

What's so special about forest school? Exploring practice within a new materialist/posthuman paradigm.

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This paper presents a new materialist/posthuman conceptual paradigm as a way to explore the special nature of forest school. It proposes that conventional approaches to forest school research may leave less-measurable aspects of the practice unexplored. Forest school research is often conducted within well-established qualitative research traditions. Is it possible that researchers and practitioners *feel* that there is something very special about forest school but have at their disposal only the tools and underpinning onto-epistemological frameworks of conventional educational research? One may argue that this is a position that prioritises the experience of forest school as it is *constructed by the humans* who are present (Leather, 2012). This traditional research paradigm contains a conceptual separation between the humans and the forest itself. And yet, recent environmental philosophies and scientific discoveries propose an undoing of this separation between human and nature (Tsing, 2015). If we are all made of the same stuff existing in *sympoesis* (Haraway, 2016) – a collective self-organising force - then might it not be the case that the forest-place itself (the 'matter' of forest school) should merit at least an equal research significance as the humans? Other recent theoretical perspectives align with this *turn to matter* – where matter is seen as having agency – and these perspectives include philosophy (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) philosophy/physics (Barad, 2007) and feminism/posthumanism (Braidotti, 2019; Haraway, 2016). I draw upon these new materialist/posthuman ideas to establish a theoretical research position which aims to find new ways to develop the evidence base to truly understand the 'specialness' of forest school. I present ethnographic forest school data and give an account of some of the benefits and also the challenges of moving beyond traditional *ways of seeing* forest school. I suggest new ways to develop the evidence base to truly understand the 'specialness' of the practice.

Keywords: posthumanism; new materialism; matter; sympoesis; research; agency.

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