Views from the staffroom: Forest School in English primary schools

Dr Nicola Kemp

Faculty of Education, Canterbury Christ Church University, North Holmes Road, Canterbury, Kent, CT1 1QU

01227 924457

nicola.kemp@canterbury.ac.uk

Nicola is a senior lecturer in the Faculty of Education at Canterbury Christ Church University where she is the Programme Director for the MA in Early Childhood Education as well as the co-lead for sustainability research. Her research interests include children's connection with nature, outdoor learning and sustainability education. She is currently leading a Froebel Trust funded project on outdoor provision for under twos in early childhood settings as well as a project exploring the educational potential of Harmony, a form of sustainability education.

Views from the staffroom: Forest School in English primary schools

Abstract

Forest School is a form of outdoor learning that is increasingly popular within English primary schools although little is known about the experiences of teaching staff who engage with it. This paper identifies three prevailing discourses within existing Forest School literature in relation to schools and teachers: as "critical stakeholders", "unenlightened" and "consumers." Drawing upon semi-structured interviews conducted with teaching staff from seven rural primary schools in South East England, a fourth discourse is proposed. In this additional discourse, teaching staff are "agentic" and engagement with Forest School is an act of resistance against the mainstream standards agenda. In a further act of resistance schools adapt the Forest School approach to fit their specific context. This raises a dilemma for the Forest School movement about the extent to which it is willing to support the agency of teaching professionals by providing flexibility to adapt its principles to meet school priorities.

Key words: agency Forest School, outdoor learning, primary schools

Introduction: Forest School in schools

In England there is increasing concern about children's lack of connection and relationship with nature and the natural environment. This is exemplified by the government's recently published 25 year Environment Plan which recognises the need for children to be 'close to nature' particularly those growing up in disadvantaged areas who may not have access to gardens or local green spaces (DEFRA, 2018). The role of schools is clearly emphasised in the range of opportunities supported in the plan including school outreach activities with community forests, a nature friendly schools programme and programmes of nature contact for schools and Pupil Referral Units. This positioning within policy of schools as a 'solution' to the problem of what Louv (2005) refers to as Nature Deficit Disorder is not new. The previous White Paper (DEFRA, 2011), for example, explicitly highlighted the importance of connecting through education and, in many ways, had a more ambitious remit in this regard. However, the point remains that schools are understood within contemporary environmental policy discourse, as having a vital role to play in supporting nature connections for children and young people (Dillon & Dickie 2012).

Forest School is increasingly popular in English primary schools (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019) and, as one of the approaches specifically mentioned by DEFRA, is an interesting example of how outdoor learning is being developed in practice. In England the identity of Forest School has been defined, and is protected by, the Forest School Association (FSA), the professional body and voice of Forest School. It identifies six underpinning principles and associated criteria for good practice which together provide clarification of what can and cannot be understood as Forest School[1]. Although initially developed by early childhood

[1] Forest School is a long-term process of regular sessions; it takes place in a woodland or natural environment; it is learner-centred; it promotes holistic development; it supports risk-taking; it is run by qualified FS practitioners (adapted from FSA website 2019)

educators, the potential for Forest School to be applied to other educational contexts has been central to its development within England. Specifically, there is an underlying assumption that Forest School is a form of outdoor education that can be easily integrated within primary school contexts (see for example Murray & O'Brien, 2005; O'Brien & Murray, 2007; O'Brien, 2009, Slade, Lowery & Bland, 2013, Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019).

Even a brief consideration of the contemporary educational context in England reveals the potential ideological tensions of engaging with Forest School. Primary schools are increasingly driven by neo-liberal policies based on accountability and measurement. Ball notably refers to the 'terrain of performativity' (2003: 215) and 'tyranny of numbers' (2015: 299) within English schools. In practice this means that the performance of schools and teachers is assessed by student outcomes as measured by standardised tests such as SATs (Standard Assessment Tests) and the new reception baseline assessment. Forest School, in contrast, 'encapsulates a progressive pedagogic ideology which promotes a holistic education that encourages play and awareness of nature' (Connolly & Haughton, 2017: 110). The focus in Forest School is on the learning process, and the learning is child-led rather than curriculum focused (Harris, 2017). An associated tension relates to perceptions of risk. One consequence of the increased responsibility and autonomy given to schools is an intensified sense of risk both in relation to achieving the required student outcomes but also in relation to safeguarding and child protection (Connolly *et al*, 2018a). This risk aversion contrasts with Forest School pedagogy which actively promotes risk-taking and raises important questions about how these tensions are negotiated and resolved.

