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Article

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Challenging gender and power dynamics in Forest Schools: an ecofeminist perspective

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ABSTRACT

This study extends the analysis of Garden's (2024) paper on power dynamics in Forest Schools through a critical ecofeminist perspective and Foucauldian lens, examining interactions between early years teachers and Forest School (FS) leaders. Using data from four participants - two early years teachers and two FS leaders - who conducted weekly FS sessions with children aged 3–5 years over a 10-week period, thematic analysis identified themes of power dynamics, reimagining learning environments, risk, resilience, and gender performativity.

Foucault's concepts reveal the challenges educators face in navigating authority and autonomy in outdoor settings, while ecofeminist critiques (Schwai 2024) highlight how socio-cultural power relations, gender dualisms, and androcentrism shape pedagogical practices. The findings advocate for gender-aware outdoor pedagogies that challenge traditional norms, promote sustainability, and foster inclusive strategies. This study enriches the discourse on theory-practice integration in outdoor education, providing insights for transformative curriculum development and teacher training in Forest Schools.

Introduction

Building on Garden's (2024) exploration of *Foucault and Power: UK Forest School as a Socially Constructed Space for Early Years Teachers and Forest School Leaders*, this paper extends the analysis of power and gender dynamics within Forest School (FS) environments by incorporating a critical ecofeminist perspective. Since their introduction to the UK in 1993, Forest Schools have evolved from the Danish *udeskole* model into educational practices that emphasise child-led learning, holistic development, and environmental engagement (Knight 2011). Rooted in Scandinavian traditions such as Norway's *friluftsliv*, UK Forest Schools reflect unique socio-cultural and ecological contexts that shape their pedagogical approaches (Williams-Siegfredsen 2017).

A recent systematic review of FS literature (Garden and Downes 2021) identified space as a critical lens for understanding hybrid learning environments that transcend traditional indoor-outdoor distinctions. These spaces offer opportunities to examine how socio-cultural power relations influence pedagogical practices. However, tensions arise as FS pedagogy faces structural pressures to align with curriculum standards, risking the dilution of its child-led ethos (Morgan 2018; Leather 2018).

This paper integrates Foucault's concepts of power with ecofeminist theory (Warren 2000) to examine hierarchical systems that marginalise both nature and underrepresented groups. By

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exploring themes of power dynamics, gender performativity, and risk and resilience, the study highlights the transformative potential of FS practices to foster inclusivity and challenge traditional norms. Ecofeminism's emphasis on social and environmental justice provides a framework for addressing inequities, reconnecting marginalised communities with nature, and advancing sustainability within outdoor education.

Ecofeminism emerged in the 1970s, with the term first being used by Françoise d'Eaubonne (1974). Its roots lie in activist social movements, particularly the anti-nuclear and peace movements of the time, and in the growing perception of gender blindness and sexism in other environmental groups (Gaard 2011; Phillips and Rumens 2016). Ecofeminism developed as both an activist and academic/philosophical movement, where the convergence of ecology and feminism challenged gender relations, social institutions, economic systems, sciences, and views of human existence within the biosphere (Lahar 1991; Gough and Whitehouse 2018).

At the same time as the feminist movement, ecofeminism gained traction in global political struggles, with women playing a prominent role in movements for peace, anti-nuclear activism, health, and ecology (Caldecott and Leland 1983). Ecofeminists recognised and reclaimed women's relationships with the environment, but also critiqued the underlying civilisation that had created oppressive structures, calling for a reimagining of values, goals, and human progress. This broader critique, which links women's struggles for equality with environmental justice, is encapsulated in the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (United Nations 1992), which highlights the essential role of women in environmental management for sustainable development (Principle 21).

The discourse surrounding women and the environment has evolved over time, transitioning from a focus on women's victimhood in the global South to an emphasis on gender equality and human rights within international environmental policies (Gaard 2015). This shift aligns with ecofeminism's broader intersectional framework, which now calls for a partnership ethic that recognises the interconnectedness of all beings - human and nonhuman - in addressing climate change and sustainability challenges. While ecofeminism faced criticism in the late 1990s for being essentialist and ethnocentric, it has recently experienced a resurgence, with renewed attention to the intersection of feminism and environmentalism (Gough and Whitehouse 2018). This paper draws on this renewed ecofeminist perspective to examine how Forest Schools, as spaces of nature-based education, can challenge hierarchical systems of power and foster more inclusive, sustainable pedagogies.

