknowledges the necessity for children, especially those from disadvantaged areas with limited access to gardens or green spaces, to have a close relationship with nature (DEFRA 2018). Schools play a prominent role in addressing this concern, as highlighted in the plan's endorsement of various opportunities, such as school-community forest partnerships, nature-friendly school programmes, and nature engagement initiatives for schools and Pupil Referral Units. This role assigned to schools as a solution to what Louv (2005) terms Nature Deficit Disorder is not novel. The previous White Paper (DEFRA 2011) similarly underscored the significance of fostering connections through education, perhaps with even more ambitious intentions. Nevertheless, the fact remains that contemporary environmental policy discourse positions schools as pivotal in facilitating nature connections for children and youth (Dillon and Dickie 2012).

Within English primary schools, Forest School is witnessing a surge in popularity (Coates and Pimlott-Wilson 2019). As a method specifically mentioned by DEFRA, it serves as a compelling example of the practical development of outdoor learning (Kemp 2020). Forest schools emerged from the Danish concept of 'udeskole' or 'outdoor school', which is embraced by many schools across Scandinavia. Danish udeskole approach is often embedded within an established early

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years' approach to outdoor learning (Williams-Sieghfredsen 2017). The Scandinavian approach to early years' education has a strong focus on the importance of 'place' for learning. In this context, the outdoor environment is a significant aspect of the school curriculum. Based on an outdoor learning approach, Forest Schools are a distinctive educational approach that has emerged in the UK over the past 20 years (Garden and Downes 2023a) after staff of Bridgwater College, Somerset undertook an exchange visit to Denmark in 1993. The outdoor learning approach of Udeskole was adapted and applied to pre-school children with results showing an increase in confidence, concentration, and motivation over time, which then led on to improved learning outcomes. Whilst outdoor learning is often viewed from the lenses of teaching science or geography outdoors, a growing body of literature has identified that it can provide opportunities for learning across many subjects whilst supporting children's holistic development (Barrable and Arventis 2019; Garden and Hirst 2022; Harris 2023; Tiplady and Menter 2021).

The Forest School Association (FSA), set up in 2011 supports those involved in Forest School practice (FSA 2021). It promotes the ethos of providing children with regular opportunities to engage in outdoor activities, ideally in a woodland setting. The FSA promotes a process that supports the development of children's knowledge and social skills in the outdoor environment; thereby developing their confidence and skills. Indeed, there are a diverse range of activities engaged with under the Forest School banner, which can be problematic when attempting to unravel what makes forest schools unique from other outdoor learning experiences (Garden 2022; Garden and Downes 2023a). Danish schools for example highlight outdoor learning through curriculum subjects such as nature and technology (Danish Learning Portal 2018).

The DfES (2006) highlighted the importance of the use of outdoor education with the 'Learning Outside the Classroom Manifesto' (DfES 2006) promoting a move towards the outdoors as a learning site. The provision of outdoor learning is highlighted in the revised Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (DfE 2023) and the revised 'Development Matters' (DfE 2023). The EYFS Tickell review (2011, 27) recommends that 'playing and exploring, active learning, and creating and thinking critically are highlighted as ... three characteristics of effective teaching and learning'; such activities could be carried out outdoors as well as indoors. The outdoors may no longer just be the domain of progressive or creative schools but part of the mainstream approach to education and preparation for the workplace.

The National College for School Leadership (2012) report on embedding outdoor learning within the primary curriculum found that the use of the outdoors is not only beneficial to children but to adult learners. Although there are several studies concerning learning in nature in schools (Knowles et al. 2020), transferring these studies to higher education settings may be problematic given the differences in age groups and learning environments. Adult learners are more likely to be intrinsically motivated and self-directed than child learners (Knowles et al. 2020). It is the attitude and behaviours of the adults outdoors that has the most impact on children's learning and engagement particularly relevant for trainee early years educators.