This paper explores the ideological and practical tensions between Forest School and mainstream education. Drawing on a new analysis of existing research it identifies three existing discourses in which schools and teachers are seen as (a) critical stakeholder (b) unenlightened and (c) consumers. The findings from a new study are then presented which suggest a fourth discourse in which teaching professionals (teaching assistants and teaching professionals as well as classroom teachers) are agentic and actively negotiate tensions between Forest School and the needs of school context. This raises a dilemma for the Forest School movement – is it willing to support its integration into schools which implies the need

for flexibility and adaptation to local contexts by teaching professionals, or it intent on maintaining its principles and purity?

Literature review

Schools and teachers as stakeholders

One of the most often cited pieces of research about Forest School in the UK was conducted more than fifteen years ago by the New Economics Foundation and Forest Research, funded by the Forestry Commission. This research was designed to be participatory and teachers were positioned as stakeholders alongside Forest School leaders, parents and pupils. Subsequent research takes a similar approach in that it explores how Forest School can be integrated with mainstream practice. Specifically, Forest School is seen as offering an alternative learning environment rich in affordances from which curricular links can be made, particularly with respect to science, maths and the arts (Cumming & Nash, 2015, Murphy, 2018). The natural environment is particularly recognised as benefitting 'those who find it difficult to assimilate knowledge in a strictly "classroom" environment' (Murray & O'Brien, 2005: 12). As well as offering a different context for learning, the learning approach associated with Forest School is understood as being quite different from that of mainstream school – constructivist rather than instructional (Murray & O'Brien, 2005:12) and 'an alternative way of delivering the curriculum' which can be embedded "into the schools' education framework as a whole" (Cumming & Nash, 2015:298). This, it is argued, can support children's motivation to learn and so Forest School is often positioned as a 'compliment' and 'supplement' to classroom learning (O'Brien 2009: 54-55) – a form of 'curriculum enrichment' that allows children to develop key skills such as problem-solving (Slade, Lowery & Bland, 2013:67). In this discourse, Forest School offers another way of meeting the standards agenda particularly for children with additional learning needs.

Schools and teachers as unenlightened

Other research has identified a tension in practice between Forest School practitioners and teaching staff accompanying children during sessions. Maynard (2007), for example, provides an in-depth case study of the declining relationship between two early years teachers and two Forest School workers due to differences in their approach to control and risk during Forest School sessions. It is interesting that the resolution involved the teachers questioning their 'normal ways of working' (387) because according to the Forest School workers they 'were positioned not as good teachers but as over-protective and over-controlling adults' (389). There is not a sense of mutual learning and of integration but of teachers 'seeing the light' and adapting their practice. Since then others have also referenced this tension (Humberstone & Stan, 2011; Maynard, Waters and Clement, 2013, Slade, Lowery & Bland, 2013, Waite, Bolling & Bentsen, 2015; Harris, 2017; Harris 2018). Within this deficit discourse teachers are positioned as a problem and are described variously as being 'outdoor immigrants' (Leather: 2018: 15), 'unfamiliar' with teaching outdoors and 'nervous' (O'Brien & Murray, 2007: 262). It is within this discourse that the ideological differences between Forest School and mainstream schooling are most explicitly in conflict. In the example explored by Maynard the tensions are focused around different perceptions of educational risk. Whereas schools and teachers have become increasingly risk averse, Forest School directly 'challenges risk aversion' and 'a narrow view of education' (Connolly & Haughton, 2017: 114). This ideological difference then creates tensions in practice.

School and teachers as consumers

Within the most recent research literature, the sense of collaboration and participation between schools and Forest School providers, so central to the work of Murray & O'Brien (2005) is almost absent. Instead, Forest School has become commodified, defined and branded to the extent that Waite, Bolling & Bentsen (2015:16) describe it as 'an external school service operating between market forces and nature ideology'. Similarly, Connolly & Haughton (2017:110) refer to it as a 'badge' schools use to 'distinguish themselves' in the competitive educational marketplace. An extensive review of Forest School literature confirms that the articulated aims and principles of Forest School have become those of its practitioners not schools and teachers (Waite, Bolling & Bentsen, 2015). Leather (2018:12) argues that such a position threatens the future of outdoor education as it limits possibilities

for schools and makes Forest School the 'only acceptable badge and qualification to educate children in the woods'

Furthermore, there is a wider concern about the more general 'creep of "experts" and external providers' within outdoor learning (Cosgriff, 2017:24) which undermines teacher expertise and confidence and relegates the teacher to passive consumer of services (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). Such is the power of the expert that Murphy (2018:272), herself a teacher, suggests that schools should bring in external providers rather than rely on teachers,

> while teachers may implement elements of Forest School untrained, there is a concern that this may dilute the quality associated with the title of 'Forest School'. It may be financially beneficial for a school to hire an outside agency to come to the school to implement the program.

