

BOYS and **GIRL'S** reflections
of a 6-week
FOREST SCHOOL
programme



As part of my degree in Adventure Education, I was required to spend a year working in the sector - I decided to spend my year working as a teaching assistant at a local primary school. In my placement year I also wanted to undertake my Forest Schools (level 3) training. Already believing in the philosophy of Forest Schools and wanting to be able to be a teacher with an 'outdoor edge', I knew this was for me.

During Forest Schools sessions, children are encouraged to follow their own interests and explore their natural surroundings. At the beginning of each session, a taught skill is introduced to the group. In my sessions skills such as whittling, fire building, shelter building and coppicing were introduced and then children were free to take part or pursue their own interests. I lead the Year 4 class (12 children at a time) for six weeks. Once a week the children would visit local woodland for a morning. There was no real rationale for choosing the year 4's other than I was the TA in their class during the week and knew the children well. After the six weeks had finished, I interviewed all the children and asked them to reflect on their time in a Forest School.

I wanted to use the interviews to evaluate my own teaching and learning, to see what the children got out of Forest Schools and if it had any impact on them. While reviewing the recorded interviews it was quite clear that boys and girls had very different perceptions and opinions on their time in a Forest School. The purpose of this article is to highlight them briefly and try to explore the answers they gave.

After watching the videos back and noticing this difference in gender perceptions of Forest Schools, I attempted to turn to literature to investigate. I was unable to find any research on gender differences at Forest Schools. I therefore, had to look at studies that investigated male and female perceptions of nature, connectedness to nature and biophilia. I see these as some of the important elements of Forest Schools, and relevant to the themes mentioned in the children's reflections.

In various studies that looked at gender differences in environmentalism I found that women report stronger attitudes and behaviors towards the environment compared to men. This was found to be the case across age and race. It was found that females across most cultures are shaped by socialisation to have a stronger ethic of care, social responsibility and to be more compassionate and nurturing, whereas males are generally brought up to be competitive and autonomous (Arnocky and Stroink, 2010).

Research into biophilia or ecocentrism, comments that women are 'evolutionary programmed' to respond more positively to therapeutic interactions with natural settings (Kellert and Wilson, 1993). Males however, have been found to benefit more from being outside, as the environment allows them to take part in physical activities that they would be disciplined for indoors (Jacobsen, 2012).

The research presented draws a myriad of similarities in their findings, yet there are some flaws in methodology, for instance most research only took snap shots of children's experiences in the outdoors. The research also fails to investigate the role of the teacher/ facilitator/ outdoor leader in children's perceptions of nature. Instead it focused on biophobic parents perceptions of nature. All studies that looked at connectedness to nature used questionnaires that were either filled in online or indoors.

The piece of research aims to elaborate on children's views of outdoor education programmes such as Forest Schools using qualitative methods of data collection.

At the end of the six-week programme children were interviewed using a semi-structured interview. Children were interviewed outdoors in a wooded area in front of a video camera. They were given seven questions to answer, but were also encouraged to talk as much as they liked. There was no interviewer present, 17 boys and 14 girls took part in the interview.

- If you had to describe Forest Schools to a stranger, how would you explain it?
- Should all children take part in Forest Schools?
- What have you learnt to do at Forest Schools?
- Have you learnt anything about yourself at Forest Schools?
- Have you learnt anything about working with others at Forest Schools?
- Is there anything you would like to change about Forest Schools?
- Is there anything else you would like to say?

The answers collected from the children were listened to and themes identified. Figure 1, clearly shows that there was a difference between boys and girls in some of their answers. I will investigate the most contrasting answers given by the children.

Figure 1 (overleaf), Response to Forest Schools Themes.

