

Article

Parents' Perceptions of UK Forest School: Descriptive and Evaluative Aspects

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Abstract: Parental support for children's Forest School (FS) education is likely connected to the parents' own views about FS. We investigated parents' perceptions of FS by performing a qualitative study on parents' views, as expressed in an online forum for parents (Mumsnet). Findings were grouped into two main categories, descriptive (what FS is) and evaluative (FS is good or bad). Thematic analysis revealed five dimensions of evaluation: skills and knowledge, nature connectedness and physical/mental health, structure, inclusivity and enjoyment. Along these dimensions we uncovered tensions between opposing views. We also identified two strategies for dealing with these tensions, dismissal and balance. This is the first study that identifies dimensions of evaluation for FS and potential parent satisfaction. The implications are discussed.

Keywords: forest school; parental support; parental involvement; parental satisfaction



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1. Introduction

Within education and over the last few decades, there has been an increasing push to incorporate more nature-based experiences and learning, to support both child wellbeing, as well as environmental awareness and nature connection [1,2]. Forest School (FS), which is a specific type of outdoor educational practice, was initially developed in Scandinavia and has been adopted and adapted for use in the UK [3]. FS often falls under the umbrella of "alternative pedagogies" and provides a "divergence from more common learning spaces and situations" [4] (p. 25). Its primary purpose is to support child-led activities and learning, occurring within nature, and cultivate physical and social skills, as well as to promote a connection to the natural world [5,6]. According to FS pedagogy, learning does not happen automatically through a simple habitual enactment of certain practices. Instead, activities and stimuli are processed actively by learners who become co-constructors of knowledge (for constructivist approaches, see [7]). This constructivist approach assigns an important role to practitioners who take on the role to guide children on their learning path [8].

The role of parents is also recognised as important. Knight [9] highlights parental involvement as a key element of a successful FS practice. Parental involvement is the highest form of parental influence wherein a parent participates in an activity with the child. Previous research suggests that parental involvement in education has a positive impact on a variety of outcomes [10–12], including self-regulatory skills, child motivation [13] and general academic achievement [14,15]. Parents are expected to exert influence in other ways too, for example, through supporting children's participation. Although there is no specific research on different types of parental influence in FS, we can take the example of physical activity, where parents can act as role models or encourage a child to engage in physical activity [16]. Parents can also be "gate-keepers" [17,18], whereby, for example, they can enrol their children in FS practices and make sure they can attend (i.e., drive them there if necessary). What determines the level of parental support? If we take the example

of physical activity again, the extent to which parents find physical activity important influences parental support [19]. Therefore, we would also assume that positive parental attitudes towards FS, and an overall positive evaluation of FS, is needed in order for a parent to enrol their children in FS, encourage them or facilitate their participation.

There is previous research on how parents [20–22], practitioners [23] and children [24] perceive FS. Findings in general support an overwhelmingly positive response to FS and FS pedagogy across the board (e.g., [25]). However, it should be noted that samples are often biased and self-selecting, as in the case of Kahriman-Pamuk [22] where parents approached had already sent their children to FS, or in the case of Nawaz and Blackwell [25] where the research team was comprised of employees of the main FS training provider in the UK.

The purpose of the present paper is to focus specifically on parents' perceptions of FS within the UK. Our research aimed to study broader parental views of FS, as exemplified by the comments posted on an internet forum addressed to parents. We intended to explore parents' perception of FS, their understanding of FS pedagogies and their evaluation of FS, as these were presented on an anonymous online forum discussion.

