

# A critique of Forest School: Something lost in translation

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## Abstract

This is a critique of an approach to outdoor education experienced in the United Kingdom (UK) at Forest School. Forest School came to the UK primarily from Scandinavia, where early years education conducted in the outdoors is a widely accepted practice. In its move to the UK, however, three major issues have arisen. The first concerns how Forest School as a form of outdoor education is culturally, socially, and historically situated. This suggests that its adoption in the UK must navigate cultural differences, acknowledging that Forest School is a social construction. Secondly, the pedagogy of Forest School, relevant as it is to early years education, is undertheorised in the outdoor education literature. This especially relates to considerations of play as a central tenet of Forest School pedagogy. Thirdly, the expansion of Forest School in the UK has taken a particularly corporate turn, resulting in a rapid institutionalisation and commodification of Forest School practices. The need to situate claims made for and about Forest School in well-designed and conducted research is crucial for substantiating what can degenerate into market-based promotion. Finally, some of the very positive contributions Forest School is making to the development of contemporary practices of outdoor and environmental education are introduced. This critique is written in the spirit of engaging in robust discussion and debate around Forest School in order to see the difficulties addressed and the positive contributions continue.

Keywords: Forest School, commodification, social constructionism, play pedagogy

## The growth of Forest School in the UK

Over the past decade there has been an increased focus on reconnecting children with nature (Louv, 2005), based on the recognition that being in nature is a good thing, said to encourage bonding with the natural world (Chawla & Cushing, 2007) as well as supporting children's imaginative play and the development of positive relationships (Dowdell, Gray, & Malone, 2011). In this paper I examine and critique aspects of an approach to outdoor education known as "Forest School" which works to achieve this reconnection. I offer this critique of Forest School from my position as an outdoor educator and researcher involved with professional practitioner networks in the UK and beyond, and one who is concerned about some of the recent developments involving Forest School.

Forest School is a form of outdoor education that is particularly associated with early years education (children from the age of three to the age of eight) wherein young children spend time in forest or woodland settings. Writing in the UK, Knight (2009) described this approach as one in which "the experience is regular, repeated and in an unfamiliar setting, it is made as safe as reasonably possible, it happens over time, there is no such thing as bad weather — only bad clothing, trust is central and," very importantly, "the learning is play based and, as far as possible, child-initiated and child-led" (pp. 16–17).

The basic idea of conducting schooling for young children in forests or woodlands is not new and has emerged in various countries, but it is especially

associated with Scandinavia. A prominent version has existed for many years in Denmark where it is affiliated with the idea of *udeskole*, which means "outdoor school" (Bentsen & Jensen, 2012). In the UK there has been a steep rise in the number of Forest Schools since the 1990s, with the emergence of another more recent version known as "Bush School" in Australia, which is "based on the ethos and philosophy of the European Forest Schools movement but all materials and content have been adapted to suit the Australian culture and environment" (Archimedes Training, 2012a). This ongoing expansion suggests that Forest Schools are filling a gap in the provision of education for younger children. However, this relatively quick pace of growth can also bring with it problems.

This paper is premised on the notion that the rapid development of Forest Schools in the UK has seen pragmatic concerns overtake conceptual understanding. This has meant that practitioners are emulating practices without necessarily understanding why they are doing things in certain ways and not others. It has also meant that training of practitioners has been speedily institutionalised, perhaps exacerbating this issue of understanding. In order to counter this I open up discussion and further discourse in three areas: (1) awareness of the cultural underpinnings of Forest Schooling and the associated consideration of Forest School as a social construction; (2) the theoretical underpinnings for the pedagogical orientation of Forest School, especially considering the notion of play; (3) the problems accruing to the commodification of Forest School in association with the inadequacy of current attempts to adequately substantiate claims for the outcomes of Forest School.

My intention in this paper is to consider Forest School experiences from wider social, historical, educational, and cultural perspectives so as to develop greater knowledge, understanding, and discussion about Forest School practice in general, thereby contributing to the theoretical discourse available to Forest School leaders. I suggest that a Forest School approach offers a new outlook for outdoor education when compared with more traditional forms of outdoor adventure education, specifically the child-centred and child-initiated pedagogy associated with Forest School. With this unique contribution in mind, I propose an applied pedagogical model of play that utilises sociocultural theory.

