

From Risky Play to Caring for Nature: Searching for Situated Decoding of Gender in Forest Schools

Abstract:

Research has shown that spending time in nature is rapidly disappearing from childhood. One way educators have attempted to counter this phenomenon is through the development of forest schools—woodland environments that emphasize risky play and child-centered learning. Within the forest school ethos, the coexistence of traditionally feminine- and masculine-coded practices creates a unique domain for gender expression. I am proposing to conduct a qualitative study exploring the ways that children and teachers communicate and experience gender in forest schools. While many aspects of nature-based education have been thoroughly researched, the impact forest schools may have on children's experiences with gender has not been studied. Based on Frödén's (2018) concept of 'situated decoding of gender,' I will examine the extent to which forest schools disrupt and complicate typical gender socialization and offer children more options for gender expression.

Personal Statement:

In high school, I spent every Sunday volunteering in the Science Playground, a room in the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI) for kids aged 0-6. The coolest part of my job was the dozens of hands-on activities the museum asked me to facilitate based off of studies in child development. I remember poring through the binders of supportive academic articles in my free time, excited to learn all about the inner workings of young kids' minds. Watching the findings of those studies manifest themselves in the museum's young visitors was easily my favorite part of my OMSI experience.

In junior year biology class, we were assigned an Independent Research Project (IRP). I didn't realize it at the time, but we were allowed almost unheard-of license to design and conduct our own independent study. Having discovered my passion for child development research through OMSI, I knew immediately that I wanted to devote this assignment to studying some topic within that field. Concurrent with my IRP, I was wrestling with other aspects of my personal identity. While I wouldn't find self-acceptance and certainty for another year or two, the middle of high school was when my struggle with my sexuality began. As I started to question my socialized straightness, topics related to gender became increasingly relevant in my life. Explorations of gender constructions, stereotypes, and expectations began to feel deeply important to my identity, even if I hadn't pinpointed exactly why they meant so much to me.

When given the opportunity to pursue research of my own, I wanted to find a way

to incorporate my academic interest in child development and my personal interest in gender. My project, titled “The Effect of Age on Children’s Tendency to Prefer Colors Stereotyped for Their Gender,” drew my passion for months. Not only did my experience collecting data and creating a poster presentation for student research conferences provide me intellectual stimulation through a personal passion, but the time I spent with the children involved in my study constantly reminded me of my love for teaching. When our work in school was over, I knew my interest in exploring how children experience and communicate gender had only just begun.

During my first spring semester at Elon, my Education and Society professor, Dr. Hollingsworth, brought us into the Loy Farm forest classroom during our unit on nature-based education. The lesson that Dr. Morrison facilitated outside kept me more engaged and curious than I had ever felt in a traditional classroom setting. We were allowed to be creative, risky, and independent in a way I hadn’t experienced in education since I was young. When I left class that day, one question burned in my mind: how could a space like this affect the way students experience gender? The forest classroom felt so separate from society and the industrialized world. Societal pressures seemed irrelevant. As a girl, I was expected to get dirty and rough—an expectation I am not usually given.

Since beginning work with Dr. Morrison, I have read significant literature discussing the cognitive and non-cognitive benefits of nature-based education. I am eager to become a teacher who provides her students with outdoor experiences to support their learning. But as someone upon whom societal constructions of gender have had significant impact, I am even more eager to explore the ways in which nature-based education can code and decode gender for my students. If natural spaces have the potential to affect experiences and constructions of gender and the way children grow to understand their own personal identities, the importance of taking students outside grows even further.

Project Description

Focus:

As societies become more industrialized, there is a growing concern that children are lacking in contact with and exposure to the natural world (e.g., Louv, 2005; Natural England, 2009). Louv (2005) coined the term “nature deficit disorder” to refer to this absence of time spent outdoors, in green spaces, due to increased indoor activity, greater electronic presence, and growing constraints in schools from standardized testing (Hursh, Henderson, & Greenwood, 2015). One of the ways that educators have attempted to counter this deficit is through the construction of forest schools. Forest schools are educational spaces that allow children to consistently access hands-on learning experiences in a woodland environment (O’Brien, 2008). The Forest School Association (FSA) details six guiding principles of the forest school model, including regular sessions in a natural environment, the promotion of the holistic development of all those involved, and the inclusion of learner-centered processes to foster a community of development and learning (FSA, 2011). The forest school experience has been shown to not only increase attitudes towards the environment (Turtle, Convery, & Convery, 2015) but also advance cognitive and non-cognitive skills including language, communication, confidence, intrinsic motivation, and autonomy (e.g., Fjørtoft, 2004; O’Brien, 2008; O’Brien & Murray, 2007; Waite, 2011).