Teacher presence and voice in much recent Forest School research is largely absent – the views of teachers may be sought about the experiences of children (see for example Slade, Lowery & Bland, 2013; Cumming & Nash, 2015) but the interest is in other stakeholder perspectives such as Forest School practitioners (Harris, 2017, 2018). There is also a growing interest in children's perspectives (for example, Ridgers, Knowles & Sayers,2012; Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019). Forest School in this discourse (the territory of environmental 'experts') offers respite from the demands of the primary curriculum (the territory of teachers).

Repositioning teachers as policy actors: a theoretical perspective

There are interesting parallels between Forest School and other educational research which has been critiqued for insufficiently acknowledging the agency of teachers in relation to policy initiatives (Connolly *et al*, 2018b). Within the context of schools, the dominance of 'macro-level objectives of standards and achievements' (Maguire, Ball & Braun, 2010: 156) has resulted in a body of work focused on the impacts of increased teacher autonomy and accountability. This generated a powerful discourse around the 'deprofessionalisation' of teaching (Ball, 2003) in which teacher agency was marginalised (Priestley, Biesta & Robinson, 2015). Recent research, particularly from the field of educational sociology, recognises that even strong policy mandates translate into 'variability and distinctiveness' (Maguire, Ball & Braun, 2010: 158) in practice. This work offers theoretical insights which could be applied to Forest School. It derives from a long-standing sociological concern about how to account for social practices without giving priority either to individuals

(agents/actors) or external factors such as policy (structures). There are two associated theoretical ideas of particular relevance: ecological agency and policy enactment.

An ecological perspective sees agency not something that individuals either have or don't have but an 'emergent phenomenon' that may be achieved in specific contexts. This understanding builds upon previous theoretical attempts to transcend the structure/agency dualism (see for example Giddens (1984) theory of structuration) moving away from concepts of agency based on individual capacity. There have also been a change in understanding about how structures (such as policies) are translated into practice. Maguire, Ball & Braun, 2010) chart the move from a rational approach which prioritises clarity and correctness of implementation, towards one which recognises that policies are 'enacted' and that this is a 'negotiated and contested process' (157). An emergent theory of policy enactment has been developed from their empirical research focused on behaviour and classroom management in English secondary schools identifying the following points of relevance. Firstly, that different policy actors within a school context will 'make sense of' and interpret policies differently. Secondly, there may be struggles and conflicts which need to be negotiated within the school setting, the outcome of which will depend upon questions of hierarchy and power. Thirdly, the material context of each school presents different opportunities and challenges in relation to the enactment of a policy. Even between schools which share characteristics, the degree to which any new policy 'fits' is likely to vary. They conclude "[p]olicy enactment is a creative and sophisticated process that is a complex, shifting meld of values, contingency and context' (167).

These concepts of ecological agency and policy enactment offer a different way to think about Forest School which has implications for research. Firstly, it places the focus on the way in which schools and teachers engage with Forest School as a policy initiative. Secondly, it implies that rather than there being a simple model of engagement (Murray & O'Brien, 2005) we might expect variability and distinctiveness in the ways in which schools and teachers enact Forest School depending upon the nature of the context in which they are situated. Following Maguire Ball & Braun (2011) this suggests the need to study different schools in similar contexts. Thirdly, it foregrounds the experience of the 'ecological' policy actors; in this case the teaching staff directly involved in 'enacting' Forest School. These implications have informed the design of the research on which this paper is based.

The research

The aim of this small-scale study was to explore the way in which Forest School is enacted in English primary schools. Data was gathered from teaching staff from seven rural primary schools in South East England who had recently engaged with a local Forest School provider in semi-structured interviews. All the participating schools had experienced a programme of free externally facilitated Forest School sessions as part of a funded project so shared a common starting place and like Maguire, Ball & Braun's (2010) sample they share a similar context. The sample can be considered a criterion sample (Merrill & West, 2009: 116). Within each school those members of staff involved in Forest School were asked to take part; participants included headteachers, assistant headteachers, classroom teachers as well as Teaching Assistants (TAs) (see Table 1 for a summary of schools and participants).