## **Issue 1 — Forest School as a social construction**

Typical activities of a Forest School in the UK may include: lighting, managing, and cooking on fires; building dens and shelters; engaging in imaginative and fantasy play including storytelling; climbing trees, rope swings, using full-size tools to cut, carve, and create using natural materials, and playing environmental games (Stevens, 2013, p. 81). However, whilst many practitioners are trained to deliver these activities, it is my argument that there is a lack of understanding of the underpinning philosophy. This philosophical understanding is crucial as it supports awareness of other curricular opportunities, retention of some cultural sensitivity to the place,<sup>1</sup> and comprehension of the tensions that arise through implementation in different contexts (in the UK this may especially concern the concept of play) — all of which helps to maximise children’s learning and development from these Forest School experiences. A brief account of the theoretical and philosophical foundations of Forest School is provided by Knight (2009, p. 1) in the first chapter of her book *Forest Schools and Outdoor Learning in the Early Years*. These theoretical considerations are helpful but not explored in great detail. This brevity is repeated in training course syllabi such as that of the National Open College Network (NOCN, 2012).

The growth of the Forest School approach to outdoor education has interesting influences and sees origins that differ to the more traditional Hahnian roots of outdoor adventure education. Forest School is significantly informed by ideas emergent from the Scandinavian philosophy of *friluftsliv*. The basic idea of *friluftsliv* can be discerned in the practices of outdoor people around the world, but as a specific philosophy it is unique to Scandinavia, especially Norway and Sweden. The word translates to “free air life” meaning a lifestyle philosophy based on experiences of freedom in nature and spiritual connectedness with the landscape (Gelter, 2000). When applied in education, *friluftsliv* supports experiential

learning where the “sensual intimacy” between land and people has strong links with indigenous traditions and the notion of authentic experience (Loynes, 2002, p. 120). Henderson (2001) argued that *friluftsliv* may be understood as outdoor recreation with its heart in the land and linked to a tradition of being and learning with the land. The reward for this connectedness with the landscape is a strong sensation of a new level of consciousness and a spiritual wholeness.

This philosophy has obvious connections with outdoor education as practised around the world, and yet *friluftsliv* is also different to outdoor education (Andkjær, 2012), suggesting a complexity that belies direct translation of the ideas. This complexity is culturally rooted (Gurholt, 2014) and aspects of the original philosophy may become lost when implemented in other countries. The translation required in the move from Scandinavian cultures to the UK is something which is critical for educators working in Forest Schools in the UK to understand, yet it poses cultural challenges. As Maynard & Waters (2007) highlight, “the outdoor environment is not a central feature of British cultural identity and as a result, for some [teachers] ... the idea of being outside for an extended period of time may have been anathema” (p. 262). For many working and living in contemporary urban educational settings in the UK, this may provide a good description of how being outside is often seen. Historically, British colonial imperialistic ideals have influenced cultural conceptions of nature and the outdoors, positioning them as something to be conquered and romanticised. For example, the seafaring influences strong in the 18th and 19th centuries and the sublime conceptions of wild nature derived from the romantic arts movement can be argued to be continuing aspects of British cultural identity. Whilst these may have changed over time, traces remain and shape mainstream cultural thinking resulting in a different dominant conception of the outdoors to that of *friluftsliv*.

Differing interpretations of the cultural underpinnings of Forest Schools suggest the importance of understanding Forest School as a social construction. Social constructionism is an epistemological position and aims to account for the ways in which phenomena, such as Forest School, are socially constructed, although both Burr (2003) and Gergen and Gergen (2003) acknowledge that much like constructivism there is no single clear definition for this term. Berger and Luckman (1967) introduced the notion of social construction into the social sciences and made a comprehensive argument for how our reality is socially constructed in various ways. According to Gergen (1985), the terms in which the world is understood are social artefacts, products of historically situated interchanges amongst people. From this position understanding is the result of an

active, cooperative enterprise of people in relationships (Gergen & Gergen, 2003). Also, and of use for Forest School practice, social constructionism insists that we take a critical stance towards our taken-for-granted understanding of the world, which operates in historically and culturally specific ways (Burr, 2003, p. 2).