Forest Schools in the UK: rethinking education in natural spaces

The concept of Forest Schools in the UK originated in the early 1990s when staff and students from Bridgwater College in Somerset visited Denmark and adapted the Danish *udeskole* model of outdoor learning for nursery-aged children (Garden 2022b). Since then, Forest Schools have grown in popularity, recognised for fostering motivation, self-confidence, and concentration, leading to improved learning outcomes (Garden and Downes 2021). New schools continue to open annually, valued for their holistic contributions to children's physical and mental wellbeing and their ability to integrate play, learning, and connection to nature.

Rooted in Scandinavian traditions like Denmark's *udeskole* and Norway's *friluftsliv*, UK Forest Schools have evolved to reflect distinctive cultural, educational, and ecological contexts (Williams-Siegfredsen 2017). The establishment of the Forest School Association (FSA) in 2011 formalised the core principles of this pedagogy, emphasising repeated outdoor engagement to promote holistic child development. Despite these shared values, considerable diversity exists in FS practices, leading to challenges in clearly distinguishing them from other outdoor learning models (Garden 2022a).

Central to Forest Schools is the dynamic interaction between children, educators, and the environment. This fluidity creates 'undecided spaces' where roles, boundaries, and educational norms are renegotiated. Unlike traditional classrooms, where teacher-student roles are clearly defined, Forest Schools foster flexibility, allowing children and adults to redefine their relationships

and approaches to learning (Garden and Downes 2023). This approach, grounded in social constructivist theory, asserts that knowledge emerges through interaction with others and the environment (Vygotsky 1978).

For example, when a FS leader teaches a child to use a knife for whittling wood, the activity fosters practical skills, independence, and confidence through experiential learning. Similarly, collaborative tasks such as building a bug den not only deepen children's understanding of the natural world but also enhance teamwork and problem-solving abilities. However, this flexibility can generate tensions, particularly in balancing the ethos of child-led learning with structural and safety concerns. Educators often delegate responsibility to FS leaders, creating ambiguities around risk management (Garden and Downes 2023). For instance, activities involving tools like knives may evoke varying expectations about supervision. Additionally, the transition from classroom to outdoor settings introduces what Peacock and Pratt (2011) term a 'cultural border,' where shifts in relationships and teaching methods can disrupt established dynamics.

This symbolic threshold between structured indoor environments and flexible outdoor spaces is often marked by rituals, such as gathering around a fire circle. Such practices provide a gateway that maintains the connection between these learning environments while supporting the renegotiation of roles and goals (Vygotsky 1978). This duality reinforces the importance of 'place' in FS pedagogy, where physical and emotional bonds to natural spaces, termed place attachment (Scannell and Gifford 2010; Garden and Downes 2023), foster belonging, safety, and ecological identity.

As children develop place attachment through meaningful experiences in Forest Schools, they cultivate a sense of connection to nature, forming the foundation for lifelong ecological responsibility (Beames and Ross 2010; Garden and Downes 2023). This attachment enriches their broader educational experiences, making Forest Schools integral to reimagining learning spaces and fostering sustainability in education.

Forest Schools, ecofeminism, and gender

Ecofeminist theory (Warren 2000) offers a lens through which Forest Schools can be seen as resisting hierarchical systems that marginalise both the environment and underserved communities. By focusing on environmental and social justice, these settings provide a transformative framework for understanding how entrenched power structures are challenged. Forest Schools, with their emphasis on child-led learning and deep ecological engagement, promote a reconnection with nature while addressing systemic inequities and encouraging pro-environmental behaviours (Harris 2023).

Gender dynamics within Forest Schools offer a particularly valuable opportunity to question and dismantle traditional norms. Building on the work of Schwai (2024), the intersection of ecofeminism and queer ecopedagogy highlights how these educational spaces can challenge binary thinking and create inclusive practices. The way Forest Schools are designed and operated plays a crucial role in either reinforcing or resisting gender norms, offering a context for reimagining more equitable approaches to education.