The research draws upon biographical approaches as this type of research naturally supports exploration of the dialectical process between structure and agency. As Merrill & West (2009: 39) argue it considers the 'interplay between culture, power and available narrative resources on the one hand, and individual lives and struggle for voice and story, on the other' A central concern in biographical research is the relationship between the particular and the general, uniqueness and commonality, the individual and institution. Semi-structured interviewing is fundamental to the biographical approach and the aim is to create an open and reflexive environment for exploring issues of interest. Initial topics for conversation were identified beforehand and developed into a semi-structured interview schedule. These topics were derived from engagement with existing literature and included questions about the school context, individual roles and responsibilities as well about the delivery of Forest School in practice. The focus was not on whether or not schools were following the Forest School approach but in understanding the broader context in which the school is operating and how they were choosing to engage with Forest School. During the interview open prompts (tell me about…etc.) were used to support in-depth discussion about issues as they arose. Following ethical approval, interviews were conducted on the school premises by one of the research team and were audio recorded and then transcribed fully in narrative form. The research team consisted of two academics - one with a background in primary school teaching, the other without - as well as a research intern, all working within the context of a

large university Faculty of Education. All were involved throughout the research process and we had regular opportunities to discuss issues as they arose and to challenge our own attitudes, values and understanding as the research progressed. All schools and participants have been given a pseudonym to maintain anonymity and confidentiality.

Analysis of biographical data is challenging and requires a careful balancing between respect for the individual case and need to understand its wider significance through abstraction (Merrill & West, 2009). In this case, data analysis was led by the author of this paper and involved listening to and reading transcripts multiple times to support immersion in the data. Coffey & Atkinson's (1996:29) three stages of qualitative coding offered further structure: noticing relevant phenomenon; collecting examples of those phenomenon; analysing those phenomena to find commonalities, differences, patterns and structures. The analysis is presented here in terms of who leads Forest School (the policy actors), how the schools practice Forest School (policy enactment), It also considers mediating factors influencing the enactment of Forest School (the setting).

Findings – Forest School in Practice

This research reveals considerable diversity in the way in which the schools responded to their initial engagement with Forest School. This concurs with Maguire, Ball & Braun's (2010) theory that even schools in very similar contexts will interpret and enact policies differently. Of the seven schools, three have developed Forest School on site; two use a local site as they have limited school grounds; one has extended their outdoor learning provision but doesn't offer Forest School and one currently has no provision. What was clear was that all the schools involved in the study were in the process of exploring how to adapt Forest School to fit the context of school life. There was a strong sense of compromise between what teaching staff understood as 'proper' Forest School and the adaptations necessary to offer it within their school context. Indeed, all the staff interviewed demonstrated. a deep knowledge and understanding of the Forest School approach but also recognised that adaptation was required to fit this to the needs of the school.

Who are the policy actors?

In this study, it was senior managers and Teaching Assistants (TAs) who were leading Forest School in the schools. They, rather than classroom teachers could be understood as the policy actors in relation to Forest School. Forest School seems to offer TAs a particular opportunity to develop a new leadership role within the school. One TA, Mrs Cannon, discussed her role which includes getting funding to support the training of staff and leading Forest School sessions. However, she also referred to the fact that she is "only a TA" when answering questions highlighting an interesting tension being both a 'leader' and 'assistant'. This tension was also acknowledged by the headteacher, Mrs Nolan, who while admitting her position of authority also expressed the wish that other staff should have as much responsibility as herself in relation to Forest School.

This changing role between 'leader' and 'assistant' can clearly be challenging for support staff taking on this new role within the school environment. Nonetheless, it demonstrates the importance of support staff in relation to implementing Forest School in these schools. It is also interesting to note the number of headteachers and members of the senior management team who had chosen to become Forest School leaders. For the headteacher, taking on the role of Forest School leader, also challenges the hierarchical structure of primary school life. For them there was a sense that Forest School represents a 'safety valve' as Mrs Nolan explained.

> I'm taking every Friday and I'm going out into the woods, which is fantastic and for my sanity and wellbeing is one of the reasons why I can see through the rest of the week a lot of the time

The need for headteachers to have access to 'safe spaces' was also identified in Connolly *et al's (*2018) study in Wales. The reframing of headship away from the leadership of teaching and learning towards educational management means that it can be a particularly challenging role.