I suggest here that social constructionism focuses on meaning and power and it cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be (Burr, 2003) and as such, this should challenge our thinking. For those involved with a Forest or Bush School it is perfectly normal to head into the woods, or the bush, with children to build fires and use sharp tools. Similarly, for those involved in adventure education it is normal to hike up a mountain, light a campfire, or sail a boat, all in the name of creating a (learning) experience. The meaning made of these experiences by participants may well be quite different to that of those who regularly inhabit outdoor spaces such as farmers, fishers, or gardeners.

Cook (1999) provided us with a useful historical perspective on the development of outdoor education in the UK which highlighted how this social construction called “outdoor education” involves a range of activities: walking, camping, sailing, and so on, as well as a range of attributes that are part of the processes: problem solving, communication, leadership, teamwork, etc. All of these have become normalised as the standard and assumed way of educating in, through, and about the outdoors in the UK. I argue that culturally in the UK it is still acceptable to claim that this is all “good character building” activity. Social constructionism challenges the assumptions and beliefs of this cultural “norm.”

In the UK the transmission of outdoor leadership styles is embedded, for better and worse, in the structure of national governing bodies and leadership training schemes (for example, the UK Mountain Training Association, British Canoeing, and Forest School Association). The meaning of what constitutes, for example, a wood or forest, or a mountain (as a distinct feature at a height of 600m above sea level) has a cultural significance and root. Our 21st century engagements with the outdoors, for education, recreation, or leisure, are clearly social constructions. For example, during a Forest School experience the lighting of a fire and sitting around it for communal purposes is a key activity. The ability to light a fire and sit round for warmth and cooking is something that 100 years ago was an essential element for most people’s survival in the UK and remains so today in developing regions of the world. In summary, it is important that we understand Forest School as a social construction, adapted from a Scandinavian approach to kindergarten education and imported to the UK. A

social constructionist position allows us to question the orthodoxy of what constitutes an educational experience in a Forest School.

## **Issue 2 – Forest School pedagogy**

Many cultural norms in the UK, especially those related to education and physical activity, are still rooted in Victorian values with the power and authority for organising, the learning invested in the teacher, the outdoor activity instructor, the sports coach or Forest School leader. Jon Cree (2009), an influential UK Forest School practitioner and chair of the UK Forest School Association, emphasises the child-centred learning approach of Forest School. In doing so he alludes to some pedagogical differences, describing how “teachers and practitioners openly admit they find it hard not to interfere and shut up!” and how “a real distinguishing factor of Forest Schools is the role of the leader to facilitate child centred learning” (p. 24).

Central to such discussions concerning the pedagogy of Forest School, but often missing, is the notion of play. The Forest School focus on younger children with its associated *pedagogy of play* brings an extra-dimension to contemporary outdoor practice. The concept of child-centred and child-initiated *play* as a central tenet is new and potentially exciting for outdoor educators and it challenges the current orthodoxy. The importance of learning through play for young children is and has been comprehensively articulated by numerous authors. Bruce (2011a)<sup>2</sup> argued that play, like creativity, helps children “to be led forward actively in their learning ... extending and broadening their learning” (p. 4). In her book *Playing Outdoors*, Helen Tovey (2007) suggested that outdoor play is essential for young children’s learning when they seek adventure and challenge, highlighting how the adult fulfils an essential role in supporting and extending children’s free play, whilst supporting management of the risks inherent in these environments.

But even with such advocates, play remains a problematic concept for theory and practice. Wood (2010) argues that the continuing tensions between the rhetoric and reality of play in educational settings can in part be attributed to “the long-established ideological claims that have been made about the primacy of free play, free choice, autonomy, control and ownership, all of which are characteristics of children’s self-initiated activities” (p. 3.). Although many of the claims that are made for play are supported by research evidence, there remain problems “in demonstrating to parents and other professionals that *children are learning when they are playing*” (p. 3, italics added). In order to address these issues, Wood proposed a model of integrated pedagogical approaches (see Figure 1). This includes

child-initiated as well as adult-directed activities, and reflects sociocultural theories of learning with practitioners playing important roles in responding to children's ranges of choices, interests, and activities. I argue that this is a useful model for outdoor education practice, including Forest School.

