Title: Hearing children's voices in the forest

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Abstract

This chapter explores the notion that paying regular, systematic attention to children's voices in unstructured, open-ended contexts, such as that offered by forest school, may support genuine child centred practice. It suggests ways in which such practices may be developed even within structured institutional contexts, such as mainstream school. It notes the tendency of the outcome focused dominant model of education to silence children's voices and explores alternative child-centred approaches to education (such as Reggio Emilia), drawing upon the author's experiences both as a teacher and facilitator of a child-led forest school programme. It explores both forest school research and pedagogical practice that amplifies children's voices. Ultimately, it suggests that the practical application of forest school approaches could spread respectful listening practices beyond education and into other childhood disciplines.

Keywords: forest school; childhood; voice; child-led; education; holistic; child-centred; pedagogy; multi-disciplinary; communication.

The child's voice in education

In this chapter I aim to show how paying regular, systematic attention to children's voices in unstructured, open-ended contexts may blossom into rich oases of genuine child centred practice. I suggest ways in which such practices may be developed even within structured contexts, such as mainstream school. As a case study, I draw upon my experiences during my previous career as a teacher and facilitator of a child-led forest school programme[1]. Ultimately, I propose that the practical application of some forest school approaches could spread respectful listening practices beyond education and into other childhood contexts. However, from my own personal and professional background, I naturally begin within the field of schooling. School, a key feature of a child's developmental experience, does not traditionally function as a milieu of democracy in which the child's personal voice is significant. To understand why this may be, and whether things could be different, I present a brief analysis of some perceived societal purposes of education and their subsequent impact on how we may listen to the child's voice. I suggest that our theoretical understanding of the child's role within the education system impacts greatly on the extent to which their voices may be amplified. Here I draw upon concepts presented in the thoughtful manifesto for the transformation of schooling set out by British educationalists Michael Fielding and Peter Moss (2010). Although now somewhat dated, the text criticises many still dominant trends in education, and suggests that modern society consider radical, democratic alternatives. It is the case that, as a societal concept, education has often engendered tensions between, on the one hand, the

[1]A note about capitalisation: many authors choose to refer to Forest School in its capitalised form. This usage often entails an adherence to the codified set of forest school guidelines devised by the Forest School Association (2019); in particular, the presence of a trained FSA practitioner. I deviate from this as my personal experience of 'forest-school-type' sessions arose from my involvement in a similar programme that was not run by an accredited 'Forest School' provider but was a project very similar in ethos run by a local educational charity Sightlines Initiative (2020), an organisation dedicated to promoting an enquiry-based approach to early childhood education, and the UK reference organisation for Reggio Emilia's preschools.

institutionalised demands of the "official models or established theories" (Malaguzzi, 1994, p. 51), such as the traditional performativity focus of the Anglo-Saxon/-American curriculum model (Waite et al., 2016), and on the other hand, our ethical, political and societal understanding of the wider needs of the child (Rinaldi, 2006). To explore this tension further, and what it may mean for the way we understand the child's visible presence in schools, I begin by presenting two broad contrasting theoretical models of education. By *education* I simply mean children, their teachers, and our societal understanding of *what school is for.*

The first model, which one might call the *business model*, views education as primarily outcomes focused. Schooling is, in essence, the "accumulation of competencies and qualifications" aimed at equipping young people with the tools and flexibility they will need to survive in a global, competitive market place (Fielding & Moss, 2010, p. 28). Within this relatively narrow framework parents are the informed consumers (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006) and children are the *products* of the educational system. And this model has become widely and publicly accepted as the primary purpose of education in recent years. Thus, in the UK for example, the concepts and vocabulary of business dominate in schools, rather than language pertaining to particular *educational* values, ideologies, and understandings (Sackville-Ford, 2019). This business language is performance based and suggestive of a "human treadmill: words pertaining to children in school include 'goals', 'outcomes', 'performance', [and] standards" (Fielding & Moss, 2010, p. 16). Within this model *children* and *teachers* occupy easily defined hierarchical roles and knowledge transfer happens in a top-down direction. In other words, education is *done* to children in a unidirectional manner. Children themselves seem not to be at the centre, or heart, of the national curriculum for England, for example. This curriculum document sets out attainment targets for each programme of study under the heading "Pupils should be taught to"; a phrase which itself seems to erase the child as an active agent in the learning activity (Department for Education, 2014). In this model the teacher delivers the learning; "the teacher [is a] technician, whose task is to unwrap and present packages of prescribed information" (Fielding & Moss, 2010, p. 17). And yet it is axiomatic that, in school, the teachers may be doing the teaching, but it is the children who *do* the learning. And as soon as we begin to consider that children are the active agents of their own learning and development then this 'business model' becomes problematic. In this outcomes-based framework there seems to be silence where the child's voice (their opinions, feelings, thoughts) should be. And it may be argued that this dominant conceptual framework has seemingly now *replaced* many of the most profound ethical and political responsibilities of education; for example a model of education as a "shared experience in a democratic society…whose citizens take responsibility for all their children" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p. 2). Fielding and Moss judge the current educational discourse to be "failed and dysfunctional" (2010, p. 2). By this they mean that important conversations about the ethical and societal purpose of education *for children* seem to have been abandoned in favour of narrow market-driven economic conversations. Frustratingly for those who view the purpose of education in a much broader sense, the present overarching socio-political discourse is merely "reduced to discussion of the best technical solutions for achieving pre-determined and self-evident ends" (Fielding & Moss, 2010, p. 21) within a conceptual framework so narrow it effectively silences the voices of the very individuals it claims to champion.

