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Forest School and its effect on the community: A brief review

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Abstract

Forest School and similar outdoor nature-based education programmes have been spreading across different parts of the world. In this short manuscript, we draw on the literature to shed light on the demarcating characteristics of this distinctive form of outdoor education. Furthermore, we expand on the work by Dabaja (2022a; 2022b) to briefly introduce not only the impact of this educational concept on the involved children, but also the way it affects the educators and their pedagogies as well as the dynamics among the children's family members and their connection to the outdoors. We then conclude by proposing a set of research-related recommendations to explore the full potentiality of the Forest School concept.

Keywords: Forest School, outdoor education, impact, educators, community

1. Introduction

Ever since it was brought from the Scandinavian context into the UK toward mid 1990 by a staff from Bridgwater College, Somerset (Maynard, 2007), Forest School has been gaining ground all over the world (Knight, 2016). In this paper, we draw on the literature to concisely demarcate the distinctive features of the Forest School concept. We then summarize the outcomes of reviews of the literature on the impact of Forest School on the involved children (Dabaja, 2022a; 2022b), before presenting what was proposed in terms of its effect on the educators and their pedagogies as well as on the children's families. We conclude by proposing a set of research-related recommendations aiming at constructing a deeper understanding of this

promising educational concept and explore its full potentiality.

2. Demarcating Forest School

Cree and McCree (2013) suggested that "establishing a collective idea of [Forest School] practice undergoes continuing debate" (p. 33). In fact, there is an ongoing discussion on what Forest School is and should be (Knight, 2018; Leather, 2018; Waite & Goodenough, 2018). Still, based on the literature, Forest School can be perceived as a form of outdoor education through which children frequently visit a specific natural place for an extended period across the seasons to engage in a multitude of outdoor activities. In this definition, the natural place can consist of "urban greenspace[s], playgrounds, forests, creeks, prairies, mountains, shoreline, and tundra" (Child & Nature Alliance of Canada [CNAC], n.d., para.

1) in addition to adapted desert settings (Takriti, Wright, Alhosani, & Schofield, 2020).

Although the term “Forest School” is prevalently used worldwide, especially in the UK (Forest School Association, n.d.), other names are also employed to refer to outdoor nature-based educational programs that adopt similar philosophy. Among these terms are *Udeskole* in Denmark (Waite, Bølling, & Bentsen, 2016); *I Ur och Skur* (Rain or Shine) in Sweden (Robertson, 2008); *Waldkindergarten* in Germany (Kane & Kane, 2011); *Bush Kinder* (Elliott & Chancellor, 2014) and *Bush School* (Cumming & Nash, 2015) in the Australian context, *Forest/Nature School* in Canada (CNAC, n.d.), and *Desert School* in the UAE (Takriti et al., 2020). Beside adopting different names, leaders and facilitators of this outdoor nature-based education form, from different parts of the world, have adjusted the implementation of their programs “to integrate better with their own cultural and geographical frameworks” (Knight, 2018, p. 21). This indicates the paramount influence of the context in which Forest School is being delivered (Knight, 2018; Leather, 2018; Waite et al., 2016).

3. The Forest School Impact on Children

The literature review conducted by Dabaja (2022a; 2022b) revealed that Forest School can help promote the children’s:

- a. *Social and cooperative skills* which “refers to the children’s ability to work cooperatively, communicate effectively, behave respectfully, and show empathy towards one another” (Dabaja, 2022a, p. 646).
- b. *Physical skills* that allude to “the Forest School impact on the children’s (a) gross motor skills that can be related to certain activities, such as running, jumping, and climbing; (b) fine motor skills (dexterity) that are relatable to activities in which the children use small muscles and usually accompanied with eye coordination (e.g., building structures and using tools); (c) physical stamina or endurance, and/or (d) balance” (Dabaja, 2022a, pp. 647-648).
- c. *Learning performance and cognitive skills* which is related to the children’s “(a) level of concentration/focus, motivation, interest to

learn, and autonomy; (b) curriculum related knowledge; and (c) creativity, imagination, and construction/designing skills” (Dabaja, 2022b, p. 739).

- d. *Emotional and mental wellbeing* pertaining to the children’s “behavioural conducts as well as their emotional state and overall mental health” (Dabaja, 2022b, p. 741).
- e. *Risk management skills* which allude to the children’s “behaviours toward assessing and dealing with risky situations” (Dabaja, 2022b, p. 742).
- f. *Environmental awareness and sense of belonging* that is associated to the children’s “better understanding of the natural site and nature in general as well as through their improved sense of belonging, pride, and positive attitude towards the natural surroundings” (Dabaja, 2022b, p. 743), and
- g. *Self-esteem and self-confidence*. This Forest School impact mainly pertained to helping shy and introverted children to come out of their shells and confidently participate in various outdoor activities alongside their peers (Dabaja, 2022b).

4. The Forest School Impact on the Educators and their Pedagogy

In this paper, we aim to highlight what the literature has proposed in terms of the effect of engaging in Forest School, and similar outdoor nature-based programs, on the mainstream classroom and early years’ teachers who were facilitating Forest School sessions. In this regard, Harper (2017) suggested that “[p]edagogically, [Forest School] disrupts the traditional role of teacher in school” (p. 321). This was echoed in the narratives of some educators who, at Forest School and similar programs, tended to perceive themselves as facilitators (Murphy, 2018) of the children’s learning through encouraging them to explore and investigate (Elliot, Eycke, Chan, & Müller, 2014). In fact, facilitating learning was emphasised by a group of experienced Forest School practitioners as paramount for a conducive child-led learning that underpins the Forest School philosophy (Harris, 2017; 2018). One of them stated, “the role of forest school

leaders is to encourage . . . to go with the flow, with what the child finds interesting, rather than narrowly control what the child must do [as in the directed learning of the classroom]" (Harris, 2018, p. 228).