2. Method

We employed a qualitative approach in examining participants' perceptions of FS, which allowed the investigation of evaluative comments of FS and argumentation for potential positives and negatives of selecting FS for their own children. We decided to access an internet forum discussion on the topic between people with various experiences of FS, as we thought that it was better than the alternative, which was conducting individual or group interviews. The main reason for this decision was the freedom of expression that forums ensure due to participants' anonymity, as well as the access to rich, authentic and natural data, which are less susceptible to social desirability issues in comparison to focus groups or interview settings [26]. We specifically selected Mumsnet as it is a parent network founded in 2000, which hosts publicly accessible discussions to members and non-members, and has 7 million unique visitors and 100 million page views per month, making it the largest parenting network in the UK [27]. The use of such an approach allowed, therefore, for a rich account of participants' views. Findings were identified through the use of the analytic procedures outlined in thematic analysis (indicatively, [28]).

2.1. Privacy and Ethical Aspects

Given the nature and function of forums, postings are seen as “public behaviour” [26], especially since they are freely accessible to members and non-members, i.e., not password protected [29]. Moreover, our intentions with this study were very clear and did not include accessing additional personal information of participants or contacting any participants in the online discussions in any way. Acknowledging the need to be sensitive towards participants and to avoid linking postings to usernames, typically used in Mumsnet, we removed all usernames of participants and replaced them with pseudonyms. While we removed all potentially identifying information (for example, reference to the age and gender of children, location, etc.), posts were kept otherwise unedited.

2.2. Procedure

Data in this study were posted in Mumsnet Talk pages in November 2019. Mumsnet not only hosts topics on parenting, but also on health, work–life balance and other topics of interest to parents. Participants need to be registered members before posting threads or comments [30]. In this study, the term “forest school” was first put into the search engine run by the site Mumsnet with over 900 results coming up. A look at the thread titles and/or the initial post revealed that most threads were:

- (1) about specific FS establishments (with geographic location or name of school included); or
- (2) specific questions about issues such as clothing, weather conditions, applying for a place at FS and other practical issues.

We chose this specific thread because it presented an initial post that enquired directly about perceptions of FS, and it was started by a parent (other similar threads were started by researchers or business owners/practitioners wanting feedback on a particular aspect of forest school).

2.3. Data Analysis

We employed thematic analysis in this study. Thematic analysis can be used with deductive and inductive methodologies [28,31]; in this study our approach was top-down, although we aimed to balance between what the data were telling us and what we looked for [32]. Analysis was conducted through adapting the Miles and Humberman [33] model of sequential steps in identifying key themes. First, data reduction took place through selecting the parts of the thread considered to be relevant to the current investigation. Second, we displayed the data through the development of a code key (see Table 1). Finally, we identified themes and links between them to address the topic at hand.

Table 1. Analysis of responses within the “Forest school-Why? AIBU [Am I Being Unreasonable]-probably?” thread.

Descriptive Sentences		Evaluative Sentences	
What FS Does	Endorsement	Disapproval/Complaint	Addressing the Tension
Let loose, running, climbing, building, cooking, fires, etc.	Skills cultivated (motor, writing/reading etc, emotional (intelligence)/social/behavioural/cognitive, application of skills in physical situations/bushcraft skills)	Skills not cultivated (reading, writing)	Impossible to have everything
Countries: Finland, Germany, Sweden	Gaining knowledge on . . . (science, maths . . .)	Knowledge not gained Heavy homework and typical teaching at home	Need for balance
Frequency (1 day a week, 1 day per month, 1 afternoon per week)	Nature connectedness and knowledge of the natural world Physical and mental health	Some children already have access to nature	
	Inclusion	Lack of inclusion (not all children can get additional support at home to cover “missed” academic learning)	
	Flexible Structure	Lack of structure	
	Enjoyment (and positive associations with school/love school)	“Fun school”	

Code development emerged following a set of rules developed exclusively for the purposes of this thematic analysis (for a similar procedure see [34]). In particular, emergent categories had to be:

- recurrent—that is, found in more than one posting,
- mutually exclusive—data chunks would have to be assigned only in one category,
- instrumental—emerging categories had to be instrumental in addressing the topic and questions at hand,
- comprehensive—categories had to be well-rounded and adding to our understanding of parents’ perceptions of FS.