A second model of education, that one might call the *holistic model*, views the school experience as an integral part of the child's ongoing personal, social, and emotional development. This model explicitly places the child at the centre of things. Fielding and Moss label this model "education-in-its-broadest-sense" (2010, p. 46) and associate it closely with the European tradition of *social pedagogy* (Eichsteller & Holthoff, 2011). This broader model encompasses a child's holistic well-being, notions of empowerment, and the promotion of children's rights as a key aspect of education. In this framework, education is explicitly a cornerstone of the child's upbringing as a member of his or her

society. Fielding and Moss foreground these societal aspects of schooling as they propose a more democratic notion of education. Here they mean democracy in its broadest sense; a way of "thinking, being and acting, of *relating* and living together" (my italics) which foregrounds the voice of the child within the learning community (Fielding & Moss, 2010, p. 42). And this type of educational community, though rare, is no vague utopia. An inspirational example has flourished for over five decades in Reggio Emilia, a city of around 150,000 inhabitants in Northern Italy. Within the Reggio network of municipal pre-schools (catering for children aged 0 – 6) the child's voice is at the heart of the school experience and each individual is regarded as a citizen of the educational community with associated rights and uniquely valuable contributions to make (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006). The Reggio Emilia approach encompasses notions of ethics, democracy, and society as they relate to the experience of being a child. Fundamental to this approach is a pedagogy of listening and relationships, where both the child and the adult co-construct joint knowledge and culture together. Participants work reciprocally on child-led projects which explore children's own questions and fascinations. As Carlina Rinaldi, former director of the Reggio centres explains, each day is spent in "a search for meaning that only the children can help you find" (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 98). Tellingly, she often refers to the children and the adults within Reggio pre-schools by the same name: the *protagonists* (Rinaldi, 2006). Central to these notions of equality are the respectful listening and documentation practices that the adults within the educational community carry out, creating visible learning that truly foregrounds the child's voice.

These two broad models of education feature contrasting notions of the positioning and power of the child's voice. The 'holistic model' contains the idea of a symbiotic *culture of advocacy* (Frankel, 2018) in which children's voices are acknowledged and valued for the contribution they can make to the wider culture of schooling. Here, the belief that children's opinions and thoughts can positively shape the shared learning space explicitly informs planning and teaching. The notion of children as "active meaning makers" informs the image of the child (Frankel, 2018, p.16). In the words of the Reggio educators, the notion of the *rich child* replaces the traditional deficit model of education. (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006). In other words, this model combines an understanding that children themselves are the active agents of their own learning with a fearless willingness to listen to their voices. In the outcomes focused 'business model', by contrast, the child makes no visible contribution to the *learning activity* in school, and the child's voice is correspondingly absent. For example, in the English national curriculum the top-down directionality of the teaching is clearly indicated throughout: the introductory overview states that the document "provides pupils with an introduction to the essential knowledge they need to be educated citizens" (Department for Education, 2014). In other words, the focus is on direct knowledge transmission from teacher to student. 'Teaching and learning' happens in one direction only and thus there is no need for the child to contribute. And this is not to say that cognitive and cultural knowledge transfer should not be a key component of schooling. However, the overarching image of the child within this traditional model is characterised by notions of lack, and the child is silent at the centre of the process. Traditionally, "young children and their lives have not really figured much in public discourse; and when they do, they are readily devalued and marginalised… [and] spoken of in terms of deficit" (Dahlberg & Moss, 2006, p. 13). This image of the child places educators in a poor position to innovate processes that give children the (democratic) right to be listened to and to be "recognised as a citizen of the community" (*ibid*, p. 13). And one may argue that this deficit model also sits uneasily against the rights of the child as set out in Article 12 of the UN Convention: "Every child has the right to express their views, feelings and wishes in all matters affecting them, and to have their views considered and taken seriously" (*UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)*, 1989). In the next section I suggest ways in which some of the listening practices which characterise the holistic model of schooling may be developed even within the top-down

outcomes focused model of education in which many (if not most) teachers currently work. What can we do to incorporate some of these listening practices into our existing systems?