One of the commonly studied practices supported by a forest school environment is risky play. Sandseter (2009) defined risky play as “thrilling and exciting forms of play that involve a risk of physical injury” (p. 4). Risk-taking is a natural and important part of children’s play; it allows them exhilarating outlets and teaches them risk assessment (Sandseter, 2007). In traditional school environments, risky play is often deliberately minimized to avoid possibilities of injury or death (e.g., Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012; Wardle, 1997). However, research has shown that restricting the natural tendency of children to participate in risky play can hinder development, including a lack of independence, stunted judgement, and decreased motor and spatial skills (Brussoni, Olsen, Pike, & Sleet, 2012; Sandseter, 2009). The forest school model takes advantage of the benefits of risky play by supporting learner-directed risk-taking that positively impacts education (The Forest School Association, 2011).

While forest schools deliberately work to promote risky play, the characteristics that are associated with this form of play are traditionally associated with masculinity (Whittington, 2006). The historical roots of outdoor education lie in training young boys to navigate and dominate their natural environment (e.g., Birrell, 2018; Gurholt, 2008; Humberstone, 2000). Characteristics of strength, determination, and an affinity for danger are considered to be qualities expressed by men and boys, allowing the forest school setting to act as a potentially complicated social domain. The concept of gendered expression in the forest school environment becomes increasingly complex considering another one of the goals of the forest school model: critical caring and nurturing relationships with nature (FSA, 2011). While risky play has societal associations with masculinity, nurturing and caring for

those beyond oneself are often normed as feminine traits (Blenkinsop, Piersol, & Stika-Sage, 2018; Schindel & Tolbert, 2017). As the forest school is a domain where both of these contrasting concepts are key to the ethos of the model, the constructions and experiences of gender in that environment are likely complicated and worth exploring.

Gender, like many other facets of social development, begins to influence children from a young age. In our gendered society, as children begin to observe the world around them, they learn these gendered roles and how to behave to fit into the model. This process, known as gender socialization theory, is one of the earliest forms of socialization that children experience (Stockard, 2006). However, children are not simply passive consumers of gendered expectations. Children are constantly exploring gender through their actions and interactions with peers, allowing the gendered experience to evolve beyond a simple state of being and into a constantly reiterative, performative process (Thorne, 1993; Butler, 2004). One of the primary ways that children explore their own understanding of gender is through play (Thorne, 1993), which makes the forest school a unique setting for gendered performance. Because child-centered exploration and play are key practices in forest school pedagogy, there are numerous opportunities for children to explore gender.

In her case study of a Swedish preschool, Frödén (2018) introduced a new theoretical perspective called 'situated decoding of gender'. Drawing from the understanding of gender as a constantly performative process (Butler, 2004), Frödén observed the deliberate actions of educators who were attempting to subvert traditional expectations of gendered performance. In a direct contrast to the typical process of gender socialization, educators in this study made conscious attempts to carry out a reverse process—turning societal perceptions of masculinity and femininity into a gender decoded state where norms of gendered performance became de-emphasized. This situated decoding of gender, as Frödén concluded, was reiterative, much like gendered performance, and was cultivated through the construction of the physical environment, the repetitive structure of education, and the consistent actions of teachers. The complex coexistence of gendered experiences in forest schools raises the question: Can situated decoding of gender occur in that space as well? I am proposing to conduct an ethnographic study that explores how students and teachers experience and communicate gender in a forest school. As made clear by the recent special editions of *The Journal of Environmental Education* (Gough et. al., 2017; Russell et. al., 2018), gender is garnering attention as an important factor in environmental education broadly, making this research not only valuable for the reasons previously discussed but also disciplinarily relevant. Through this research, the following questions will be explored: How are gender norms communicated and experienced in forest schools? To what extent is gender decoded?