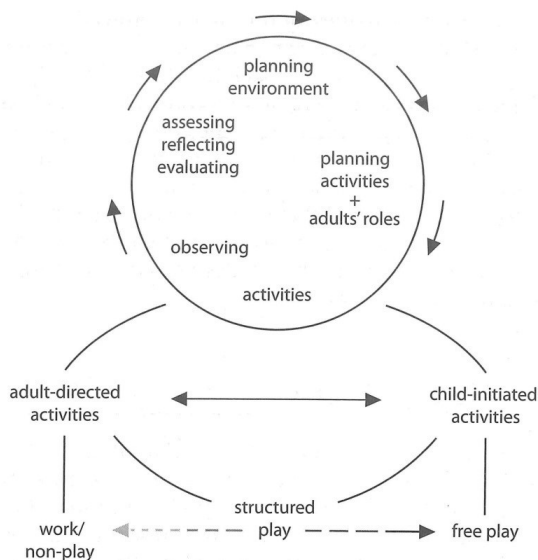


Figure 1: Integrated pedagogical approaches to play (Wood, 2010, p. 21).

The need for some support and structure in play is supported by John Dewey who believed that children benefit from some structure; he did not advocate for free play totally led by children themselves (Gray & MacBlain, 2012). Ord and Leather (2011) highlighted the importance of Dewey's work for outdoor educators and his conceptualisation of the *transactional* nature of experience and subsequent *meaning making* inherent to experience. Bruner's (1977) concept of "scaffolding" supports Wood's model (see Figure 1). Scaffolding refers to the "process of setting up the situation to make the child's entry easy and successful and then gradually pulling back and handing the role to the child as he becomes skilled enough to manage" (Bruner, 1983, p.60). For example, the introduction of knives and the whittling of sticks with young children in a Forest School may see the leader start with vegetable peelers, or assist the child with holding and moving their hands, gradually reducing the amount of support they provide.

I believe that our cultural understanding and acceptance of "educational play" is slowly changing and being addressed by early years educators such as Elizabeth Wood (2009, 2010, 2013). However, Wood highlights how play is problematic in

educational settings because, amongst other things, "it may threaten adults' control, disrupt their choices, challenge their values or provoke concerns about risks and hazards" (2013, p. 14). As such, the educational significance of *friluftsliv*, which champions freedom in nature and spiritual connectedness to the land achieved through child-centred and child-initiated activities, may create dissonance for UK educators.

### Issue 3: The commodification of Forest School

#### Centralising governance

Strongly associated with and contributing to the growth of Forest School in the UK have been three interconnected achievements: the writings and other work of Sara Knight (2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2013), the forming of the Forest School Association (FSA) in 2012 (FSA, 2013), and the commercialisation of training provision of Forest Schools<sup>3</sup> (Archimedes Training, 2012b). These three align around the development of a national model for Forest Schools in the UK, and "if we are to develop a shared national model for Forest School in the UK," as Knight (2009) proposed, then "there must be robust discussion and debate" (p. 14). With the aim of adding to the "robust discussion and debate," I argue that it remains an open question whether a shared national model is needed or desired, not to mention whether it is achievable.

Whilst it could be argued that a national model may act as an antidote to commodification of Forest Schools by commercial organisations, having a national model may also reify the Forest School experience, transforming it into a product that organisations can market and sell rather than allowing it, as an educational philosophy, to inform a range of approaches. The FSA (2013) state that it is "the professional body and UK wide voice for Forest School, promoting best practice, cohesion and quality Forest School for all." Further, within its constitution the FSA claims that it "will be the national governing body for the Forest School qualifications across the UK." A range of issues surround the establishment of a governing body to oversee qualifications for activities that have taken place for many years as basic training modules in other organisations, for example, Earth Education and Scouting.

In the UK and other similar economies, the commodification and marketisation of education has been built on a neoliberal political philosophy, which is principally associated with emphasising the efficiency of market competition and the role of individuals through free choice; at the heart of this commodification is a view of human beings as rational, autonomous, utility-maximising individuals (Roberts,

1998). The public sector, including education, has been transformed; and traditional ideals of welfare, community and a sense of obligation towards others are replaced by the new rules of the market (Olssen & Peters, 2005).