Forest Schools sit within, and interact with, other connected spaces (Garden 2023). An examination of the complexity around the hybrid spaces constituted by both classrooms and Forest Schools means that they may come together to generate existing and new spaces (Garden and Downes 2023a). The idea that space matters is perhaps a new one in the field of education (Kraftl 2014). As Kraftl (2014, 1) purports a 'good education' is often underpinned by the attributes of the teacher, the engagement of the pupils, the appropriateness of the curriculum and the quality of the relationship between teachers and pupils. New learning spaces can provide a different context for children's and adult's learning with different practices, norms of behaviour, objectives and goals for learning (Peacock and Pratt 2011). Taking children (or adults) out of the indoor classroom to an outdoor environment can transfer their learning to a physical space that gives a different experience to the classroom (Harris 2017). Restrictions on movement and sound that often characterise indoor classrooms contrast with the outdoor classroom or Forest School where children often have more space and autonomy to develop their imaginations and enhance their learning.

## Learning outdoors for early years undergraduates

Whilst there is a growing emphasis on incorporating outdoor learning experiences, a notable obstacle hindering the consistent and favourable integration of outdoor education is teachers' apprehension in conducting lessons outdoors. To address this concern, Initial Teacher Education (ITE) has been recognised as a potential avenue to enhance teachers' self-assurance; however, the extent and effectiveness of such programmes remain diverse and relatively under-researched (Barbare and Lakin 2020). In this article, I have expanded upon my previous publication (Garden and Downes 2023a) which identified several abstract themes that arose from my research on outdoor learning spaces. These themes all relate to the concept of outdoor education, but they are applicable in three distinct contexts: early childhood education, special needs education, and formal education. I have argued that Forest School writers should pay closer attention to these contexts because abstract theories, such as spatialisation, offer opportunities for more inclusive and open discussions that are not limited by historical discourses associated with specific contexts (as described by Foucault in 1972).

The foundational concepts presented by Doreen Massey (2005) and Henri Lefebvre (1991) regarding the socially constructed nature of space offer valuable insights for higher education, teacher education and Forest School contexts. In higher education, these ideas challenge us to view classrooms and virtual learning spaces as products of social relations and power dynamics, calling for more inclusive and student-centred educational environments. In teacher education, recognising that training spaces are not neutral allows for the development of more socially aware, equitable, and culturally responsive early years pedagogies. Similarly, in the context of Forest Schools, understanding that outdoor learning spaces are not just natural settings but are shaped by values, power dynamics, and community influences can lead to a holistic, socially aware approach to forest-based education. By integrating these concepts, educators can critically examine the spaces in which they teach and create more inclusive, equitable, and socially conscious learning environments, effectively challenging and reshaping existing power structures (Lefebvre 1991; Massey 1994).

The concept of space, as articulated by Massey, holds significant relevance for teacher education and Forest School environments. Massey's assertion that space is not static but rather dynamic and shaped by social relations and power dynamics challenges traditional educational settings. In HE, this perspective calls for a re-evaluation of physical and virtual learning spaces, emphasising the need for more dynamic and socially responsive environments that consider the diverse experiences and needs of students. Teacher education can benefit from this perspective by recognising that the spaces where educators are trained are not neutral, but rather influenced by social dynamics and historical processes. This understanding can lead to the development of more socially aware and inclusive teacher training practices. Similarly, in Forest Schools, Massey's insights highlight that outdoor natural spaces are not just physical locations but also products of human interactions, cultural practices, and political processes. Acknowledging this dynamic nature of outdoor spaces can lead to more culturally responsive and adaptable approaches to forest-based education, ensuring that it remains relevant and inclusive for all (Massey 2005).

The emphasis on specific educational contexts holds great importance because established practices within a particular setting influence what is seen as feasible, and consequently, shapes the extent of the theoretical framework used to interpret activities (Garden and Downes 2023a). This narrative takes on an even more pronounced resonance within the domain of early years education for university students. Here, the intricate interplay between pedagogical techniques, classroom dynamics, and educational philosophies amplifies the relevance of this study. By discerning the broader implications of these abstract themes, I aspire to empower early years students to navigate their roles with an enriched perspective, one that is informed by a comprehensive understanding of the diverse educational landscapes they will encounter.

The significance of adapting educational practices to specific contexts, as emphasised in my previous paper (Garden and Downes 2023a), is particularly pronounced in early years education and Forest School settings with the recognition of the impact of established practices on teaching and learning environments as crucial. The dynamics of classroom interactions, educational philosophies, and pedagogical techniques interact in unique ways to shape the higher education experiences. For teacher and early years education, understanding the intricate interplay between these factors is essential in preparing future educators for the diverse educational landscapes they will encounter. This comprehensive perspective empowers them to adapt their teaching strategies to meet the needs of a variety of students and settings. Similarly, in Forest Schools, where outdoor and experiential learning is central, recognising the influence of the specific natural environment and the interactions within it is vital.