Forest school in mainstream education

Fortunately there exist pockets of rich child centred practice even within the current discourse of mainstream schooling which have the potential to foreground children's voices, and here I present forest school as an exemplar case study. For context, I begin with a description of the forest school movement, its ethos and current situation within UK education. Forest school has incrementally gained regular (although unofficial) prominence in mainstream UK education over the past 25 years or so. Although the concept of outdoor education as a desirable adjunct to children's educational experience has its historical roots in the widespread urbanisation of the nineteenth century (Knight, 2013; Leather, 2012) its delivery had historically been restricted to the periphery of organised education (such as class field trips, out-of-school clubs, short residential courses). So forest school both as a term and as a grassroots phenomenon in educational settings has relatively recent origins, dating from the mid-1990s onwards. Its subsequent rapid spread bears witness to the popularity and word-of-mouth influence of this child-led outdoor education programme. Forest school scholar Dr Mel McCree notes that many schools currently promote the forest school 'brand' in an attempt to attract more business or as part of their online presence (2019). This movement toward nature is happening even though the present educational ideology continually drives UK schools and teachers towards an ever-narrower focus on academic outcomes (most markedly so in England[2]).

So why does forest school retain such joyful, infectious influence? In the UK, forest school programmes have continued to increase exponentially from the very small number that existed in the 1990s (Mycock, 2020). Before attempting an answer, the term *forest school* itself firstly requires a brief definition. In the UK the label is widely and often informally used to describe outdoor woodland-based education programmes which encourage curiosity and independence, and with an emphasis on learner-initiated learning (Knight, 2011; Williams-Siegfredsen, 2012). Many commentators would also stipulate, or at least recommend, the presence of a qualified Forest School Leader (Forest School Association, 2019). Although not exhaustive or unique to forest school, the following elements when used in combination exemplify the ethos of this approach:

- the use of a woodland (often described as a 'wild') setting
- the children having freedom to explore
- regular participation over a significant period of time
- a high adult to child ratio
- a child-led approach to learning, scaffolded by the participating adults

(Knight, 2013).

Distilling the two key elements that distinguish forest school from other outdoor education experiences, it is possible to summarise two key features of the approach: a) a *long-term programme* of regular visits to a wooded area, characterised by b) an *exploratory pedagogical orientation*. But what is it about these two elements in combination that has had such a catalytic effect?

A personal case study/reflection

[2] At the time of writing the Education Policy Institute reports that Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland now emphasise a broad set of skills across different areas of learning in their new curriculums, while England maintains a strong focus on traditional subjects (Sibeta & Jerrim, 2021).

I begin with some personal observations drawn from my professional background as the facilitator of a long-term forest-based programme within the context of a mainstream school. My experience of forest school-type programmes dates from my years as a classroom teacher working with four- and five-year-olds, leading a weekly visit to the local woodland. Since then, a sideways move into higher education and doctoral study has afforded me the opportunity to explore the impact of such programmes in more depth. Originally, I was introduced to the forest school ethos via an outdoor learning project devised by a local educational charity (Sightlines Initiative, 2020). I and a team of other adults (teachers, teaching assistants and parents) facilitated a weekly half-day trip to the woods for our two reception classes, throughout the whole year and in every kind of weather. We were fortunate that we were located close to an inner-city woodland within walking distance: a small wooded and wild area in a local park. During this time, and despite various obstacles thrown up by the weather in north-east England, other curricular demands on our time, and the sheer effort involved in getting two reception classes dressed and booted for a visit to the woods, there was an overall feeling (shared by staff and parents alike) that this was a uniquely valuable programme for the children involved. At the time these were my own 'gut feelings' about the impact of the programme:

- Conversations with children in the woods seemed more equitable
- The programme seemed to have a positive impact on children's language
- There was a sense of shared ownership and belonging to the space
- Problems and solutions seemed to arise naturally from a shared perspective
- We developed shared labels for spaces, objects, and games

It also changed our relationships with each other in ways which seemed difficult to quantify. My overriding feeling was that relationships were strengthened between adults and children and that these links translated back into the classroom. We all seemed to know each other better, and the difference was particularly striking in our conversations with those children who seemed ill at ease in the classroom space. In the outdoors, week by week, our dialogue both with each other (as a group) and in conversations about our wild space developed and deepened. The programme, and others like it, seems to offer children a qualitatively different relational experience from that which they experience in the school setting, even though (and if) the adults and peers with whom they interact were the same individuals whom they ordinarily met in the classroom. Forest school, it seems, has a powerful impact upon the way adults and children talk and relate with each other. To begin to explore the deeper reasons for this, I next examine attempts by researchers to pin down the hard-to-capture, 'butterfly-esque' nature of the experience, and I argue that traditional outcomes focused research approaches work less well than more exploratory methodologies which pay closer attention to children's real voices.

