Boys and Girls reflections of a 6 week Forest School programme.
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Introduction

During my placement year I worked as a teaching assistant at a local primary school. In that year I undertook the Forest School Level 3 training. I lost the entire year of 6-12 children at a time for 6 weeks. Once a week the children would visit local woodland for a whole morning.

*Forest School is 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 local woodland environment.*

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**Forest Education Initiative (2010)**

During Forest Schools 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. Skills such as whistling, fire building, shelter building and cooking are introduced and then children were free to take part or pursue their own interests. After the 6 weeks had finished, I interviewed all the children and asked them to reflect on their time in a Forest School, boys and girls both gave very different answers. The purpose of this poster is to explore those themes.

Literature Review

There is very little research into gender differences at Forest Schools; therefore I found it necessary to draw upon research in similar domains. This literature review will look at studies that investigated male and female's perceptions of nature, connectedness to nature and bio-philia. I see these as some of the important elements of Forest Schools, and relevant to the themes mentioned in the children's reflections.

There is a great deal of research on the impact outdoor education programmes can have on children. A study of 12 children of kindergarten age found that male children of younger age have greater enjoyment of outdoor activities. (Allen, 2006) These results are supported by many other studies that have found males to be more active in outdoor activities than females (Kellert and Wilson, 1993; Denzin, 1977; Bem, 1981; Plumwood, 1993; and Deane-Drummond, 2004). The research on these programmes can be seen as a positive response to the vision of the Children of the 21st Century (Kellert and Wilson, 1993). There are many reasons for this. First of all, children are given opportunities to experience nature in a more natural setting than they could be found to benefit more from being outside, as the environment allows them to take part in physical activities that they would be discarded for indoors (Gil, 1997; Leupp, 2007; and Jacobson, 2012).

The research presented draws a myriad of similarities in their findings, yet there are some flaws in methodology; for instance Hynd's (2006) research only took up 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 bio-phobic parents perceptions of nature; all studies that looked at connectedness to nature used questionnaires and was either filled in offline or online.

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

Data Collection

At the end of the 6-week programme children were interviewed using a semi-structured interview style. Children were interviewed outdoors in a wooded area in front of a video camera. They were given six questions to answer, but were also encouraged to talk as much as they liked. There was no interviewer present. 17 boys and 14 girls were interviewed.

The data collected from the children at the end of the 6-week programme 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.

Boys mentioned ‘survival skills’ as an important facet of Forest Schools. During my Forest School 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. This is corroborated by Hyun's (2005) study that mentions the importance of gender doing (i.e. males taking part in outdoor physical activities such as camping and hiking). Due to the few female survival experts on TV there is no surprise girls mentioned it less.

A contrasting theme was learning about nature; it was mentioned less than 5 times by boys and 11 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. (Schultz, 2002; Van der Parra, 2004; and Mayer and Frantz, 2003) and that women reported a higher connectedness than males, which was also observed by Zelensky, Chua and Aldrich (2000). There are many other studies that indicate that females' affinity to nature; some researches take an ecocentric-evolutionary standpoint and believe that females' potential to become a mother means they are more connected to nature (Merchant, 1980; Plumwood, 1993; and Deane-Drummond, 2004). The biophilia hypothesis suggests that people have a biologically based need to feel connected with the natural environment (Kellert and Wilson, 1993; and that people have a biologically based need to feel connected with the natural environment (Kellert, 2005).

The last contrasting answer was ‘feeling free'; this answer is the most interesting. Possible explanations for this answer may be explained by females’ evolutionary programming (Kellert and Wilson, 1993), and that a biological basis needed to feel connected with the natural environment (Kellert, 2005).

It was interesting to note that males mentioned ‘feeling free’ far less. This could be due to the interview style; Hyun (2005) mentions that males tend to give shorter less descriptive answers that show more a combination of expression compared to girls answers that are more narrative and linguistically longer (Buckner and Fivush, 1998). It is supported by the data collected.

Boys chose to talk on average for 3.5 minutes, whereas girls chose to talk for an average of 5.1 minutes. Therefore boys may have mentioned feeling free eventually but found it hard to communicate this.

The interview style I chose may be seen as a positive and a negative, with no interviewer children were free to take part or pursue their own interests. After the 6 weeks had finished, I interviewed all the children and asked them to reflect on their time in a Forest School, boys and girls both gave very different answers. The purpose of this poster is to explore those themes.

Conclusion

Taking an exploratory prospective may be the right way to find a gender difference, but perhaps the power that Forest Schools has to provoke answers such as these should be investigated. Future research should focus on how the perceptions of nature, connectedness to nature and their inclination to be environmentally minded. There is certainly a difference in boys’ and girls’ answers and what they have found to be most important and what resonated with them. Further research should be conducted to understand the psychological and philosophical elements this and should be capitalised upon for a number of beneficial reasons. There are also implications for Forest School leaders who should possibly challenge boys’ perceptions of nature during Forest Schools programmes.

References