The notion of learning spaces, as delineated by Peacock and Pratt (2011), is essential to understanding and optimising educational settings in Higher Education (HE), teacher education, and Forest School environments. In HE, the distinction between macro and micro contexts of learning spaces is valuable, as it allows educators to consider not only the physical layout of classrooms but also the intricacies of spatial arrangements and environmental factors that influence learning experiences. This perspective acknowledges the unique character of outdoor environments, where the concept of space extends beyond physical attributes to encompass the permissibility of different behaviours and the spaces allocated within the curriculum. The insights drawn from Lefebvre's view of the built environment as a social and cultural product are especially pertinent here. In teacher and early years education understanding that spaces reflect values, beliefs, and practices offers an opportunity to create more intentional and socially responsive environments. Lefebvre's emphasis on public space as a catalyst for social relations and democratic participation aligns with the potential of outdoor spaces like those in Forest Schools to facilitate collaboration, idea sharing, and collective action. These insights underscore the importance of recognising outdoor spaces as sites of contestation where diverse groups can negotiate their interests and work towards greater social justice and equality, fostering a sense of empowerment and inclusivity within these educational contexts (Garden and Downes 2023b; Lefebvre 1991; Peacock and Pratt 2011).

Recognising the value of nature relatedness in outdoor learning programmes, as highlighted by Barrable and Arventis (2019) and Garden (2022), is critical. The concept of nature relatedness can inform the development of curricula and learning environments that encourage students to forge a deeper connection with the natural world, fostering a sense of responsibility and environmental stewardship. In early years education, this understanding can guide the preparation of educators who, in turn, can instil these values in their students, promoting environmentally conscientious actions and outdoor engagement as integral components of their teaching practices (Barrable and Arventis 2019; Capaldi, Dopko, and Zelenski 2014; Garden 2022). Barrable and Lakin (2020) by centring attention on a pedagogical approach geared towards fostering a connection with nature within outdoor learning and the interconnection between outdoor education and sustainability-focused learning, they propose that nature relatedness is positively correlated with the perceived competence and willingness of student teachers to engage in outdoor teaching.

Recent research has underscored the pivotal role of Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes in nurturing teachers' confidence concerning outdoor learning practices (Barrable, Touloumakos, and Lapere 2022). Insights into the function of ITE programmes and universities in the professional growth of educators have unveiled a multifaceted approach, encompassing a diverse array of influences that extend beyond conventional university contexts (Livingston 2014). While Livingston primarily addresses post-ITE encounters and collaborations with external agencies after teacher qualification, this study seeks to explore the potential impact of earlier experiences and various components on the development of early years education educators' self-assurance regarding learning outdoors.

## Methodology

### *Participants*

A convenience group of 25 participants, consisting of a facilitator (tutor) and 25 students, were selected for the focus group. The students were first year education studies and early years undergraduate students with the convenience sample comprising of a single seminar group. The participants were seated around a fire circle in a designated woodland area of the campus, as part of the on-campus Forest School. The researcher, who acted as an observer and conducted the subsequent focus group, was also a tutor and a Forest School Leader.

### *Ethical considerations*

This study employed focus groups as a method to explore the experiences of both students and tutor in holding university seminar groups in the on-campus Forest School space. Prior to the session, the students were required to read a journal article, which was used as a discussion point during the session. Ethical approval before the commencement of the study was granted through the University Ethics Committee. In accordance with the BERA Ethical Guidelines (2018), voluntary informed consent was obtained from all participants. The participants were informed in advance of the session, with letters of consent and information sheets issued, outlining the activity, ensuring confidentiality, and addressing issues of data protection. During the focus group, the researcher digitally recorded quotes at the time of their occurrence, which were later converted to pseudonyms to protect the identities of the participants, in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. The BERA (2018) Ethical Guidelines for research notes that participants have the right to withdraw from research without explanation, and through the participant information sheet and consent forms, all participants were made aware of their right to withdraw.