Scholarly Process:

This research has two phases. The first phase, currently underway, is composed of semi-structured interviews with educators who have worked with students in nature-based

settings. In the fall of 2018, I was awarded the Elon Sustainability Research Grant to financially support this first phase. IRB approval was obtained in October 2018 and, as of now, 30 educators have agreed to participate in the study. These participants were initially selected from my faculty mentor's network within the field of environmental education, and snowball sampling and a Twitter request for participants were used to increase breadth. The current interviewees include educators from several different countries and of varying job titles, which has contributed to the diversity of conversations recorded.

In these interviews, several questions were used to incite a dialogue, including, "Have you observed moments where gender roles were subverted/reinforced in your nature-based education setting?" I allowed the conversations to flow naturally in the direction each educator wished, as the goal was to understand the extent to which they have observed or consciously considered gender as an influence in their teaching. The insight gained from these interviews will help shape the second phase.

During the second phase of this study, ethnographic data will be collected in a forest school. While specific about locations and dates have not been confirmed yet, there are possible long-term sites for this research in Chapel Hill, and possible short-term sites for observation in Montpelier, Vermont; Asheville, North Carolina; and Ontario, Canada. It is intended that fieldwork will be conducted on a regular, likely weekly, basis at forest school locations in North Carolina over the course of my junior year with short-term visits to the other observation sites. The purpose of this fieldwork will be to observe the experiences students and educators have with coding and decoding gender in a forest school. Qualitative research processes will include detailed field notes and regular reflective memos of observations between teachers, students, and nature, and how these different interactions are affected by or affect a construction of gender within the environment. Talking to educators in the field has helped me understand some of the forms this data might take, including the objects and toys students are using and how they are using them, the different gender grouping of students (either deliberately by educators or naturally by students themselves), the gendered language students are using to refer to things in nature, and any other potential observations that suggest or demonstrate an influence of gender in the learning environment. In general, the qualitative nature of this study allows me to observe what I am both expecting and not expecting, and comprehensively discuss all of the ways I encounter gender being coded or decoded in the space. As this study seeks to explore how nature-based practices and gender interact within an outdoor education setting, rather than prove any quantitative concept, qualitative fieldwork is the most effective form of research methodology (Horvat & Heron, 2013).

Proposed Products:

I plan on presenting my findings at several national and international conferences, including the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting, the North American Association of Environmental Education (NAAEE) research symposium, and the

Children & Nature Network (C&NN) conference. I will also prepare a manuscript for The Journal of Environmental Education.

Feasibility

Feasibility statement:

In many ways, this research project is already in process. Over the course of the last academic year, I have been steadily interviewing 30 educators who teach students in outdoor, natural areas to hear their ideas and perspectives on the gender explorations and experiences of their students in nature. I have formed a rich professional learning network of nature-based educators and begun to analyze the interview data I have collected to inform my future fieldwork.

For fieldwork, the most important detail is location. My first option is Learning Outside, a forest school in Chapel Hill, NC. Learning Outside serves approximately a dozen students aged 4-5 in the morning from 9 to 12, and another dozen 6-9 year olds from 12:30 until 3:30 in the afternoon. I have already contacted Wendy Banning, the director of the school, with whom Dr. Morrison has a long-time professional relationship. She is open to the idea, and we are planning future meetings to discuss further.

If challenges arise with Learning Outside, I have two secondary options. The first option is the Free Forest School in Raleigh/Durham, and the second option is Asheville Forest School in Asheville, which would require more time and money spent on travel but is still feasible. If none of these options are possible, there are short-term observation sites in Vermont and Ontario; I have already received invitations for visiting from the interviews I have conducted. If timing and resources provide, all of these sites could be visited as well to further enrich the fieldwork experience.

Another detail to consider for this study is working with children. Research studies involving children require special IRB approval and parent permission to collect data. Dr. Morrison has experience receiving IRB approval for studies involving minors, so developing an ethical, appropriate IRB application will not be problematic. Furthermore, while parent permission can sometimes be a difficult task to achieve, whole class participation is not needed. If there are children who lack parental consent to participate, I do not have to include information about them in my observations.