Ecofeminism challenges the deeply entrenched dualisms in society that align men with culture and women with nature. In Forest Schools, these dualisms can manifest through gendered behaviours and task assignments, such as associating tool use or fire-making with masculinity, while nurturing or creative activities are linked to femininity. These assumptions risk perpetuating stereotypes rather than dismantling them (Trapasso et al. 2018). However, Garden and Downes (2023) argue that intentional approaches to the design and pedagogy of Forest Schools can actively counteract these dynamics, creating a more equitable and inclusive environment. Encouraging all children to participate in a variety of activities – from tool use to creative storytelling – can help to break down the gendered coding of tasks and promote a broader understanding of ability and contribution.

Queer ecopedagogy builds on this by questioning normative assumptions about gender and identity in educational settings. Drawing on queer theory, it seeks to deconstruct binary thinking and celebrate diversity. Forest Schools, with their flexible and child-centred approach, are uniquely

placed to adopt these principles and provide spaces that challenge heteronormative and andro-centric models of education. Activities can be designed to allow children to choose their tasks freely, rather than assigning roles based on traditional gender norms. This approach not only disrupts stereotypes but also empowers children to explore their identities in a safe and supportive setting (Garden and Downes 2023).

Recent work, such as Siegel's (2024:, 1) exploration of 'fifth-stage critical ecofeminism,' enriches this discussion further by introducing the concept of intraconnectivism. This idea emphasises the interconnectedness of ecological, gender, and social justice issues, offering a way to reimagine Forest Schools as spaces where ecological systems and diverse identities coexist in non-hierarchical relationships. By integrating such perspectives, Forest Schools have the potential to go beyond addressing gender binaries to creating environments that celebrate the fluidity of identity and foster an ethos of inclusivity.

Power dynamics and the role of space

Forest Schools are inherently social and dynamic spaces where power relationships and roles are negotiated rather than fixed. Drawing on poststructuralist theories, particularly Foucault's concept of disciplinary power, these environments decentralise authority and encourage children to take ownership of their learning experiences (Foucault 1977; Maynard 2007). This pedagogical approach supports autonomy and collaboration while challenging traditional teacher-student hierarchies.

Arguably, Forest Schools, as situated within the broader cultural and social educational field, are not exempt from power dynamics (Maynard 2007; Garden 2024). Initially inspired by Danish early years education, FS emerged in the UK through interpretations of early years practitioners (Knight 2011). Originating from Denmark, FS was introduced in England in 1993 through the initiative of Bridgwater College, Somerset, after witnessing Denmark's outdoor learning practices (Garden and Downes 2021). This inception led to the establishment of numerous FS projects across Great Britain, reflecting an increasing acknowledgment of its benefits for holistic child development and environmental awareness (Garden 2022a). While initially designed for early childhood education, Forest School's influence expanded to encompass older age groups and children with additional needs like SEMH, resonating with movements advocating natural play, woodland culture, land rights, and child-centred learning (Cree and McCree 2012; DfES 2007). Despite its Scandinavian roots emphasising child-led learning, tensions arise in England due to the necessity of aligning sessions with the curriculum, potentially commodifying FS culture and diluting its essence (Morgan 2018).

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

However, the flexibility of these spaces requires ongoing reflection to ensure they do not inadvertently replicate societal inequalities. For example, the negotiation of roles during high-risk activities, such as fire-making or tool use, can reveal underlying power dynamics. By adopting critical reflection and inclusive practices, FS leaders can create environments where traditional hierarchies are continuously re-examined and transformed.

Towards transformative educational spaces

By integrating ecofeminism, queer theory, and critical pedagogy, Forest Schools have the potential to serve as transformative spaces that challenge societal norms and foster inclusivity (Garden and Downes 2023). These frameworks encourage a rethinking of both spatial and pedagogical practices to create environments that reflect and promote equity, diversity, and sustainability.

Activities and interactions within Forest Schools are deeply influenced by cultural narratives and societal expectations, presenting opportunities for educators to reimagine outdoor pedagogy. For example, educators might reconsider how tasks are assigned or how risks are managed, ensuring that all children feel empowered and valued. As Schwai (2024) and Steele (2011) suggest, creating inclusive and safe spaces is critical for redefining gender norms and fostering a sense of belonging for all participants.

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 both existing and new spaces (Garden and Downes 2023). The idea that space matters is perhaps a new one in the field of education (Kraftl 2013). As Kraftl (2013, 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, such as those provided by Forest Schools, can offer a different context for children's and adults' learning, with varied practices, norms of behaviour, objectives, and goals for learning (Peacock and Pratt 2011).