Certainly, ethical considerations are indeed paramount, especially considering the unique dual role I occupied as both a 'tutor' and 'researcher' within this study. This duality introduced significant power differentials that warranted careful attention throughout the research process, particularly in relation to issues such as 'coerced consent'. Given my position as a tutor, there existed a potential for students to feel compelled to participate due to the inherent power dynamic. To mitigate this risk, several steps were taken to ensure that participants felt truly voluntary in their engagement. Firstly, explicit emphasis was placed on the voluntary nature of participation during the initial communication about the study. It was underscored that the decision to take part or withdraw would in no way influence their academic standing or relationship with me as a tutor. Moreover, recognising the power dynamics, I deliberately chose to delegate the task of obtaining informed consent from the students to the tutor (facilitator) running the seminar sessions, a neutral third party. This ensured that there was no perceived pressure from me, their tutor, to participate. The tutor was equipped to answer any queries and concerns the participants might have had. Additionally, an open forum was established for participants to raise concerns about the study, both before and after their involvement. This was done to foster a sense of agency and to allow participants to voice any reservations without fear of academic repercussions.

It is important to note that the ethical considerations extended beyond the consent process. Throughout the focus groups, I was particularly mindful of my dual role and the potential for my presence to inadvertently influence the participants' responses. I employed techniques such as asking open-ended questions and encouraging diverse viewpoints to create a balanced discourse.

### *Tool of data collection*

The study sought to understand the potential value of Forest Schools within the wider education context of higher education for trainee early years educators. Forest Schools provide a unique

space where new interactions, rituals, and practices can be constructed, potentially leading to positive outcomes on the mental health and well-being of those who participate in forest school programmes (Manner, Doi, and Laird 2021). Additionally, such spaces may provide different learning experiences and outcomes, resulting in qualitatively different kinds of knowledge compared to more formal learning spaces.

To achieve the research objectives, the participants were asked a series of questions whilst remaining seated around the campfire and following the seminar discussions. These questions were designed to investigate the following aspects of their experience:

- Were the conversations different from those held in the classroom?
- If so, did this change the way the participants thought about the paper?
- Did the participants spend less or more time thinking about the content of the paper?
- Were the participants able to make links between the paper and other things they have learned?
- Were the participants able to find their own voice in the paper?
- Did being outside help or hinder the participants?
- Did the participants feel more or less comfortable talking to their peers? If so, why?
- Did the participants feel more or less comfortable talking to their tutors? If so, why?
- Were the participants able or unable to say things they wouldn't normally say? If so, why?
- How do you think learning or teaching outdoors could enhance your practice as an early years educator?

### ***Analysis of data***

This study utilised thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2022) as a methodological framework to delve into the data. Thematic analysis is a systematic and widely recognised qualitative research approach that allows for a comprehensive exploration of textual or visual data, with the aim of identifying recurring patterns, themes, and insights. In the context of this study, thematic analysis was the chosen methodological framework because it allowed the researchers to systematically and comprehensively explore the data collected from the experiences of trainee early years educators and their tutor in the forest school setting. The outcomes of this analysis revealed distinct themes that can be categorised as collaboration, creativity, and cultural boundaries, each of which holds significant relevance in the realm of early years teaching within outdoor settings.

### ***Findings***

The primary objective of this research was to gain a deeper understanding of the potential value that Forest Schools bring to the broader landscape of higher education, specifically for trainee early years educators. The study set out to explore the multifaceted aspects of Forest Schools and how they intersect with the educational journey of these future educators. In the context of early years teaching, the feedback from undergraduate students highlighted the impact of the less structured outdoor environment on their interactions. These students noted that discussions took on a more relaxed and interactive tone, attributed in part to the surroundings. The presence of fresh air, exposure to nature, and the arrangement of seating contributed to them feeling more alert and engaged. Equally significant, the tutor leading the session also experienced an enhanced ability to connect with the students during discussions. This rapport was fostered by the circular seating arrangement, which encouraged a sense of inclusivity and facilitated more open dialogue. In essence, the outdoor setting not only influenced the students' state of alertness and participation but also positively shaped the tutor's interactions with them, emphasising the potential of outdoor environments in early years education.



## Collaboration

This study explored the differences in collaboration between outdoor learning environments and traditional classroom environments. The findings indicate that outdoor learning environments offer more physical mobility and less structure than classroom environments, which can increase or decrease the physical space around students, thereby aiding collaboration (Harris 2021). Students reported feeling more involved and awake outside and being less distracted, which kept them more energised:

I feel more involved and awake outside. The fresh air stops you from nodding off and being distracted. It keeps you awake and a bit more energised.