Disrupting the conventional classroom approach to learning requires an active role from the schoolteachers who aspire engaging their students in Forest School. This agentic role was underscored by Kemp (2020) who noted a "double act of resistance" of some teaching professionals while responding to the "ideological tension" between Forest School and mainstream education (p. 377). According to the author, engaging with Forest School and its alternative pedagogy can be viewed as the first act of resistance where teachers "can resist or subvert the mainstream standards agenda" (p. 377) while the second act of resistance consisted of the teachers' adaptation of Forest School to fit their needs. Comparably, Whincup et al. (2021) reported how a group of UK primary school teachers-Forest School leader participants "were finding ways and means of being agentic, overcoming challenges and [...] trying to persuade others of the pedagogical value of [Forest School] and outdoor learning in their schools" (p. 10).

Finally, it is noteworthy that engaging in Forest School was suggested to play a role in strengthening the relationship between the educators and their students (Cumming & Nash, 2015; Davis & Waite, 2005).

5. The Transcending Effect of Forest School on the Children's Families

The effect of Forest School appears to transcend the Forest School site boundaries to impact, in a way or another, the children's parents and families. For instance, one mother reported that Forest School had positively influenced the older brother of a Forest School child who, due to his sister's experience, began to show more interest in the outdoors and even wanted to attend Forest School sessions. As a result, the entire family started to make frequent visits to the woodland and bring along all the things usually taken to Forest School, such as food and first aid kit (Murray & O'Brien, 2005). Similar outcome was also outlined by three Forest School practitioners who reported that children were visiting the Forest School sites with

their parents and families to, among other activities, discover the places, go on a picnic, and play games together (Harris, 2017). As a result of similar outdoor visits, one parent reported "an affective 'closeness in sharing peace and wonder in nature' with her child" (Elliot & Chancellor, 2014, p. 50). In fact, parents' involvement in the Bush Kinder program, through visiting the natural site and sharing knowledge and stories, appeared to strengthen their relations with not only their children, but also the Forest School staff (Elliott & Chancellor, 2014). These instances could be indicative of how involving children in Forest School programs has the potential to help bring families together and spread the love and appreciation for the outdoor natural environment among all community members.

6. Concluding Thoughts

Forest School appears to impact the involved community members in different ways. The literature proposes that Forest School can promote the children's social and cooperative skills, physical skills, learning performance and cognitive skills, emotional and mental wellbeing, risk management skills, environmental awareness, self-esteem and self-confidence, and sense of belonging. Furthermore, educators who partake in Forest School tend to perceive themselves as facilitators of the learning by giving the children a wider space to explore and investigate which disrupts the traditional role of the classroom teacher as the source of knowledge. Also, the literature proposes that the effect of Forest School can transcend the program boundaries to reach the families of the children by, for instance, promoting family nature outings and reinforcing the bonds among their members. Despite these positive outcomes, the Forest School realm can benefit from further research (Knight, 2018). For instance, aligning with Dabaja (2022a; 2022b), we contend that more studies are needed to examine the potential impact of Forest School on specific aspects of the children's development, such as their social skills, self-esteem, self-confidence, physical skills, environmental attitude, love of nature (biophilia), nature connectedness, resilience, risk taking, and cognitive skills, to name a few. Also, it would be informative to investigate the long-term effect of Forest School on

the children through, either longitudinal or cross-sectional studies. Since culture plays a key role in shaping the children's outdoor learning (Sandseter, 2009; Yilmaz-Uysal, 2020; Yilmaz & Olgan, 2017) and Forest School is influenced by the context in which it is implemented, we suggest conducting comparative international studies that explore the practice and impact of Forest School in different locations.

Moreover, it proves constructive to further investigate the impact of engaging in Forest School on the involved classroom educators and children's families, such as examining how Forest School affects the teaching approach of the educators as well as their mental and physical states. In addition, it will be insightful to thoroughly explore the ripple effect (Murray & O'Brien, 2005) of the children's Forest School engagement on their parents and families, including their connection with, and attitude toward, the natural environment.

To conclude, societies nowadays are facing a multitude of significant problems. For instance, human activities on the planet have been contributing to the rise in global temperature which, in turn, has led to devastating consequences, such as the frequent occurrence of extreme weather conditions (e.g., heatwaves, heavy precipitations, tropical cyclones), the melting of the polar ice sheets, and the rise of sea levels (IPCC, 2021). Also, people in this era are increasingly adopting a sedentary lifestyle (Kandola, 2018), including children (Almeida, Rato, & Dabaja, 2021; Louv, 2008), which is having a deleterious effect on their physical wellbeing and mental health. In contrast, Forest School was suggested to promote the children's socio-emotional, cognitive, and physical wellbeing as well as their connection to and understanding of the natural environment. Knight (2016) went even farther to argue that "Forest School exemplifies ways of being in and with nature that are essential for the health of the individuals, society and the planet" (p. 1). Thus, and based on this brief review, it proves prudent to further explore the potentiality of this educational concept to benefit not only the children, but also the wider community toward preparing healthy and knowledgeable individuals who are inclined to tackle global environmental challenges.

7. Disclosure statement

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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