Class teachers seem to be rarely involved with Forest School sessions even if the children in their class are, as they either stay with part of their own class while a smaller group participates in Forest School or cover the Forest School leader's classroom responsibilities. Mr Cane, a year 6 teacher, explained that "I've not actually had any experience of it myself" highlighting the practical separation between Forest School and school. He only gets accounts of what has happened at Forest School from the children or from one of the Forest School leaders.

> I get something second-hand from the Forest School practitioner who tells me things the children have said during the session.

This meant that although he stated he was "a fan" of Forest School, he had not seen any benefits back in the classroom nor is he able to integrate the learning. This contrasted with Mrs Lucas who, as Forest School leader and class teacher, has had the opportunity to see her class in both environments. This logistical issue of how the experience of Forest School is connected to the class teacher is significant and one which Mrs Lucas is grappling with as she extends Forest School provision beyond her own class.

> We should really invite them [the class teacher] in…so they can come and see them in a different light because that's really important as it's not just bonding between the children; it's with the teachers as well.

The principle that Forest School should be about the holistic development of those involved is clearly challenging to achieve in practice if there is little or no connection between the class teacher and the Forest School leader.

How do schools enact Forest School?

This research has revealed practical tensions which schools must negotiate when offering Forest School. The first of these is focused on regularity versus equity of provision. The higher ratios of adults to children and small group dynamic of Forest School is challenging to achieve in many primary schools where one teacher may lead a class of up to 34 children. Headteacher, Mrs Nolan articulates this problem,

> Ideally you should be doing ten weeks with a small group but…**I know that we aren't following exactly how Forest School should be** as far as numbers are concerned but I want to try to ensure every child has an experience every year.

Even within a small school it is challenging to provide regular Forest School sessions for every child. There is a tension between being able to offer regular sessions and keeping group size small with a high adult to learner ratio. At Coxstead and Honeywell school each year group is offered a six week experience annually which means that groups of up to 28 children participate in Forest School at any one time. A similar approach has been adopted at both Redway and Tiverley where each year group is offered a term of Forest School so that over the course of their primary schooling children should experience the full range of seasonal change. This is not easy and requires careful logistical planning to avoid key

pressure points in the academic year such as SATS as well as the harshest weather conditions for lower year groups. Other schools, such as Streetend, have chosen to limit access to Forest School to purposefully selected groups of children who they feel will benefit most. There is then a balance to be struck between regularity and equity of provision which schools must negotiate. This exemplifies the 'struggles about points of practice' Maguire, Ball & Braun (2010:165) refer to.

A further tension relates to the requirement for Forest School to take place in a wooded environment or natural environment with trees (FSA, 2019) and the cost of accessing a suitable site with a trained Forest School practitioner. Although all the schools in this research were located in rural environments, finding a suitable site was challenging. Three of the schools had developed Forest School sites on the school grounds and found creative ways to fund this development including drawing on Pupil Premium (Tiverley) and Sports Premium (Streetend) funding. This caused them to use previously unused areas, as Mrs Taylor describes,

> actually when we started to go up there we realised the potential for it. We're lucky. We haven't got a massive site up there but you could take ten children up there, you could be anywhere, absolutely anywhere.

As a federation of two small schools with limited grounds, Coxstead and Honeywell have developed a Forest School site externally on a piece of woodland owned by a parent at the school and also make use of the local beach. At Highpeak, the cost of adopting Forest School is too high but having experienced the externally delivered Forest School sessions, they have prioritised outdoor learning in the school development plan. As Mrs Hemming explains, they are using the school environment to "give the curriculum purpose" and have consciously developed the school environment building a den and wildlife area. Rather than accepting that they can't offer Forest School, Mrs Hemming has been agentic in making the most of the resources she has and in adapting aspects of the Forest School approach to fit.