Taking children (or adults) out of the indoor classroom and into an outdoor environment offers a unique learning experience. The physical space of the outdoors contrasts with the indoor classroom, where restrictions on movement and sound often prevail. In the outdoor classroom or FS, children have more space and autonomy, which can enhance their creativity and support their emotional and intellectual development. As Harris (2017) points out, this change in environment can deeply affect the learning process by providing children with opportunities to develop their imaginations and engage with learning in a way that is less constrained by traditional classroom structures.

Garden (2023) highlights the importance of adapting educational practices to specific contexts, especially in early years education and FS settings. The impact of established practices on teaching and learning environments is critical in these contexts. 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 this interplay is essential in preparing future educators to navigate the diverse educational landscapes they will encounter. Building on these insights, this study seeks to explore '*How do gendered power dynamics and spatial practices within Forest Schools reflect and challenge traditional socio-cultural norms in early years education?*' By examining these intersections, the research aims to provide a deeper understanding of how Forest Schools function as transformative spaces that challenge societal norms and promote inclusivity in education.

Methodology

Participants

Expanding the analysis of Garden's (2024) study, this research involved four participants: two early years teachers (Teacher A and Teacher B) and two FS leaders (FS Leader A and FS Leader B). These participants were selected based on their involvement in weekly Forest School (FS) sessions with their reception class (children aged 4–5 years) over a 10-week period from September to December. As the sole researcher, I conducted all aspects of the study, including participant recruitment, data collection, and analysis. My role as both a researcher and with a background as a FS leader/tutor provided valuable contextual insight into the study's focus.

Data collection

Forest School sessions took place weekly over a 10-week period from September to December. Data collection was carried out through structured interviews, which were undertaken once in late November over a two-week period. The interviews were conducted during the latter half of the Forest School programme, capturing participants' reflections on the ongoing experiences. These interviews were scheduled with all participants at the same time in late November, ensuring consistency across the data collection process.

Each participant was interviewed once. The interviews, which lasted approximately 30 minutes, were structured around a set of predetermined questions (Garden 2024) to explore key themes around power dynamics, risk, gender, and resilience. The decision to conduct only one interview per participant was to capture a snapshot of their perspectives after several weeks of Forest School sessions, allowing for a meaningful analysis of their experiences without overburdening the participants.

Ethical considerations

As the sole researcher and with a background as a FS leader, I acknowledge the potential for implicit biases to influence the research process. My familiarity with FS pedagogy may shape how I interpret the responses of participants, potentially skewing the findings to align with my own experiences and beliefs. To minimise bias, I employed structured interviews to maintain consistency and reduce subjective influence. Anonymity and confidentiality were emphasised to encourage open, honest feedback. Reflective practice (Harris 2021) was used throughout the research process to help mitigate biases and ensure a more objective analysis.

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the University Ethics Committee before data collection commenced. In line with the BERA Ethical Guidelines (2018), participants provided voluntary informed consent and were given letters of consent and information sheets detailing the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and data protection protocols. Interviews were recorded digitally and anonymised in accordance with the Data Protection Act 1998. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw from the study without explanation, as per BERA guidelines.

Data collection tools

Data for this study were collected through structured interviews, designed to explore the complex socio-cultural and gendered power dynamics within the FS environment. The interview schedule included six questions (Garden 2024):

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

The interviews, which averaged 30 minutes in duration, were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure the data was detailed and accurate for thematic analysis. The analysis focused on gender to reveal two key themes: *Reimagining Gender and Power Dynamics in Forest Schools and Gendered Perspectives on Risk and Resilience in Forest Schools*. These themes provide valuable insights into how gendered expectations and behaviours influence interactions between educators and children within FS settings.

Analysis of data

Thematic analysis, following the framework outlined by Braun and Clarke (2023), was employed to examine the qualitative data systematically. This method was selected for its capacity to identify, analyse, and report patterns (themes) within the data, offering a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of early years teachers and Forest School (FS) leaders.

All aspects of data analysis were conducted by the researcher to maintain consistency and rigour. To ensure reliability, strategies such as verbatim transcription, memo writing, and continuous reflection on potential researcher biases were employed.