Insights from forest school research

Recent research has explored the nature of the forest school experience, and positive impacts of such programmes upon the children who participate have been documented extensively since its inception. However the extent to which research approaches listen closely to the *children's voices themselves* varies greatly. Many early impact studies focus on data generated by adult participants - their observations of the children's progress and development, for example. The word *impact* here aligns with the project evaluation approach; a model which has understandably characterised much early funded forest school research. One longitudinal impact study carried out in Wales and, subsequently, England has been particularly influential in communicating some potential benefits of forest school programmes for young children (Murray, 2003; Murray & O'Brien, 2005; O'Brien & Murray, 2006, 2007). Murray (2003), for example, assessed the impact of two forest school programmes in Wales using a participatory evaluation methodology. The author collated data from

anecdotal observations reported by the teachers who accompanied their pupils to the forest sessions into a pre-structured framework of themes. He found, for example, that "the recurring feedback from teachers and leaders involved with the projects was that of surprise at how exposure to the forest school concept had a visible effect on certain children's behaviour" (2003, p. 6). The positive impact of forest school sessions upon the participating children comes across strongly in such reports. These and similar studies frequently report qualitative data which suggest a range of positive impacts on children such as an increase in their confidence, a positive impact on language and communication, increased social skills, to name but a few (Murray and O'Brien, 2005). The scope of such findings is impressive. However the research outcomes relating to this, and other similar studies, have been described as suffering from both a vagueness in terms of detail and a rather all-encompassing range of topics, which render them potentially "common sense" findings (Blackwell and Pound, 2011, p. 143). The reasons for this may be related to research approaches that silence children's voices.

It may be argued that the role of the researcher and participants in setting out a template for evidence gathering also sets fixed parameters for what is deemed worthy of investigation. This may have the effect of limiting researchers' understanding to a set of pre-conceived assumptions.[3] So a focus on adult-generated outcomes may lead us away from a truer understanding of what it is that makes forest school especially powerful. As the author of an early evaluation report acknowledges, quantifiable reasons for the transformational effect of forest school are hard to discern using traditional measures:

"Most people who have had anything to do with forest school agree that there is something special about this radical approach to teaching. They see remarkable changes in the behaviour of those children who do not perform as well in traditional classroom environments; they blossom in Forest School. Sometimes the transformations are astounding, and yet, the existing academic tests tell less than half of the story" (Murray, 2003, p. 8).

An outcomes-based adult-oriented evaluation approach, although pragmatic, may be fundamentally unsuited to capturing this particular kind of 'special-ness'. One might argue that this approach fits the 'business model' of schooling somewhat better than the more holistic forest school programme it aims to describe. And it is intriguing that even these studies that aim to *measure* the outcomes of forest school, regularly report that the practice of forest school engenders a "special" emotional energy (Knight, 2013); that "something special" happens to the children who participate in the sessions (Murray, 2003, p. 8). In an outcomes-based, adult oriented research model these 'special' outcomes must ultimately, elusively, remain invisible. Something more is going on here. However, it has proved difficult to define what it is about the unique impact of the forest school programme that acts so powerfully upon its participants. What seems to make forest school so special may be linked to the particular context of pedagogical approach combined with regular visits to a wild place; however this quasi-vitalistic confluence is severely underexplored by research which has been

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[3] Early forest school sponsors and supporters included British social and economic think-tank *new economics foundation* (*nef*) (New Economics Foundation, 2019) and the Forest Education Initiative in Wales (Murray, 2003); *nef* in collaboration with Forest Research (an executive government agency sponsored by the Forestry Commission) in England (Murray & O'Brien, 2005); and Forestry Commission Scotland (then a sub-department of the Forestry Commission Great Britain) (Borradaile, 2006). The predominant orientation of early forest school studies may be described as situated within the conceptual framework of 'evaluation' rather than 'research'. This is clearly a necessary step for the evaluation of given initiatives which involve funding. However Stronach and Morris (1994) warn that commissioned evaluations risk becoming 'conformative' (in the sense of conforming to existing norms and expectations) as they give undue weight to the perceptions of the programme participants (in this case, the *adult* participants).

described as "show-and-tell reports populated with cherry-picked evaluation quotations" (Hawxwell et al., 2019, p. 9). Such methodologies neaten up the messy transformational potential of forest school and force it into measurable impact 'boxes' which fit more happily within the discourse of business model schooling. Children's voices seem to have been somewhat lost in the attempts described above to evaluate the impact of such programmes. Here, then, I exemplify two studies that engage more successfully with the authentic voices of the children themselves who participate in forest school sessions.