The impacts of the efficiencies and consumerism of the free market on outdoor education were first highlighted by Chris Loynes (1998). He employed the concept of “McDonaldization” (Ritzer, 1993) to explore the changes evident in outdoor education provision and as a result expressed concern that marketplace values (the efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control of McDonaldization) were detrimentally influencing the provision of outdoor education experiences. More recently, Humberstone and Stan (2012) have similarly noted how neoliberal ideologies shift informal educational experiences “away from pupil-centred learning towards production and outcomes” (p. 184). Beames and Brown (2014) explored the related concept of “Disneyization” and highlighted “the pervasive and insidious nature of consumerism within some aspects of outdoor education” (p. 128). I suggest that the Disneyization notion of “performative labour” (p. 120), along with McDonaldization, are both useful ways to understand the negative impact of the training approach to Forest School leadership. Outdoor education has a long tradition of embracing opportunities for embodied and holistic approaches to learning where “values otherwise submerged or vanished in the wider world” (Loynes, 1998, p. 35) are found. If these were lost via “the unconscious acceptance of rationalized processes that rob students and educators of spontaneity and serendipitous learning opportunities that are often encountered in outdoor environments where not everything is predictable and measurable” (Beames & Brown, 2014, p.129) then, as they understate, that would “be a shame.”

In essence, this commodification and marketisation means that Forest School activities become more standardised, controllable, and efficiently delivered. Perhaps counterintuitively, this may result in a less skilled work force. Qualifications exist in the UK to train and validate Level 3 Forest School leaders (a level of education below that of a first year undergraduate degree) to allow them to “design and run a Forest School programme” (Forest Schools Education, n.d.). My concern is that commodification of the Forest School experience, utilising lower skilled practitioners who deliver a range of Forest School activities in a standardised performance, with less developed conceptions of *play* or understandings of the philosophy of *friluftsliv*, may be unaware of the impact of the cultural context in which they practice and the significance of *the place* to this practice (for discussion of culture and place in outdoor education see Quay, 2016).

The ability to facilitate child-initiated play is culturally influenced and situated, and a pedagogy of play remains problematic in practice in the UK and similar western nations. As highlighted by Cree’s (2009, p. 24) statement that “teachers and practitioners openly admit they find it hard not to interfere and shut up!” the ability of a Forest School leader to facilitate play is influenced by their educational background and career path as an outdoor educator. Harris (2015) has shown that some Forest School leaders are happy to completely change plans in response to children; however, “others do not always do this” and find “facilitating child-led learning ... to be a challenge” (p. 15). In addition, the teaching and learning may become simplified in a mechanical way when the Forest School session is designed and run by a practitioner with only Level 3 Forest School training. This is not intended as a generalisation, however, since from my experience it is apparent that Forest School leaders often have a range and depth of other teaching experiences and qualifications.

Finally, I am concerned that a market dominance of the Forest School brand narrows the opportunities for outdoor education in forest and woodland locations if Forest School is perceived by critical stakeholders (head teachers, school principals, parents, governors, or insurers) as the only acceptable badge and qualification to educate children in the woods. If an individual is a skilled, experienced outdoor educator, a competent risk manager, with a knowledge of woodland and bushcraft activities, who understands the principles of play and already holds a teaching qualification, then they do not require further training leading to another separate qualification. That is of course unless *the market* decides, and the insurance companies and decision makers recognise the Forest School brand as *the* measure of competence.

### **Amplifying benefits of participation**

This commodification of Forest School creates other problems, including the tendency to make claims for the benefits and efficacy of the experience for children that, it may be argued, overreach the available evidence. For example, assertions made about perceived benefits such as growth in confidence and self-esteem may be presented in the literature as a matter of fact.

Confidence and self-esteem are improved as skills develop and no one fails. This has a snowball effect, because as confidence grows so the children find more exciting things to do, which they will succeed at, thus improving their sense of self-esteem even more. (Knight, 2009, p. 39)

The assertions about self-esteem are based upon a two-phase evaluation of Forest School (see Murray, 2003; Murray & O'Brien, 2005; O'Brien, 2009; O'Brien & Murray, 2006, 2007). Phase 1 studied two different Forest Schools in Wales, although the number of children involved is unclear. Phase 2 of the Forest School evaluation developed themes from phase 1 and focused on three case study areas in England – Oxfordshire, Worcestershire, and Shropshire – tracking 24 children over eight months. Both phases of the evaluation were participatory and involved workshops with key stakeholders who developed six specific positive outcomes for children that related to: self-esteem, ability to work with others, motivation to learn, language development, skills and knowledge, and physical skill development. Forest School leaders and teachers used a self-appraisal template to record changes in the children focussing on the positive outcomes mentioned above. This template can be seen in Murray (2003, p. 49) appendix 5 – “Activities, outputs and outcomes table” – showing six outcomes statements that capture the possible benefits of Forest School experiences for children.