Stage 1: Familiarisation with the data

The analysis commenced with an initial reading of the interview transcripts to immerse in the data and gain a comprehensive understanding of the content. This stage enabled the identification of significant patterns and recurring themes relevant to the research questions.

Stage 2: Generating initial codes

The transcripts were systematically coded, with attention to segments that reflected the core focus of the study, including gendered power dynamics and spatial practices. This process ensured that a wide range of relevant data was captured.

Stage 3: Searching for themes

Following the initial coding, the codes were organised into potential themes. Patterns within the data were examined, and thematic clusters were developed to reflect the core concepts emerging from the participants' experiences.

Stage 4: Reviewing and refining themes

The identified themes were reviewed and refined for coherence and relevance. This stage involved revisiting the data to ensure that themes were clearly supported by evidence and accurately represented the data's breadth and depth.

Stage 5: Defining and naming themes

Each theme was defined and named to capture its central idea. A detailed description of each theme was provided, accompanied by illustrative quotes from the interview data to substantiate the analysis.

Findings

Building on the theoretical foundations established earlier, this study employs an ecofeminist framework to examine the intricate interplay of power, gender, and identity within FS settings. The analysis reveals how FS environments challenge traditional classroom norms by creating spaces where power structures can be renegotiated, and identities are allowed to manifest more fluidly. This shift aligns with ecofeminist principles, which advocate for the dismantling of hierarchical relationships between humans and nature, and between people within educational environments.

Central to this investigation is the analysis of gendered roles and identities, seen as socially constructed phenomena that reflect the tensions educators face in balancing nurturing, collaborative approaches with the leadership demands intrinsic to FS pedagogy. This finding resonates with Maynard's (2007) assertion that FS practitioners often navigate complex power hierarchies that intersect with deeply embedded gender norms. The study builds on Garden and Downes (2023) concept of FS as a liminal space, where traditional and progressive gender roles coexist and are continuously renegotiated. In such a space, rigid gender binaries can be challenged, fostering an environment that encourages inclusivity and equitable interactions.

Despite these opportunities, the findings also expose significant barriers to access, particularly for children from marginalised communities. FS pedagogy, with its emphasis on child-led learning and environmental engagement, has the potential to reach diverse student groups. However, socio-economic inequalities often hinder the participation of these groups (Friedman et al. 2022). This reveals a pressing need for systemic changes to increase FS accessibility, ensuring that its transformative potential is realised equitably across different demographic groups.

Further analysis underscores the persistent influence of power relations on pedagogical practices within FS settings. Building on Foucault's conceptualisation of power as both pervasive and productive, Garden (2024) explores how authority is distributed and contested between early years teachers and FS leaders. While FS pedagogy strives to dismantle hierarchical structures, the thematic analysis highlights that power imbalances continue to influence practice, shaped by societal expectations and institutional pressures. This finding points to the need for continued reflection and action in challenging residual power imbalances within FS.

The thematic analysis also demonstrates that FS environments have the potential to foster a more egalitarian learning space, empowering children to take ownership of their educational experiences. This shift aligns with Freire's (1972) critique of traditional education, in which students are often passive recipients of knowledge. FS, however, offers a model for reimagining educational spaces as democratic, inclusive, and reflective of diverse identities. Through its focus on experiential learning, risk-taking, and collaboration, FS fosters the development of critical thinking, resilience, and self-expression, all of which contribute to a more holistic, child-centred approach to education.

Reimagining gender and power dynamics in Forest Schools

This study underscores how Forest Schools and outdoor spaces serve as transformative learning environments that benefit both children and educators, while also offering a lens through which to examine gender dynamics in education. Unlike traditional classrooms, these environments create physical and ideological separation, fostering opportunities to rethink gender roles and relationships within educational settings (Potter and McDougall 2017). Forest Schools function within what Bhabha (2012) describes as a 'third space,' where cultural and gender norms intersect, enabling innovative understandings of pedagogy and community dynamics (Garden and Downes 2023). The fluid, adaptable nature of outdoor spaces encourages interactions that are less influenced by the rigid gender expectations often present in classroom settings (Garden 2022a).

By identifying ways in which Forest Schools may uphold children's rights and mitigate restrictive gender norms, this research supports the existing literature on the positive impact of Forest Schools on children's wellbeing. However, it also argues that for children to benefit fully from the learning opportunities these environments offer, educators must ensure that gender inequality is not further perpetuated within Forest Schools. Effective Forest School practice requires critical examination of the gender constructions inherent in these settings. This study provides a foundation for further research into how Forest School practices can be adapted to better promote gender equality and support children's holistic development (FSA 2021).