Kate (student)

The removal of students from the structure, social dynamics, norms, and expectations of the classroom to new learning spaces allowed for new ways of exploring and learning. At Forest School sessions, different norms and expectations for behaviour operated, and the larger physical space enabled students to engage in behaviour that was not possible in a classroom situation where they were confined to desks and chairs. This arrangement of the physical space outdoors allowed students to discuss the article as a group and were more likely to individually contribute although arguably chairs could be arranged in a similar fashion in the indoor classroom:

If you're indoors in a large room, you might need to shout or you might get ignored and people feel embarrassed by that whereas if its more intimate then we get heard. There is less of a risk of not getting heard.

Jess (student)



**Figure 1.** Individual contributions.



The norms and expectations around a fire circle differed from those of a classroom environment (Figure 1). Fiskum and Jacobsen (2013) reported that when children move outdoors, they transition into a learning space that is freer in terms of norms and expectations for behaviour, as they do not need to suppress energy levels, movement, or noise in the same way as in a classroom. This can be particularly beneficial for children or students with ADHD who find the indoor environment stressful, as the move outdoors reduces stress, enabling better concentration and increasing motivation to learn.

Massey (2005) argued that space is relational and not a fixed, static entity but is constantly being produced and reproduced through social relations and practices. Outdoor spaces can provide a dynamic and stimulating environment for collaboration and collective action. Similarly, the EYFS (DfE 2023) emphasises the significance of Personal, Social, and Emotional Development (PSED) in children. It states that through interactive experiences with their peers, children learn the art of cultivating good friendships, cooperating with others, and resolving conflicts peacefully. These attributes, collectively nurtured through personal, social, and emotional development, are deemed essential for children's overall well-being and successful growth.

The findings of this study suggest that the tutor role changed to that of a contributor to the group rather than a director, which made it more likely that students would contribute:

The tutor role changed to more of a contributor to the group rather than director of the group. Less teacher-like and more on a level. It means we are more likely to contribute.

Sarah (student)

The conversations were more relaxed outside, and questions were more open to discussion, leading to greater participation:

The conversations were more relaxed because it's not as much of a structured environment like a classroom. It's more of a relaxed area. The questions are less 'you must give me an answer or you're not leaving the room' they are more open to discussion. Same as in a primary school, children must put their hands up whereas outside its more open to discussion. I think it's because we are all sitting in a circle and can see each other. If we out everyone in a circle in the classroom, we probably wouldn't get it to the same extent as outdoors, but we would get more of discussion.

Jane (student)

The circular arrangement around a fire circle made it easier for the tutor to engage students and for students to engage with each other:

It makes it easier to get engagement as you move around the fire circle. Someone can be directly in your eyeline and you're in their eyeline, so they are more likely to engage. Whereas when you're in a classroom they are very staid, and you are very much at the front, or they have their back to you but because its circular and round you can get them to engage and almost force them to engage more.

Valerie (tutor)

## Creativity

The present study investigated the influence of physical space and social organisation on creativity in educational settings. Creativity is a result of not only of the physical space but also the influence this has on the social organisation within the space. According to Kraftl (2013) it is impossible to separate social processes from spatial processes. The indoor classroom is often seen to symbolise the space where 'the theory' is taught. Educational spaces are not solely defined by their physical design, but also by the social interactions that occur within them (Kraftl 2014).

In a classroom you don't see everyone faces. In a circle, you see everyone's faces. It's a different setting.

Joe (student)

The findings of this study suggest that outdoor learning environments provide greater opportunities for social interaction and student autonomy. In comparison to the controlled setting of indoor classrooms, outdoor settings offer more freedom for students to interact with a wider range of peers and engage in collaborative work (Waite 2019). The outdoor setting allowed them to experience a different way of learning and teaching, with less structure and more engagement with peers:

Coming outside for our seminar has made me realise that content can be taught outside the walls of the indoor classroom. That we don't need to be sat at desks and facing the front. I feel this is important in terms of my own training as a would-be primary school teacher.

Rosie (student)

I feel I can take the creative aspects of learning outdoors into my early years practice.