In the first example, Coates and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) present findings that position children as the active agents rather than the passive participants of the forest school experience. Their research approach aimed to listen closely to children's accounts of their own experiences, rather than limiting data to practitioner and parental perspectives. They subsequently developed a child-focused, exploratory approach to data generation, carrying out one-to-one semi-structured interviews with two groups of school children (aged 4-5 and 9-10) following their participation in a six-week forest school programme. The authors aimed to amplify children's voices using a phenomenological approach. In this way each child's subjective experience became the exploratory focus for the study, rather than the adults' interpretations of the programme's impact. Significantly, the categories indicated positive outcomes that the *children themselves* (rather than the teachers) felt that they obtained from the forest school sessions, and these differ from the usual generic reported outcomes for forest school. This suggests that perhaps, although the thematic analysis was necessarily carried out by the adult researchers, this was a valid attempt to really listen to what children themselves felt about the programme. The thematic categories developed by the study authors (and subsequent sub-categories) were 'Break from Routine' (being outside, freedom and choice) 'Learning through Play' (being creative, being physically active and managed risk) and 'Collaboration and Teamwork' (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019, p. 27). All these themes stem from the children's own perspectives; in other words, what forest school *offered* them rather than the perceived learning or developmental impact it had *upon* them. For example, children's comments in the 'Break from Routine' category revealed their (mainly) positive feelings about the freedom and autonomy offered by the sessions. This same concept of autonomy has also been explored by Barrable and Arvanitis (2019) who propose that children being able to choose their own activities independently links strongly to powerful concepts of self-authorship. They maintain that in the forest, "[autonomy] is not simply conceptualized as negative freedom, that is freedom from external interference, but especially as positive freedom, that is actively making meaningful choices" (Barrable & Arvanitis, 2019, p. 43). Forest school, for these children, presented a stark contrast to the strictures imposed by the classroom environment. This qualitative data goes some way towards uncovering children's own nuanced experiences of the forest school programme; in other words, towards hearing their own voices.

A second example touches upon reasons why the forest school setting may allow children's voices to be heard so clearly. Using an even more immediate approach to qualitative spoken-word data generation, Richardson and Murray (2017) studied language use in the natural environment by recording children's talk during outdoor forest school sessions. The study compared children's lexical diversity across three settings (indoor classroom, outdoor classroom, and forest school) using a qualitative approach featuring voice recorders in wearable backpacks. The authors found that children's lexical diversity was richer in the natural environment. For example, they noted a higher verb usage score (i.e. a greater diversity of verbs used) and speculate that this reflects the higher preponderance of action focused play. Children in the forest school setting recorded a greater frequency of exclamation usage, in terms of grammatical sentence structure. The authors link this finding with concepts of children's greater freedom and self-expression. They also reported that adult/child talk in the wild natural environment was of a different quality, even when including the talk in the school-based outdoor area: "Interactions between adults and children [in the forest] were noticeably different from those in Cases 1 and 2 [the indoor and school based outdoor settings]"

(2017, p. 462). This observation perhaps links to the concept of a different relational hierarchy between the adult and child participants in a fully natural setting, also reported by Coates and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) Overall, these results highlight the potential for further research into children's recorded talk as a lens through which to uncover their experiences and feelings at forest school. And, in addition, it seems to support the notion that forest school offers a unique interaction space within which children and adults may make mutual meaning. These approaches to investigating children's experiences of forest school which foreground their own voices may bring us closer to a true understanding of the power and impact of the practice.