Teacher Reflections:

This environment allows us to break away from usual routines and constraints. We focus on hands-on, experiential learning where traditional gender roles are less pronounced. The physical distance from the classroom encourages both children and teachers to experiment with new approaches. (Teacher A)

In Forest School, my role shifts from delivering structured lessons to facilitating exploration, helping children step beyond the prescribed gender roles they might encounter in the classroom. It's about guiding them to discover the world on their own terms, regardless of gender. (Teacher B)

As illustrated by the child-led den-building activity below (Figure 1):
FS Leader A highlights the gender-neutral potential of Forest School:

The flexibility of the Forest School environment opens up new forms of learning. Here, children move freely, engaging with nature in ways that transcend gender expectations, fostering curiosity and creativity without the boundaries of traditional classrooms. (FS Leader A)

Leather (2018) asserts that Forest Schools are socially constructed, shaped by the individuals involved and the gendered meanings they bring to the space. The outdoor environment enables a reimagining of gendered relationships, subtly shifting how students and teachers interact with each other and the space. As Harris (2023) notes, teachers adjust their pedagogical approaches in these settings, informed by evolving views on gender equality. FS Leader A reflects:

When outdoors, traditional boundaries, including gender roles, start to shift. A more collaborative environment emerges where gendered expectations become less important, and both boys and girls participate equally. I feel that teachers adapt their methods here, encouraging children to lead their learning, regardless of gender. (FS Leader A)

In Forest Schools, practitioners often prioritise personal, social, and emotional development over the rigid structures of the national curriculum, which helps dismantle traditional gender norms by valuing individuality over conformity (Harris 2017). The relaxed, open learning environment promotes creativity and exploration without the constraints of gendered classroom behaviours (Kraftl 2013).

Kraftl (2013) suggests that Forest Schools, as a form of alternative education, diverge from traditional schooling, creating spaces where gendered power dynamics are less rigidly enforced (Garden 2024). This intersection between formal and alternative educational models presents an opportunity to challenge gendered power structures. Harris (2023) highlights how Forest Schools can foster a more gender-inclusive environment, shifting the focus from curriculum-based learning to holistic development, including gender equality. Teacher B observes:

Figure 1. Child-led den-building in FS.

> Attending these FS sessions has really encouraged us to rethink our teaching approach. Instead of just delivering information, we guide the children, allowing them to explore and learn freely. It's inspiring to see how they interact with nature, breaking free from the gender roles they often fall into in the classroom.

Through collaborative goal setting and negotiation, children and adults work together, promoting equality across gender lines and focusing on cooperation rather than competition (Mackinder 2023). This collaborative atmosphere nurtures creativity and encourages children to look beyond traditional gender roles. Insights from Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (2005) support the idea that outdoor environments offer unique opportunities for innovative, gender-neutral thinking (Garden 2023).

The 2023 Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) framework (DfE 2023) emphasises the importance of Expressive Arts and Design in children's development, which can be enriched by breaking free from gendered expectations. By interacting with peers of all genders, children develop essential skills such as cooperation, empathy, and conflict resolution, fostering strong social relationships and personal growth (DfE 2023). This focus on personal, social, and emotional development provides a critical space for challenging gender norms and fostering a more inclusive learning environment.

However, Hine's (2023) research critically examines Forest Schools' role in challenging traditional gender norms. She notes that while these outdoor environments offer opportunities for gender transformation, they are not entirely free from gendered expectations. Children may still display gendered behaviours influenced by societal norms, such as cis-males gravitating towards more risk-taking activities like digging and cis-females engaging in creative activities roles such as potion-making (Figures 2 and 3).

Hine's work highlights the complexity of creating truly gender-neutral educational settings, suggesting that success in disrupting gender roles requires intentional pedagogical strategies from educators.

The findings align with ecofeminist theory (Warren 2000), which critiques hierarchical systems that marginalise both the environment and underserved communities (Siegel 2024). Forest Schools, focused on environmental and social justice, provide a framework for challenging power structures, promoting pro-environmental behaviours, and fostering a reconnection with nature

Figure 2. Digging in FS.

Figure 3. Potion-making in FS.