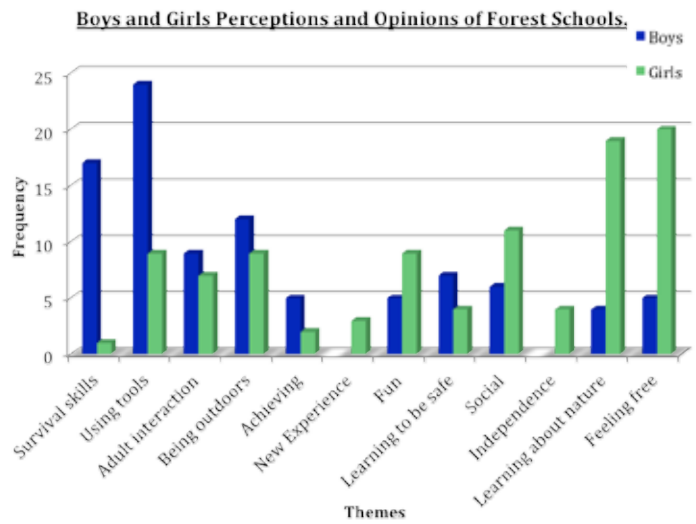
Boys mentioned 'survival skills' as an important facet of Forest Schools. This is an interesting theme that arose, as during my sessions not once were the children told that Forest Schools was about learning survival skills. A justification for this response could come from influences of TV personalities such as Bear Grylls. Due to the few female survival experts on TV it is not surprising that

girls mentioned it less. While reflecting upon this theme I questioned my own presence as the leader and what effect being a young male 'outdoorsy' role model can have on the boys in that group. It would be interesting to investigate the effect a male or female Forest Schools leader has on the children's perceptions.

Another contrasting theme was 'learning about nature'. It was mentioned less than five times by boys and nearly 20 times by the girls. Even though the children were doing exactly the same activities during Forest Schools, it was the girls who made a bigger connection with nature. A phrase that was also used by the girls only was 'learning with nature'; I chose to link this theme in with 'learning about nature'.

The choice of language is very curious as it may indicate that girls see the natural environment as more than an outdoor classroom but also as something they share a connection with. This deduction is supported by studies that measured individual's connectedness with nature, (Mayer and Frantz, 2004). There are many thoughts regarding females' affinity to nature; some believe that an ecofeminist-evolutionary standpoint can help to explain how this is part of the nurturing process that is developed through motherhood.

The last contrasting answer was 'feeling free', with girls expressing more affiliation. This answer is the most interesting. Possible explanations for this answer may be explained by females 'evolutionary programming' and that people have a biologically based need to feel connected with



the natural world. Further research is needed to explore this theme more, what does it mean to feel free while outdoors? Why is it that the girls mentioned this significantly more than the boys?

It was interesting to note that males mentioned 'feeling free' far less. This could be due to the interview style chosen. The boys all gave much shorter answers to their questions the boys tended to give less descriptive answers that were more physically expressive compared to girl's answers that are more narrative and linguistically longer. Boys chose to talk on average for 3:45 minutes, whereas girls chose to talk for an average of 5:12 minutes. Therefore boys may have mentioned feeling free eventually but found it hard to communicate this.

The interview style I chose could be seen to have both positive and negative qualities; with no interviewer children may have felt less intimidated. However, having no interviewer meant that some themes that should have been investigated further were not.

In conclusion this short piece of research revealed marked differences between the responses of boys and girls in relation to their Forest Schools experience. It prompts further research and a discussion of whether these differences can be explained through an evolutionary perspective. The responses highlight how powerful experiences in nature can be. I look forward to exploring these themes (and others) in more depth as I develop my own personal and facilitative philosophy of natural encounters.

On a final note, I would like to collect a variety of data from children of all ages who take part in Forest Schools. If you could help out with my final year dissertation, I would be very grateful if you could email me at Sgarbutt1@chi.ac.uk and we can discuss this further. ■



References:

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About the author:

Stuart Garbutt is in his final year of Adventure Education at the University of Chichester. He aims to take part in a teacher training programme next September and become a primary school teacher. He believes fully in the power of outdoor education and loves to teach outdoors, he looks forward to pursuing his career in education.

Photograph Main image by Elspeth Mason. Insert images from the author.