Michael (student)

In addition, the influence of the environment on learning can be seen through Gardner's (1993) theory of multiple intelligences, which highlights the importance of engaging multiple senses, the affective dimension, and the body in the learning process. Outdoor learning experiences are often multi-sensory and involve whole-brain learning, leading to improved cognitive function, problem-solving abilities, and creativity (Berman et al. 2012). As one student noted, the change in environment allowed them to stay more engaged and alert:

When you've been in the classroom for a long time you get tired and bored but if you're changing it around and coming into the outside environment then you're more likely to stay awake and engaged. I feel this would be the same with young children.

Jane (student)

The benefits of outdoor spaces on creativity can also be seen through the work of Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (2005), who argue that outdoor spaces provide opportunities for exploration, discovery, and new ways of thinking (Figure 2). The 2023 EYFS (DfE 2023) underscores the significance of Expressive Arts and Design in children's development. This area of learning fosters children's artistic and cultural awareness, enhancing their imagination and creativity. As a tutor noted, the energy and engagement of the students during outdoor learning was palpable:



**Figure 2.** Creative responses.

It felt like there was a lot of energy in the group when the students were talking.

Valerie (Tutor)

### **Cultural borders**

The study found that Forest Schools or natural outdoor spaces provide a physical and ideological separate space for students to experience alternative pedagogical and environmental ideas that emerge in a larger and more open space compared to classroom settings (Potter and McDougall 2017). Forest School exists within a 'third space' (Bhabha 2012) that lies between the structured and standardised environment of classrooms and the adaptable and dynamic setting of home life (Garden and Downes 2023a). The outdoor space of Forest School had different meanings for different students, depending on their cultural background, social status, and personal experiences (Massey 2005). The shifting of 'cultural borders' occurred as relationships between tutors and students were re-defined within the Forest School space (Harris 2017).

Forest Schools can break down power dynamics and create a communal feel that allows for more interactive and learner-oriented approaches to teaching (Harris 2017). Practitioners felt that national curriculum topics were of less importance at Forest School than personal, social, and emotional development (Harris 2017). The physical layout of Forest School settings serves as a foundation for recognising the significance of nature in outdoor education (Garden 2023). The outdoors is not a neutral or objective space but is shaped by cultural factors such as race, class, gender, and history. Facilitating a grasp of the world entails assisting children in comprehending their physical environment and the community in which they live.

The physical space in which Forest School takes place was viewed to be larger and more open than classroom settings. It can be a physically and ideologically separate space where alternative (pedagogical and environmental) ideas emerge. Forest School as a 'third space', as initially conceptualised by Bhabha, highlights the interconnectedness of different spaces (Potter and McDougall 2017), which lies between structured and standardised environment of classrooms and the adaptable and dynamic setting of home life (Garden and Downes 2023a). Forest School as a collection of places, for example, fire circle, trees, and paths are continually recreated and always subject to the possibility of change.

In his book 'Writings on Cities' (1996), Lefebvre argues that cities should be viewed as a place of social and political struggle, where marginalised groups can challenge dominant power struggles and assert their right to the city. He emphasises the importance of collective action and social movements in shaping urban space and promoting social justice. The shifting of 'cultural borders' arguably occurs as relationships between tutors and students are re-defined within the Forest School space. For tutors, relationships with the students and expectations of behaviour are adapted whilst skills and approaches to teaching may be subtly altered (Harris 2017). Individuals may therefore operate multiple trajectories through the same space (Garden 2023).

We have more confidence to speak up.

Robbie (student)

It felt safer to answer in this setting than indoors in a classroom. Children may also feel less intimidated.

Maisie (student)

In a classroom, you don't put as much effort into answering as you're sat so far away. It feels risky. In a lecture I just wouldn't normally put my hand up and answer a question.

Rosie (student)

A 'cultural border' (Peacock and Pratt 2011) may well be crossed when moving outdoors as the relationship between pupils and teachers is subtly re-defined. Harris (2017) highlights that teachers' skills and approaches to teaching are subtly altered and that practitioners felt national curriculum

topics were of less importance at Forest School than personal, social, and emotional development. Less pressure for both pupils and teachers may also play a factor in forest school as often the learning space is separate from the demands of the national curriculum with its associated measures of performance (Kraftl 2013).

It's made us feel more comfortable talking to our peers as it has broken down the power dynamics and has more of a communal feel. It is more of a communal discussion where it isn't so structured the student just gives a slight influence then everyone gets to speak how they want to.