The importance of the setting

To understand these differential responses to Forest School, it is worth considering aspects of the material context or setting which might create different practical possibilities and constraints for policy enactment. The impact of external (structural) pressures such as the new national curriculum, OFSTED and wider performativity culture within education were

acknowledged by all teaching staff within the study. However, it was clear that schools experience these pressures differently. At schools with an existing good or outstanding grading there seemed to be more flexibility for teaching staff to engage with Forest School. At Tiverley, Mrs Taylor highlighted the pressures but is confident that the broad curriculum she is offering (including Forest School) will meet external demands whilst providing the children with 'the best possible education'. For her engaging with Forest School offers a form of resistance to the narrow curriculum associated with the standards agenda. In contrast, at Lightwater, a school which has been graded by OFSTED as 'requires improvement,' incorporating Forest School into the curriculum is seen as too risky because the effects on the children's academic performance is unknown. Mrs Mackey explains,

> There's no flexibility…the constraints have stopped it for lots of reasons, risk assessments, attainment levels, progress, the curriculum, everything…

This is an example of extreme risk aversion where Forest School is positioned as an educational risk (Connolly & Haughton, 2017; Kemp & Pagden, 2019). It suggests an acceptance or endorsement of the mainstream educational policy agenda.

Unsurprisingly, factors such as budgets and resources were also raised as material to the enactment of Forest School. After their initial engagement with Forest School, staff at Highpeak wanted to prioritise its development. However, as Mrs Hemming explained, budgetary pressures meant that the school has,

> **tried to push our own version which really wasn't Forest School's version** but elements that they had really, really enjoyed that we could manage ourselves because we couldn't afford even to send someone on Forest School training.

Linked to this, the support from internal stakeholders such as staff, governors and parents is another factor highlighted by the research. This is a sensitive issue but it was clear that there was resistance from some teaching staff even in schools where Forest School is well-embedded. Mrs Cannon, for example, noted that, 'there are a lot of people here who don't like us going out once a week' and concerns from some staff who worried that Forest School takes valuable time away from the classroom. Such examples of struggle and conflict highlight the central ideological tension schools face in engaging with Forest School with its alternative purpose and pedagogy.

Discussion: Developing a new discourse about schools and teachers

This research raises important questions about the 'fit' of Forest School with mainstream schooling. Although elements of the three prevailing discourses presented earlier in relation to the position of schools and teachers and Forest School (as stakeholders, unenlightened and consumers) were present in the data, this analysis suggests a fourth discourse – teaching professionals as agentic.

Schools and teachers as agentic

In this research teaching staff frequently referred to their concerns about the extent to which they were able to put the "pure" and "proper" concept of Forest School into practice. This is a problem raised by Waite, Bolling & Bentsen (2015:15) who argue,

> attempts to maintain purity of the Forest Schools form, crystallised within a set of defined principles (FSA website), may work against flexible adaptation to local contexts or for specific purposes.

However, the teachers in this research did not position themselves as passive "consumers" of the Forest School brand but were pro-active in adapting Forest School to fit their needs. Furthermore, this research suggests that it is not just classroom teachers who are "agents" in Forest School contexts; rather it is those working as Teaching Assistants and those in senior management positions (assistant, deputy and headteachers) who seem to play particularly significant roles. This suggests a term such as teaching professionals might be more appropriate.

This study found that teaching professionals who had engaged with Forest School, whether they adopted it fully, were able to draw upon its principles to initiate change in their school context. This agency was demonstrated in different ways. Firstly, engagement with Forest School seemed to act as a catalyst to develop professional roles. For Senior Leaders, it offered an opportunity to connect directly with children as well as providing protected time and 'safe space' away from the demands of their leadership role to reconnect with their educational values. For Teaching Assistants, Forest School it provided an opportunity to develop an area of expertise and to demonstrate leadership. A study of primary school teachers in New Zealand found that the teachers reported a 'rejuvenated sense of professional identity' because of the outdoor learning they had initiated (Cosgriff, 2017: 23). Specifically,

this study suggests that Forest School offers a way of supporting the development of hybrid professional identities which merge organisational necessity with moral purpose (Connolly *et al*, 2018b). Secondly, the teaching professionals commented on how engagement with Forest School has caused them to reflect on their pedagogy and to take concepts from Forest School and apply them more generally. This is reminiscent of Maynard's (2007) study where teaching staff started to question their existing practice. A third dimension of change relates to the outdoors as a learning environment. In this study all participants discussed the way they were now using the school site for learning as well as the local environment following their engagement with Forest School. This wider engagement with outdoor learning and 'rewilding of the school' has also been highlighted by McCree, Cutting & Sherwin (2018:990) although over a longer period and based on the engagement of a small group of students. There thus seems to be a potentially mutually transformative relationship between Forest School and school when teaching professionals are given space to be agentic.