Towards a pedagogy of listening

Here I move from research approaches distinguished by their attention to children's voices, to good pedagogical practice which echoes the same commitment. The Forest School Association states that each programme should have "a structure which is based on the observations and collaborative work between learners and practitioners" (Forest School Association, 2019). Thus, finding ways not only to observe but also closely *document* children's voices can and should be part of forest school practice. Here I draw inspiration from the well-established approach championed by the early years school system in Reggio Emilia (Edwards et al., 2011). As I have described, a fundamental *pedagogy of relationships and listening* distinguishes the work of the teacher-researchers in the Reggio Emilia pre-schools. And the work is notable for the range of *voices* that have status within the collaborative school space. An influential theory came into being early in the development of the Reggio community of practice which acts as an assertion of the rights of children to communicate in ways outside and beyond the only two *official* languages of education: speaking and writing (*ibid*). This *hundred languages of children* theory challenges the privileged position of these traditional languages and refers to "the different ways children (human beings) represent, communicate and express their thinking" (Vecchi, 2010, p. 9). Children may express their thoughts, ideas, and emotions in a myriad of different ways – through "action, emotion, expressiveness , and iconic and symbolic representations" (Rinaldi, 2006). Educators consider all these voices valid and valuable, and this ethos translates naturally to the forest school environment. Children in the forest seem freer to express themselves in a myriad of ways outside of the official voices of schooling. And adults may feel more at ease with working collaboratively with children outside the confines of the school classroom. Within this model educators consider themselves as co-researchers with children, and habits usually confined to field researchers (continuous notetaking, photographic records, detailed observations) can become everyday practice in the forest. "When teachers make listening and documentation central to their practice, they transform themselves into researchers" (Rinaldi, 2011, p. 244). Close documentation is the practice that enables Reggio educators to examine and question their own theories, and those of their children, via a co-creative generative process. Educators observe, document, and make sense of the children's ideas. This pedagogical practice, a process that Reggio educators describe as "visible listening" (Rinaldi, 2011, p. 236), raises the profile of the children's voices.

In the UK forest setting, I and my colleagues were able to record and document the children's fascinations and questions that arose in the woods in a similar way. We used notepads, cameras, and iPads to collect information, children's talk, and our own impressions about the ongoing child-led projects in the woods. We then used these multimedia notes to inspire and connect with the learning back in the classroom. A full commitment to this practice entails constant ongoing work on the part of the educators to record the children's thinking – using notes, videos, pictures, and records of children's work. This is no dry attempt at qualitative data generation to be later assessed at arm's length against attainment targets, but a living, noisy, discursive collaboration which takes place in a learning community of children and adults. Reggio scholar Carlina Rinaldi notes that the sharing of theories is an extremely important facet of the reciprocal relationship between the learning

participants. These theories reveal "how children think, question, and interpret reality, and their own relationships with reality and with us" (Rinaldi, 2011, p. 234). In other words, listening *to each other* is the basis for any learning relationship. For other educators, the majority of whom work in more curriculum-driven settings less oriented towards children's voices, just a small amount of documentation practice can help to orient all the adults involved in forest school towards a pedagogy of listening. This could also include visual mapping, giving children cameras and allowing them to map the space etc. This child-led practice enables the creation of documentation that can be shared with and added to by the children. By sharing documentation, rather than anonymously recording, "the children discover that they exist and can emerge from anonymity and invisibility, seeing that what they say and do is important" (Rinaldi, 2011, p. 242). In such ways we may build upon the potential of the forest space to create practice that stems from and supports children's own thoughts and ideas.

A further value of the close documentation described above is that it gives us a tool with which to discard our own prejudices and internal noise in favour of a more objective attention. By *noise*, I mean that barrage of information and influence which informs the contextual, cultural, formal, historical and popular backdrop of our mental landscape (Frankel, 2018). In other words, even though we still bring our own prejudices to the things we consider to be worth documenting, the act of distancing ourselves from the action via close observation, and then sharing this with each other (as an adult team), allows us to move closer to the real issues *as the children see them*. This buttresses our own confidence to act in supportive ways which open up rather than close down meaningful dialogic relationships. I have previously described in detail (Hume, 2014) an episode when we, as adults, struggled to connect the children's ongoing interest in death and dying in the woods with the curriculum focused work going on back in the early years classroom. One of the children's main fascinations was sparked when they found a beautiful, yet very dead, bird in the woods. In this instance the mental noise from our imagined reactions of parents and colleagues weighed heavily on us. We were concerned that the topic would become too upsetting for the children, or disturbing to the parents, and wondered to what extent we should follow the children's interests. Being in the woodland space somehow gave us internal permission to give the children time to consider, talk about and explore this find. There is no doubt that, had we found it in the school playground in the middle of a busy lunchtime, the bird's corpse would have been unceremoniously disposed of. As it was, we listened closely to the children's thoughts and documented these with written notes and photographs. Again, the value of close documentation was apparent here. As a staff we had to make ongoing professional decisions about how to work with the children's various ideas, and we discovered that careful listening in the woods allowed us to more clearly grasp what big questions the children were exploring. We were able to discard our adult prejudices and listen to the children's thoughts and ideas, thus facilitating more interesting and meaningful study.