Ella (student)

The study also found that the Forest School provides opportunities for students to engage with the environment and explore different disciplinary knowledge, such as social behaviours on campus and natural phenomena, which may improve mental well-being (Figure 3) (Bratman et al. 2015). The study suggests that public spaces, such as Forest Schools, woodland, or parks, can promote social interaction and foster a sense of community (Massey 2005). The research identified a barrier to outdoor learning in that early years' students viewed outdoor learning as just Forest School and did not recognise the everyday practice in early years settings:

The challenge was that they viewed outdoor learning as just Forest Schools and because they are early years students, it's far more about the physical opportunities and the gross motor opportunities of being outdoors and not replicating indoors outdoors. Because we are in the Forest School, they viewed it is 'we are just talking about Forest School' but we are actually talking everyday practice in the early years setting. That was the only barrier really.

Valerie (tutor)



**Figure 3.** The Forest School setting.



## Discussion

This article suggests that physical space and social organisation play pivotal roles in cultivating creativity within educational settings. Outdoor learning environments, by their very nature, provide a distinctive arena for fostering social interaction, empowering student autonomy, and facilitating multi-sensory learning experiences, all of which contribute to heightened cognitive function and the development of creative thinking. This perspective aligns with previous research that underscores the advantages of outdoor learning environments in promoting social interaction, student autonomy, and multi-sensory learning experiences. For instance, Waite (2019) uncovered that outdoor settings offer increased opportunities for social interaction and student autonomy in comparison to indoor classrooms, leading to enhanced pro-social behaviour and stronger classroom cohesion. Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (1993) further accentuates the significance of involving multiple senses and the body in the learning process, a characteristic that is inherently fostered by outdoor learning experiences. Consequently, this article contributes to knowledge in the field of educational pedagogy by shedding light on the vital role of physical space and social dynamics in nurturing creativity among early years students in diverse learning environments (Gardner 1993; Waite 2019).

A study involving primary school teachers in New Zealand revealed that engaging in outdoor learning, particularly through Forest School initiatives, led to a revitalised professional identity for the teachers involved (Cosgriff 2017). The study indicated that Forest School can facilitate the creation of hybrid professional identities that blend practical demands with ethical motivations. Additionally, the educators noted that their involvement with Forest School prompted them to contemplate their teaching methods and to incorporate concepts from Forest School into their broader pedagogical approaches.

The potential of outdoor spaces to promote creativity and innovation has been noted by Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (2005). Lefebvre argues that outdoor spaces provide opportunities for exploration and invention, which can stimulate creativity in various fields, including the arts, literature, and sciences. In terms of access to natural outdoor learning spaces, Massey (2005) emphasises the power relations that shape spaces and the ways in which different groups have different access to and control over them. In the context of outdoor learning, this means that certain groups may have more opportunities to access and benefit from outdoor learning than others, depending on factors such as socioeconomic status or geographic location. For example, research has shown that children from low-income families have fewer opportunities to engage in outdoor learning compared to children from wealthier families (Bixler, Floyd, and Hammitt 2002). By acknowledging the power relations that shape outdoor learning, educators can work to create more equitable outdoor learning opportunities.

The idea of taking university classes outdoors particularly for trainee early years educators is not new in Scandinavian countries such as Norway and Sweden. Outdoor education and nature-based learning are highly valued in Scandinavian countries, and many universities (for example, the University of Tromsø, Norway and the University of Gothenburg, Sweden) have incorporated these elements into their curricula. One reason for the emphasis on outdoor education in Scandinavia is the belief that spending time in nature can have a positive impact on individuals' physical and mental health. This is reflected in the Nordic concept of 'friluftsliv', which can be translated as 'open-air life' or 'outdoor life'. Friluftsliv is a way of life that involves spending time in nature and engaging in outdoor activities, such as hiking, skiing, and camping. Friluftsliv is not just a recreational activity, but also a way of connecting with nature and improving one's well-being (Gurholt 2014).