(Harris 2021). The intersection of ecofeminism and queer ecopedagogy promotes inclusive practices that transcend binary gender constructs. Ecofeminism challenges dualisms, such as associating men with culture and women with nature, often reinforced through gendered task assignments in education (Trapasso et al. 2018). This research calls for a more reflective approach to practice, ensuring that Forest Schools consistently challenge, rather than inadvertently reinforce, traditional gender expectations.

Gendered perspectives on risk and resilience in Forest Schools

Forest Schools (FS) provide a unique environment where traditional gender norms can be challenged, and resilience fostered. However, their potential to support gender equality requires critical examination. Garden (2022a) highlights the transformative power of Forest Schools as spaces where children actively construct meaning and take ownership of their learning through engagement with manageable risks. Yet, Hine (2023) offers a more nuanced perspective. Through an observational study that included children's drawings, Hine found that Forest Schools can simultaneously reinforce and challenge gender norms. This complexity raises critical questions about how FS practices might be adapted to achieve greater gender equity.

The connection between risk-taking and children's development can be explored through the concept of resilience. Resilience refers to a child's ability to navigate and overcome personal risks and challenges, indicating that opportunities for risk-taking are essential for developing this resilience. Forest Schools play a key role in fostering resilience and confidence, which contributes to a child's overall well-being (Chawla 2015). The physical and emotional challenges faced in these settings help children build resilience by overcoming risks and embracing new challenges. In contrast to previous generations, where children in Britain were more accustomed to engaging in risky behaviours such as roaming outdoors, tree climbing, using penknives, or exploring without adult supervision, these activities have become much rarer today (Gill 2014).

A key finding from Hine's (2023) study revealed that children in Forest Schools appeared more influenced by gender norms than in the classroom. Despite the ethos of freedom and equality promoted by FS, deeply ingrained societal norms continue to shape children's behaviour and interactions. Hine points out that the 'reduced cultural density' of outdoor settings (Waite 2011) offers greater potential for freedom, but these opportunities are not always fully realised.

FS Leader A recognised this challenge, stating, '*While we strive to create an equal space, children often revert to the roles they've learned outside Forest School - like boys taking the lead in physical activities and girls stepping back.*'

However, Hine's study also revealed moments where FS disrupted these norms, allowing children to explore their identities more freely. For instance, the reduced institutional constraints and the emphasis on constructivist learning (O'Brien and Murray 2007) allowed for spontaneous, individualised interactions that defied typical gender expectations.

Teacher A observed,

> In the Forest School, you see glimpses of what could be - a girl leading a group on an adventure or a boy taking a nurturing role with younger children - but these moments are fleeting and not always supported by the wider group.

This highlights the dual role of Forest Schools: as a space for liberation and as a site where existing inequalities may persist.

Garden's (2022a) conceptualisation of risk as a relational process offers valuable insight into how Forest Schools could address gender disparities. By embracing risk-taking as a means of fostering resilience and well-being, Forest Schools have the potential to challenge the gendered perceptions of risk often reinforced in mainstream education. However, Hine (2023) raises concerns about how these opportunities are mediated. For example, boys might be more readily encouraged to engage in physical risk-taking, while girls may face subtle discouragement despite the ostensibly egalitarian setting.

Teacher B critiqued this dynamic, noting, '*We tell ourselves we're offering the same chances to everyone, but societal expectations creep in. Without meaning to, we sometimes reinforce the very behaviours we're trying to change.*'

These findings suggest that while Forest Schools hold significant promise as a tool for gender equality, their practices must be critically evaluated and adapted to maximise their potential. Strategies such as explicit discussions about gender norms, role modelling non-traditional behaviours, and fostering a culture of reflection among practitioners could help address these challenges.

FS Leader B emphasised the need for intentionality: '*Creating a space where children feel free from gender expectations isn't automatic - it takes constant effort and awareness. Otherwise, we risk replicating the same inequalities we see in the classroom or in wider society.*'

Discussion

This study highlights the intricate intersection of gender, risk, and resilience within Forest Schools, revealing a multifaceted dynamic that warrants further examination. As Savery et al. (2020) emphasise, risk-taking is integral to the developmental process of young children, positioning outdoor play within early years settings as essential for fostering growth. In this context, risk is often viewed as a developmental necessity. However, as Coates and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) note, discussions of risk within primary schools are more complex. Concepts such as 'dignity of risk' and 'risky play' are not easily applicable in these settings, given that primary schools have traditionally placed less emphasis on play, complicating the relationship between risk and classroom activities (Garden and Downes 2021).