1. Forest School increases the self-esteem and self-confidence of individuals who take part.
2. Forest School improves an individual's ability to work co-operatively and increases their awareness of others.
3. Forest School counters a lack of motivation and negative attitude towards learning.
4. Forest School encourages ownership and pride in the local environment.
5. Forest School encourages an improved relationship with, and better understanding of the outdoors.
6. Forest School increases the skills and knowledge of the individuals who take part. (Murray, 2003, p. 49)

My concern here is that these outcome statements appear to go unchallenged, are presented as facts, and then utilised in further research where leaders and teachers are asked to rate them. In what follows I shall focus on the claims related to self-esteem, although I suggest that the other statements (above) also require examination. As an example of a problematic claim, O'Brien and Murray (2006) noted that adapting to weather conditions is a physical challenge for Forest School pupils and they observed that “children with less confidence in their physical ability and lower

self-esteem became colder more quickly than the others who would rush around and keep busy” (p. 38). I am unsure how an active and busy child can be directly correlated with self-esteem, especially when it appears that children's self-esteem is being measured using adult observations. Emler (2001) highlights how observer ratings are untrustworthy in studies comparing observed values with self-reported values. Observational methods are an unreliable method of assessing an individual pupil's self-esteem, a point reinforced in a small-scale study by Miller and Parker (2006), who advised caution when teachers make judgements about pupils' self-esteem. Further to this, Maynard & Waters (2007), writing on learning in the outdoor environment, noted that, “the significance of self-esteem and learning styles may be over emphasised” (p. 320).

Claims about self-esteem continue to be made and appear in the work of Knight (2009, pp. 37–8) as well as in the marketing materials of commercial training companies, such as Forest School Training (n.d.) which states that “the areas of benefit identified by a number of studies reflect the outcomes which time and again are associated with Forest School: Increased self-esteem and self-confidence”; they go on to list another five outcomes. Similarly, another commercial training provider, The Forest Education Initiative<sup>4</sup> (2008) describes Forest School as “an inspirational process that offers children, young people and adults regular opportunities to achieve, and develop confidence and self-esteem through hands-on learning experiences in a woodland environment.” Another example considered a pilot evaluation of two Welsh Forest Schools that claimed to show that the children involved in the initiative demonstrated increased self-confidence, self-esteem, and team-working skills. Rickinson et al., (2004) argued that, “the evidence base for this evaluation appears quite weak” (p. 23).

The use of natural spaces for learning in schools is undergoing something of a renaissance (Gilchrist et al., 2016). Whilst adults engaged in outdoor learning and specifically Forest School experiences may see, feel, and believe in the efficacy of this approach for children, the implication is that further appropriate research is required regarding the experience of the children. Ridgers, Knowles and Sayers (2012) have contributed to this by presenting collections of children's voices in a child-focused qualitative case study of 17 children from one school who participated in focus groups before and after a 12-week Forest School programme. They examined these children's perceptions, knowledge, and experiences of play in the natural environment. They found that this Forest School had a positive influence on children's natural play and their knowledge of the natural world around them.

## The positive aspects of Forest School

Forest School has much to offer all outdoor educators particularly in terms of pedagogy and philosophy. In particular, the play-based and child-initiated focus could inform programmes conducted in other contexts. Although this approach is articulated in Mosston & Ashworth's (2002) negotiated teaching styles, I suggest that a more closed style of teaching with autocratic leadership and instruction dominates in many adventure education activity sessions. This may well have something to do with the age of the participants although we are well served to be mindful of the enjoyment of childlike activity. For example, the thrill of jumping in water, whilst not featuring in the syllabus of skill acquisition for sailing or canoeing (except in relation to rescues), can provide opportunities for fun, excitement, group development, personal expression, and a sensate connection with the environment or the *somaesthetic experience* (see the philosopher Shusterman 2008, 2012).