In the UK, many papers extol the benefits of learning outdoors but as regards to orientation or outdoor pursuits rather than the learning of academic subjects outdoors. Garden and Downes (2023a) argue that new educational spaces can be formed, contested, and colonised beyond the indoor university classroom. Alternative education spaces are important because they throw into sharp contrast most of our assumptions about education and learning. Forest School environments can lead to different learning experiences and outcomes from those offered by more formal learning spaces. Development Matters (2023) states that incorporating games and offering playtime, both inside and outside, enables adults to

aid children in enhancing essential physical attributes such as core strength, stability, balance, spatial awareness, coordination, and agility. These gross motor skills serve as the building blocks for nurturing healthy bodies and promoting social and emotional well-being in children. For students who want to follow careers in working children, it is important that they understand the benefits of outdoor learning through first-hand experience. Any tensions or differences between classroom spaces and outdoor spaces is something to be celebrated, as opposed to avoided and enable us to think about alternative spaces of learning away from traditional classroom environments.

The literature on the utilisation of informal and outdoor learning spaces by educators, while often centred on younger primary children, is expanding. This paper contributes to the body of knowledge in the realm of Forest School, positioning it not merely as a learning space or a physical environment but as a conceptual space within higher education for early years educators. This perspective builds upon previous research that primarily considers Forest Schools as a learning space (Kraftl 2013). Kraftl (2013, 62) emphasises the idea of 'going beyond the familiar' by characterising Forest School as a form of alternative education, representing a departure from the conventions and regulations of everyday life, traditional schooling, and institutional spaces. Forest School occupies a unique intersection between formal and alternative modes of education. Harris (2017) similarly underscores the necessity of reimagining learning approaches in the context of the UK. By offering opportunities for choice and control, Forest School has the potential to create a more adaptable and responsive learning environment for children.

Relatedness, which encompasses a sense of affiliation with both fellow individuals and the surrounding environment, assumes significance in this context. In this regard, I suggest that establishing a bond with the natural environment serves as a compelling impetus for active involvement in outdoor learning. However, when such a connection is not inherently present, early years educators may assume a pivotal role in cultivating this bond for children. This could be achieved through purposeful activities designed to foster and amplify nature relatedness such as art immersed in natural surroundings or the spiritual aspects of nature-based activities (Barrable, Touloumakos, and Lapere 2022).

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the findings of this study suggest that outdoor learning environments offer unique opportunities for collaboration and learning, which differ significantly from traditional classroom environments. Outdoor spaces can provide a dynamic and stimulating environment for collaboration, foster a sense of community, and lead to collective action and social change (Kraftl 2013; Lefebvre 1991). This article contributes to knowledge in the domains of early years education by highlighting the transformative potential of outdoor learning environments in promoting collaboration, creativity, and social interaction. These findings have important implications for educators and policymakers who aspire to create learning environments that inspire and facilitate cooperative learning, fostering the development of essential skills for students. It is also crucial to recognise that challenges in accessing outdoor natural spaces, as identified by Lefebvre (1991), can hinder creativity and social interaction, underscoring the need for increased emphasis on outdoor education and equitable access to these spaces in educational contexts (Kraftl 2013; Lefebvre 1991).

Nonetheless, the research highlights the potential of outdoor learning spaces in promoting student-initiated learning for early years educators and breaking away from the norms and rules of traditional learning spaces (Kraftl 2013). Kemp (2020) for example, discovered that educators who participated in Forest School experiences, whether fully adopting its methods or not, were empowered to leverage its principles to drive change within their school environments. This empowerment was manifested in various manners. Primarily, their involvement with Forest School appeared to spark the evolution of their professional roles. Senior Leaders found a chance to directly engage with students and have protected time in a 'safe space' away from leadership responsibilities to



reconnect with their educational values. For Teaching Assistants, Forest School presented an avenue to cultivate expertise and showcase leadership qualities.

Furthermore, educational spaces are not only defined by their physical design but also by the social interactions that occur within them (Kraftl 2014). As such, the ambiguous nature of Forest School spaces allows for diverse interactions and negotiations, promoting holistic and inclusive outdoor learning experiences (Garden 2023; Garden and Downes 2023b). Kemp's study (2020) proposes the possibility of a reciprocal transformative dynamic between Forest School and traditional educational settings. However, this symbiotic relationship can only materialise if educators are afforded the liberty to tailor the Forest School approach according to the specific local circumstances and requirements. The findings of this study suggest that early years' educators may start to create more inclusive outdoor learning opportunities by acknowledging the relationships, experiences, and interactions that take place within that space.

## Disclosure statement

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

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