Garden (2022a) advocates for a re-conceptualisation of risk within Forest School settings as a strategy to enhance children's development. Nevertheless, as Hine (2023) reminds us, these spaces are not devoid of broader societal influences. To fully realise the transformative potential of Forest Schools, practitioners must critically engage with their pedagogical practices, ensuring that these spaces actively disrupt, rather than reinforce, existing gender inequalities.

From a rights-based perspective, this research underscores the potential of Forest Schools to support gender equality. It illustrates how children's constructions of gender within these environments differ from those observed in the classroom (Hine 2023). This raises important questions about

the role of Forest Schools in addressing gender inequality, which can have far-reaching effects on children both during their primary school years and beyond. The findings contribute to ongoing discussions on gender in Forest Schools (Sackville-Ford 2019; Trapasso et al. 2018; Mycock 2019).

In alignment with Garden's (2024) earlier work, which explored the tensions between early years teachers and Forest School leaders, this study affirms that power dynamics within these spaces are not solely hierarchical but also inherently political. Adopting a Foucauldian perspective allows for an understanding of how power operates in both explicit and subtle ways. For instance, early years teachers may experience frustration regarding their secondary role within Forest School sessions, while FS leaders face challenges in balancing their pedagogical approach with the expectations of teachers. These tensions reflect broader dynamics concerning knowledge, authority, and practice within the Forest School setting. As Garden (2024) suggests, power relations are not merely about who holds authority but also about how authority and knowledge are constructed and perceived within these spaces.

Both Mackinder (2023) and Garden (2024) underscore the importance of understanding the role of the educator within Forest Schools. Educators' pedagogical approaches – whether scaffolding or co-constructing – have direct implications for how children engage with the environment and with one another. These shifting power dynamics further emphasise the need for a reconsideration of the educator's role to ensure that Forest Schools offer an inclusive and effective learning experience. Applying a Foucauldian lens, as demonstrated by Garden (2024), enriches our understanding of how power is exercised, resisted, and negotiated in these environments, offering a deeper insight into the complexities at play.

From an ecofeminist perspective, this study contributes to the understanding of how gendered power dynamics shape Forest School experiences. Ecofeminism challenges dualisms such as male/female and nature/culture, which often underpin educational practices. Schwai (2024) observes that while Forest Schools may initially appear to be gender-neutral spaces, gendered dynamics persist through performative behaviours, teacher interactions, and the reinforcement of traditional gender roles. By integrating ecofeminist perspectives and reflective practices, these dynamics can be disrupted, fostering more inclusive and egalitarian learning environments. Furthermore, Siegel's (2024) concept of intraconnectivism, which stresses the interconnectedness of ecological, gender, and social justice issues, supports the idea that Forest Schools provide a unique space where diverse identities and ecological systems coexist.

Limitations

Several limitations can be considered when interpreting the findings of this study. The small sample size of four participants - two early years teachers and two Forest School (FS) leaders limits the generalisability of the findings. This sample may not fully capture the diverse range of perspectives within Forest Schools, as the experiences of other roles or a larger group of participants could offer a broader view of the dynamics at play. Additionally, the data collection period was limited to a single point in time, occurring in late November after several weeks of FS sessions. A longer study with multiple data collection points would offer the opportunity to track changes in gendered dynamics and the role of risk and resilience over time. Furthermore, the study's focus on a 10-week period restricts the ability to explore how these dynamics evolve in the long term.

Conclusion

This study highlights the potential of Forest Schools to foster a more inclusive and egalitarian learning environment. As Maynard (2007) notes, outdoor spaces provide unique opportunities to challenge conventional norms, while Garden and Downes (2023:, 3) describe Forest Schools as 'liminal spaces' where gender roles can be fluid and renegotiated. However, challenges remain in ensuring equitable access for all children, including those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and non-

binary identities. If these barriers are not addressed, Forest Schools risk reinforcing existing inequalities (Friedman et al. 2022). This study encourages educators to critically reflect on their practices, actively working to dismantle traditional gender norms and promote inclusivity in curriculum development and teacher training.

Disclosure statement

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