Enabling young children access to the outdoors has two major positive components. Firstly, they are exposed to learning in natural environments from a young age and conceivably this becomes more familiar and perhaps "normal" especially given the Forest School approach where the experience is "regular, repeated and in an unfamiliar<sup>5</sup> setting ... [and] happens over time" (Knight, 2009, p. 16). These early experiences may seed the future and engender a desire for more experiences in nature. Studies of significant life experiences of environmental educators suggest that early experiences are crucial (Chalwa, 1998; Tanner, 1980). Secondly, working with this age group challenges the preconceptions of traditional approaches. For example, adventurous expeditions of the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme start at age 14, and traditional adventure sports, for example sailing, may commence independently from eight years (Royal Yachting Association, n.d.). The trend towards participation of younger children has been seen in the Scout movement which started in 1908 as an organisation for boys aged 11 to 16. However, by 1916 younger boys from eight years were included, supported by publication of the Wolf Cub's handbook. In the 1980s the Beaver Colonies appeared, where children from six years old were admitted (Scouts, 2013).

Another positive dimension to Forest School is the repeated and regular nature of the experience over the course of at least six weeks. It may be that these different learning environments are able to connect with the differing and various learning needs of children. This repeated experience is in contrast to the traditional British primary school residential multi-activity visit at the end of the primary phase. This may well be a one-off activity, undertaken at some distance from home and school involving many adventurous activities that are

new and potentially never repeated, though this is not to say that these memorable experiences are without value; they have a different emphasis.

Finally, for outdoor educators, the rise of Forest School espouses a new type of adult leading children outdoors. Early years practitioners have been around for many years as nursery or childcare workers and a relatively recent development introduced by the British government in 2007 was a formal qualification for this role. Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) is a professional qualification for practitioners working with children in the early years so-called "foundation stage" (ages 0–5), implemented in 2013. The qualification does not accrue Qualified Teacher Status (QTS), which has significant implications for the pay and conditions of employment. The latest iteration of Early Years Teacher (2014) lacks the status and often the remuneration that a teacher with QTS would attract. From my experience of early years professionals, the natural outdoor setting and the traditional social, cultural constructs associated with them are often new, different, and challenging; they are perhaps "outdoor immigrants" less likely to feel at ease in natural settings compared to those "outdoor natives"<sup>6</sup> who more readily embrace the outdoors as a place of learning. Whilst a new breed of educator is encouraged into the outdoors, this poses challenges and opportunities for those of us more accustomed to weather and managing risks in natural settings.

## Conclusion

In this paper I have critiqued the form of outdoor education known as Forest School. I have explored from a sociocultural perspective the problematic nature of importing an educational philosophy into the UK. Specifically I considered three themes; firstly, how Forest School as a type of outdoor education is a social construction and that its practice is culturally, socially, and historically situated. Secondly, I sought to explore some of the theoretical underpinnings that see *play* as a central tenet of a Forest School experience, and to this end suggested that a *pedagogy of play* would be of use. Thirdly, the problem and impact of commodifying the Forest School approach to education set against the neoliberal educational backdrop was explored. Specifically I questioned the validity about the claims made regarding the self-esteem of participants. I then discussed some of the positive aspects that Forest School contributes to contemporary outdoor practice and debate.

My central concern is that Forest School will become a reified and limited version of outdoor and environmental education. In order to prevent this we need to better understand and utilise the learning and development made possible via Forest

School. To achieve this we need to engage in a much deeper cultural and theoretical exploration of its meaning. This special issue of the *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education* takes an important leap forward in this regard, engaging robust discussion and debate around the theory and practice of Forest School.

## Notes

1. Place as the geographical construct explored by Tuan (1977).
2. It is not the purpose to explore play in detail here, but the work of Professor Tina Bruce (2011b) is recommended as essential reading.
3. "Forest Schools kindergarten" and "Forest School kindergarten" were applied for as trademarks by Archimedes Training Ltd. These were refused in 2014.
4. The Forest Education Initiative is part of the Forestry Commission. The Forestry Commission is a nonministerial UK government department responsible for forestry in England and Scotland.
5. I have not explored here the setting as "unfamiliar" when the Forest School ethos is one where the experience is repeated and regular – perhaps it should read "not the usual classroom one"?
6. After Prensky (2001).

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