A final detail is my lack of in-depth experience working with qualitative research methods. While this fact is true, there are an abundance of resources and experiences that will prepare me thoroughly for conducting my own qualitative study. Dr. Morrison has an extensive background in qualitative methods, and is therefore an exceptional mentor for the project. I will also be modeling my study after several previous studies that I have explored in detail, including *Gender Play* by Barrie Thorne (1993) and Frödén's (2018) Swedish preschool case study. I am also planning on specifically studying ethnographic research skills this spring in many formats. I am in the process of reading *Tales of the Field*:

On Writing Ethnography, Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes, and Ethnography in Education to gain conceptual knowledge of ethnographic processes, and I am also going to practice ethnographic skills such as observation, writing field notes, and writing memos this semester while I am abroad in the United Kingdom. The professional learning network that Dr. Morrison and I have established reaches extensively into the UK, and there are several forest school sites close to my location abroad that I have been invited to visit.

Budget:

Transcription services - \$500

Tuition - \$2,250

NAAEE Research Symposium and Conference in Lexington, KY

Registration - \$700

Travel - \$300

Lodging - \$1,000

Food - \$350

Total - \$2,350

AERA Annual Meeting in San Francisco, CA

Registration - \$200

Travel - \$400

Lodging - \$750

Food - \$250

Total - \$1,600

Children & Nature Network Conference in TBD

Registration - \$250

Travel - \$400

Lodging - \$600

Food - \$200

Total - \$1,450

ECO Institute Level I workshop in Montpelier, VT

Registration - \$1,100

Travel - \$300

Lodging - \$900

Food - \$300

Total - \$2,600

NAAEE Research Symposium and Conference in TBD

Registration - \$700

Travel - \$300

Lodging - \$1,000

Food - \$350

Total - \$2,350

Forest School Training in Galway, Ireland

Registration - \$1,400

Travel - \$1,000

Lodging - \$1,200

Food - \$400

Total - \$4,000

AERA Annual Meeting in Orlando, FL

Registration - \$200

Travel - \$250

Lodging - \$750

Food - \$250

Total - \$1,450

Children & Nature Network Conference in TBD

Registration - \$250

Travel - \$400

Lodging - \$600

Food - \$200

Total - \$1,450

Total: \$20,000

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	Proposed Experiences	Proposed Product(s)
First Summer Term	Finalize sites for ethnographic field work Submit IRB application for second phase of the study Finish analyzing and coding interview data from the first phase Write AERA proposal (first phase)	IRB application AERA proposal (first phase)
First Fall Term	Collect data (second phase) Present findings (first phase) at NAAEE Research Symposium in Lexington, KY on October 15-16 Write C&NN proposal (first phase)	NAAEE presentation (first phase) C&NN proposal (first phase) Ongoing fieldnotes & memos
First Winter Term	Collect data	Ongoing fieldnotes and memos
First Spring Term	Collect data Begin data analysis Present findings (first phase) at AERA Annual Meeting in San Francisco, CA Write NAAEE proposal (second phase) Present findings (first phase) at C&NN Conference; location TBD	AERA presentation (first phase) NAAEE proposal (second phase) C&NN presentation (first phase) Ongoing fieldnotes & memos
Second Summer Term	Analyze data during SURE Write AERA proposal (second phase) Attend ECO Institute Level 1 workshop in Montpelier, VT	AERA proposal (second phase)
Second Fall Term	Present findings (second phase) at NAAEE Research Symposium; location TBD Attend forest school training in Galway, Ireland Share research process and preliminary findings at the Honors Fellows Presentations of Progress Begin drafting manuscript	NAAEE proposal (second phase) Honors Fellows Presentation of Progress Beginning drafts of manuscript

Second Winter Term	Finish manuscript and submit to the Journal of Environmental Education	Completed manuscript submission to the Journal of Environmental Education
Second Spring Term	Student Teaching Present findings (second phase) at AERA in Orlando, FL Present findings (second phase) at C&NN conference; location TBD Present findings at SURF Submit and defend Honors Thesis	AERA presentation (second phase) C&NN presentation (second phase) SURF presentation Completed Honors Thesis