Thus forest school sessions may offer an open window into a new way of working which foregrounds children's voices. Rinaldi notes that listening always takes place within a "listening context", and it is here that the context of forest school stands out as a useful setting for this kind of attention. "Listening removes the individual from anonymity" (Rinaldi, 2011, p. 234). In other words, we can see and hear children's most authentic selves, outside of the artificial constraints of the classroom, where they often feel ill at ease. This is not to say that close listening isn't possible in any other context (including classrooms), but it is to suggest that it *seems easier* in the woods. In the forest space the lofty relational hierarchies are flattened, almost horizontal. Physically, the teachers get down on the ground with the children. The topics of discussion are fluid and natural. Everyone is more at ease. The Reggio ideal of valuing learning that is 'collective, collaborative and democratic' (Rinaldi, 2011, p. 234) feels attainable here. Visibly and sensorially situated outside of the hierarchies of the school building (the arranged chairs, the big teacher's desk, the walls delineating the learning areas) all space is equal in the woods.

Integrating forest school into institutional contexts

Having outlined some introductory thoughts about the power and potential of forest school as a context to amplify children's voices, I now consider its positioning within a hierarchical institutional context, using education as an example. The physical and pedagogical context of forest school presents a peculiarly democratic interactional natural space within which a dialogue amongst equals may begin to blossom. Forest school impacts powerfully on those teachers who experience it, as witnessed by its exponential, grassroots spread in schools. And the popular reach of the practice may be viewed almost as a reaction against the dominant educational discourse in the UK, that I have described as the 'business model'. The child-led, exploratory ethos of the forest school movement (Forest School Association, 2019) sits somewhat uneasily within the current UK education policy framework in which continued measurable progress is expected for all (Waite & Goodenough, 2018). It occupies an unstructured position at a time when education operates within the strict overarching reach of an outcomes focused educational discourse (Sackville-Ford, 2019; Waite et al., 2016). The overarching ethos of forest school (despite the 'school' nomenclature) sets it apart from the current hegemonic ideological framework and promises a qualitatively different relational experience. Teachers may therefore feel liberated from the constraints of the school curriculum and freer to let their individual judgements guide the forest school session. Adults and children can listen to each other in a potentially less hierarchical space. Forest school perhaps appeals to those individuals who work within the education system but who "can see the benefits of enacting education differently" (Sackville-Ford, 2019, p. 53). In a similar manner to the Reggio Emilia ethos, learning in the forest school model is a practice of co-constructing meaning with the child rather than the delivery of pre-planned learning objectives. (Indeed it may be considered as part of the lineage of the more holistic, alternative model of schooling.) Forest school practice therefore offers a quiet challenge to institutional practice not just in terms of the relationship between the child and the curriculum, but the very notion of the outcomes focused, top-down model of schooling itself. When embedded in an institutional context, forest school practice, if it stays true to its original ethos, amplifies children's voices and allows child-centred practice to develop from within.

The opportunity that forest school provides to shake up relational hierarchies and amplify children's voices may also bring its own challenges. Here I raise the question of whether an amplified children's voice is something that all adults necessarily want to hear. In education, for example, teachers have a professional responsibility to lead children through a pre-planned curriculum. Systems, routines, and plans imply predictable control. Adults may therefore perhaps be fearful of letting go of the reins in the woods, with visions of children galloping into the unknown without the guiderails of a lesson plan. (The etymological roots of *curriculum* strongly imply keeping on track.) One less-than-ideal solution to the tensions that exist between the forest school ideal of child-led exploratory learning and measurable academic outcomes is to dilute the ethos of forest school and create a version of the practice that is closer to the classroom-based model of school. In diluted iterations of practice, educators may adopt the forest school label without any true investment in the ethos, either in practical arrangement (freedom from the lesson plan) or in the pedagogical, child-centred approach. Commentators have criticised such versions of forest school as being inferior to the real thing in the manner of the much-maligned butter substitute. McCree (2019, p. 4) distinguishes playfully between '*Full Fat Forest School'* and more compromised and even purely tokenistic versions of forest school which she labels '*FS Lite'* and '*FS Ultra Lite'*. Tokenistic approaches to forest school would involve the predominance of measurable objectives and assessments against the curriculum. Blackwell and Pound (2011) raise similar concerns about the dilution of the original aims and the associated processes which may occur when practitioners lack genuine understanding of the forest school ethos. They raise concerns about the 'lesson plan' model of forest school practice which seems to replicate classroom routines and hierarchy structures in the woods. "Any dilution of aims and processes may mean that claims about outcomes are compromised" (2011, p. 136). In other words, if