A double act of resistance

Returning to the original ideological tension presented in the introduction between Forest School and mainstream education, this research suggests that some teaching professionals are responding to this through a double act of resistance. Firstly, because engaging with Forest School could be considered as an act of resistance in the contemporary neo-liberal educational policy environment where raising achievement is the *sine qua non*. Forest School with its alternative purpose, content and pedagogy offers a means by which teaching staff can resist or subvert the mainstream standards agenda; to regain a sense of moral purpose in their practice and leadership (Connolly *et al*, 2018a:620). The second act of resistance can be understood in the context of Forest School itself. Teaching staff can draw upon their knowledge and understanding of their own school context and adapt the Forest School approach to meet their needs. The result is a 'bricolage…of policies and practices' (Maguire, Ball & Braun, 2010: 166).

Limits to teacher agency

The relatively peripheral role of many class teachers in relation to Forest School practice raises an important caveat to the above discussion. It suggests that class teachers may not be

in a position to make any of the changes discussed above as they tend to not be directly involved in Forest School. The challenge of involving class teachers from a practical perspective also raises questions about the potential for Forest School to be integrated and linked to learning within mainstream schools. Murray & O'Brien's (2005) assumption that it would be class teachers who trained as Forest School leaders is intimately linked to the question of integration. If class teachers do not participate in Forest School they are not able to 'gain a new perspective on the children they teach as they observe them in the woodland environment' (O'Brien, 2009: 53). Nor, as McCree, Cutting & Sherwin (2018:991) argue, are they able to 'fully understand or integrate the children's experiences into class.' This research suggests that it is not only when Forest School is provided by external providers that class teachers may be "othered" (the concern that researchers including Waite, Bolling & Bentsen, 2015; Leather, 2018 have alluded to) but also, paradoxically, when it is delivered by the school themselves.

The danger of the single discourse

Significantly, this research also highlights the importance of moving away from discourses which assume similarity between and within schools and their teaching staff. The schools in this research shared several characteristics – all were small rural schools and had engaged with a local Forest School provider – but there were significant differences in their responses. Within individual schools there are clearly multiple understandings about the principles and practice of Forest School and it is problematic to assume that "teachers" or even "teaching staff" are a homogenous group and .even in schools where Forest School is established, there may not be support from the wider community of staff.

Forest School in schools: integration or separation?

The aim of this paper was to explore the way in which schools engage with Forest School from the perspective of teaching professionals. Since its inception both Forest School and schools have undergone rapid changes. Forest School has arguably become subject to the same neo-liberal market principles as mainstream education (Leather, 2018). This is well illustrated by the setting up of the FSA in 2012 to 'market, promote and professionalise" Forest School (Connolly & Haughton, 2017:110) and standardise the brand. The result of

this standardisation seems, paradoxically, to have been an increasing separation rather than integration between schools and Forest School as evidenced in recent research literature. This was also evident in the data from this small-scale study which has highlighted the poor fit between the FSA defined Forest School approach and contemporary primary school contexts.

The research on which this paper is based has revealed that rather than passively adopting Forest School as a pre-defined package which the “school as consumer discourse” might imply, the teaching professionals in this study were agentic in their responses and adapted Forest School principles to fit their specific context. However, this raises a dilemma for the Forest School movement – is it willing to support mainstream integration of Forest School which may mean a 'dilution of principles...to address school priorities’ (Waite, Bolling & Bentsen, 2015: 15). This research suggests there is potential for a mutually transformational relationship between Forest School and schools but this can only happen if teaching professionals are given freedom to adapt the Forest School approach to local contexts and needs.

References

Ball, S. (2003) The teacher's soul and the terrors of performativity, *Journal of Education Policy*, 18(2), 215-228

Ball, S. (2015) Education, governance and the tyranny of numbers, *Journal of Education Policy*, 30(3), 299-301

Coates, J. & Pimlott-Wilson, H. (2019) Learning while playing: Children's Forest School experiences in the UK. *British Educational Research Journal* 45(1), 21-40.

Connolly, M. & Haughton, C. (2017) The perception, management and performance of risk amongst Forest School educators, *British Journal of Sociology of Education,* 38:2, 105-124.

Connolly, M., Milton, E., Davies, A & Barrance, R. (2018a) Turning heads: The impact of political reform on the professional role, identity and recruitment of headteachers in Wales. *British Educational Research Journal* 44(4), 608-625.

Connolly, M., Hadfield, M., Barnes, Y. & Snook, J. (2018b) The accommodation of contested identities: The impact of participation in a practice-based Masters programme on beginning teachers' professional identity and sense of agency. *Teaching and Teacher Education,* 71, 241-250

Cosgriff, M. (2017) The rewards of professional change: two primary school teachers' experiences of transforming outdoor education. *Teachers and Curriculum,* 17(1), 23-29

Cumming, F. & Nash, M (2015) An Australian perspective of a forest school: shaping a sense of place to support learning. *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 15(4), 296-309

DEFRA (2018) *A green future: Our 25 year plan to improve the environment*. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/25-year-environment-plan (accessed 8.8.18).

DEFRA (2011) *The Natural Choice: Securing the Value of Nature*. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/228842/8082.pdf (accessed 8.8.18)

Dillon, J. & Dickie, I. (2012) *Learning in the natural environment: review of the social and economic benefits and barriers*. Natural England Commissioned Reports, Number 092.

Forest School Association (2019) *What is Forest School* available at: www.forestschool association.org/what-is-forest-school/. (Accessed: 23rd January 2019).

Giddens, A. (1984) *The Constitution of Society: Outline of the Theory of Structuration.* Cambridge: Polity Press.

Harris, F. (2017) 'The nature of learning at Forest School, practitioners' perspectives', *Education 3-13*, 45(2), pp. 272-291 DOI: 10.1080/03004279.2015.1078833

Harris, F. (2018) Outdoor learning spaces: the case of Forest School, *Area*, 50, 222-231

Humberstone, B. & Stan, I. (2011) Outdoor learning: Primary pupils experiences and teachers' interaction in outdoor learning. *Education 3-13*, 39, 529-540

Kemp, N. & Pagden, A. (2019) The place of Forest School within English primary schools: senior leader perspectives, *Education 3-13*, 47:4, 490-502, DOI: 10.1080/03004279.2018.1499791

Leather, M. (2018) A critique of "Forest School" or something lost in translation, *Journal of Outdoor & Environmental Education*, 21, 5-18

Louv, R. (2005) *Last Child in the Woods: Saving our children from Nature-Deficit Disorder.* London: Atlantic Books.

Maguire, M., Ball, S. & Braun, A. (2010) Behaviour, classroom management and student 'control': enacting policy in the English secondary school, *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 20:2, 153-170.

Maynard, T. (2007) 'Encounters with Forest School and Foucault, a risky business?' *Education 3-13*, 35(4), pp. 379-391.

Maynard, T, Waters, J. & Clement, J. (2013) Moving outdoors: Further exploration of 'child-initiated' learning in the outdoor environment, *Education 3-13*, 41 (3), 282-299.

McCree, M., Cutting, R. & Sherwin, D. (2018) The Hare and the Tortoise for to Forest School: taking the scenic route to academic attainment via emotional wellbeing outdoors, *Early Childhood Development & Care*, 188:7, 980-996.

Merrill, B. & West, L. (2009) *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research*. London: Sage

Murphy, M. (2018) Exploring the 'construction' strand in the Irish primary school visual arts curriculum through the Forest School approach, *Journal of Adventure Education and Outdoor Learning*, 18(3), 257-274

Murray, R. & O'Brien, L. (2005*) Such enthusiasm – a joy to see: An evaluation of Forest School in England*, London: Forest Research for New Economics Foundation. Available at: https://www.forestresearch.gov.uk/documents/1418/ForestSchoolEnglandReport.pdf (accessed 8.8.18)

O'Brien, L. & Murray, R. (2007) Forest School and its impacts on young children: Case studies in Britain. *Urban Forestry and Urban Greening* 6(4), 249-265

O'Brien, L. (2009) 'Learning outdoors, the Forest School approach', *Education 3-13*, 37(1), 45-60.

Priestley, M., Biesta, G. & Robinson, S. (2015) *Teacher agency: an ecological approach*. London: Bloomsbury.

Ridgers, N., Knowles, Z. & Sayers, J. (2012) Encouraging play in the natural environment: a child-focused case study of Forest School, *Children's Geographies*, 10:1, 49-65

Slade, M., Lowery, C. & Bland, K. (2013) Evaluating the impact of Forest Schools: A collaboration between a University and a Primary School, *Support for Learning* 28 (2), 66-72

Waite, S., Bølling, M. and Bentsen, P. (2016) 'Comparing apples and pears? A conceptual framework for understanding forms of outdoor learning through comparison of English Forest Schools and Danish udeskole', *Environmental Education Research*, 22(6), pp. 868-89

Disclosure Note: No potential conflict of interest.