it isn't an authentic version of forest school, it may have a lesser or even negative impact upon the children's experience. This point is echoed by McCree who warns of the *negative feedback loop* which may be set up if forest school is done badly. Any real, meaningful impact then becomes negligible. She cites a case study where forest school was perceived by other school staff as just "rolling in the mud" with the teacher "stood around gossiping" (2019, p. 14). Thus poor forest school practice runs the risk of being either abandoned or turned into something safer and more school-like. Leather notes that although research evidence strongly supports the value of play-based, exploratory learning, in forest school "there continue to be problems demonstrating to parents and other professionals that children are learning when they are playing" (2012, p. 5). This issue may explain some of the occasional disconnect between forest school ethos and practice (Waite & Goodenough, 2018). It may also in part be responsible for the fact that many researchers, either consciously or unconsciously, highlight the more overt links to the school curriculum when expounding the benefits of forest school. In 'lite' iterations of forest school research, a theoretical nod is made to child-centred constructivist theories of learning, and researchers move on to quantifiable outcomes. Ultimately, when forest school practice focuses on narrow, curriculum-based outcomes, it runs the risk of compromising and curtailing the very freedom and voice that it promises to children.

Future thoughts: widening the influence of forest school practice

Forest school is a potentially (joyfully) disruptive practice, which forces us to pay closer attention to children's voices and examine our traditional assumptions about established roles and relationships. In this chapter I have drawn upon examples from the mainstream education system as it is a personal and professional institutional milieu with which I am familiar. And, as I have shown, it is within everyday schooling that forest school has recently begun to work its joyfully disruptive magic in a widespread manner. However the potential exists for this practice to inform any setting in which children and adults work together. Forest school scholar Sue Knight notes that current practice may arguably be viewed as being situated not just in education, but also in the wider disciplines of health and social care (Knight, 2016). As a starting point, there is emerging evidence that forest school may act positively on children and young people with wider social, emotional and behavioural difficulties which prevent them from attending mainstream school (Tiplady, 2018). In this project, forest school sessions were used as a targeted behavioural intervention which met both mental health and education focused agendas. Child-led practice encouraged children and young people to develop relationships and "to internalise positive self-narratives" (2018, p. 6). In terms of wider impact, there was evidence that forest school was successful in "facilitating conversations between children and young people and their families about school" (2018, p. 4). It may therefore be the case that the respectful listening practices that characterise forest school pedagogy can exert a positive influence on a wider range of adult-child contexts. Forest school, which currently occupies an intriguing, almost subversive place within the UK education system, may offer novel opportunities for wider child-centred practice to flourish.

For children and adults, accepted hierarchical relationships are cast in a different light in the forest setting, and this can engender positive benefits for the development of child centred practice. In the outdoor setting children may propose, and adults may acknowledge and fearlessly accept, challenges to the normal status quo. In an education setting, Coates and Pimlott-Wilson (2019) found that forest school disrupted usual relational hierarchies and noted that, in the forest, the children's peers, rather than the adults, were often framed as the 'first responders' when dealing with any problems. For example, the children would typically call upon each other, rather than the adult, to resolve disputes. And the evident relaxation of hierarchical roles had a subsequent, positive effect upon the classroom environment. "At FS [forest school] …their teacher was a participant, engaging in the play activity alongside the children, making her more relatable back in the classroom" (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019, p. 32). They also described a developing critical awareness regarding the

distinction between work and play in the indoor/outdoor environments. Following the forest school sessions, children viewed the classroom differently; the Year 4 children became acutely aware of the limitations placed on their autonomy by the classroom environment. They used words such as *stressed* and *trapped* when describing their classroom experience in contrast to their forest school sessions. Forest school allowed them to show their authentic selves. One child reported:

"[At Forest School] you don't have to work and you don't have to be trapped inside – you can be your normal self outside. The thing I like about Forest School is basically that *you can be your normal self every single time*." (Coates & Pimlott-Wilson, 2019, p. 8) (my italics)

Thus forest school allows children and the adults who care for them to quickly become genuine co-participants in a shared space. This can usurp or disrupt the dualistic hierarchical relationship that often exists within more formal settings. The establishment of a neutral space is a powerful thing. In this space, children can really talk, and adults can really listen. Forest school practice (in its true original ethos) creates powerful opportunities to hear children's voices when practices are designed with and alongside children themselves. The woods, it seems, belong to everyone, and everyone there has a voice. The challenge is now to discover whether its green subversive influence can grow and spread to inform wider institutional practices.

Conversation starter

How, then, could forest school practice offer the potential to enrich and inform child-centred practices within multi-disciplinary children's institutional contexts - not just in mainstream teaching, but also in the fields of, for example, special needs education, welfare, health, and social care?

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