3. Results

Responses within the thread contained two broad categories of statements: descriptive and evaluative. The descriptive statements addressed what FS does, while the evaluative

statements expressed either endorsement or disapproval of FS and its practices (see Table 1). Since evaluative statements of both endorsement and disapproval covered similar dimensions of evaluation, an underlying tension was revealed, reflected in opposing statements on skills/knowledge, nature/health, inclusivity, structure and fun/enjoyment. There was also a separate category of evaluative statements that directly addressed these tensions.

3.1. Descriptive Perceptions of FS: Back to the Basics

Part of the thread focused on the basic concept of FS, and, to this end, contributions were heavily descriptive. FS, for example, was presented as an opportunity to find our place in the world:

"The basic concept of Forest School is that In order to better understand our world, ourselves and our place in it we need to explore it." (mamamia, 15 November 2019, 11:58)

In addition, a descriptive account of FS especially concentrated on the contrast between the urban and mainstream life of children (limited free time and electronics) on the one hand, and children being free on the other hand, but also on the actual activities of children in FS.

"So few kids today are let loose outside to play and run and be free. Forest school is a bit of time for them to be kids without influences of electronics etc [...]" (luparenting, 13 November 2019, 19:17)

"DC [Dear Child] went to a forest school for nursery. Sometimes school was outside the physical school building where they had built a park like setting with play space, a nook to read under a willow, an outdoor kitchen for mud pies and a garden that the kids tended by removing caterpillars by hand. Other days they met in natural areas around the area. The teachers would take the 3 year olds mucking into the creek looking for tadpoles or what not. Then they would get out their journals and draw what they saw and try to write a few words too." (Peppermint, 15 November 2019, 02:41)

Moreover, another aspect concentrated on the concept of FS going beyond the activities per se and children finding their own direction:

"Simply put, forest school is less about the activities and more about the child's input and own direction. Tree climbing, fire lighting, den building-whatever is just a process to allow a child come to their own conclusions about where they stand in the big wide world" (Jedi123, 14 November 2019, 18:11)

In this descriptive account of FS, the role and influence of non-UK practices, especially Swedish, Finnish and German, were recognised too:

"We're Swedish and DCs school frequently has visiting teachers from the UK to learn about how we do it" (sweetandsour, 13 November 2019, 17:13)

"The faster you grow you suddenly learn much much faster as happens in countries like Finland and Germany." (nantesbeirut, 13 November 2019, 19:05)

In addition, the role of frequency and time spent outdoors in FS emerged as important too:

"DC goes to a monthly forest camp" (abcd123, 13 November 2019, 16:51)

"My Y4s do it for a whole afternoon each week" (anythgoes, 13 November 2019, 17:16)

Frequency, however, was found to reveal some tension when FS is perceived to take place too often (and therefore we found it in evaluative sentences too):

"At afternoon or even 1 day out of 5 in the woods is not the reason your child can't form letters." (MLpuppies, 15 November 2019, 14:24)

"I know the benefits of forest school but I would be over the moon with one afternoon a week not a full day every week." (green&blue, 15 November 2019, 16:17)

3.2. Evaluative Perceptions of FS: Skills, Knowledge and the Essentials for Development

As the thread “Forest school-Why? AIBU-probably?” begins with an evaluative question on FS, responses understandably often exhibited an evaluative tone. Below we present the results along the five dimensions participants focused their evaluations on—skills/knowledge, nature/health, inclusivity, structure and fun/enjoyment.

3.2.1. Skills and Knowledge

The most common topics that were addressed in this thread concerned the development of skills and knowledge. This is the first dimension that unveils an underlying tension. On the one hand, FS is perceived to cultivate motor, emotional and bushcraft skills.

“[...] they teach him independent skills such as knot tying, ladder making, fire lighting, making a camp and whittling” (abcd123, 13 November 2019, 16:51)

“[...] help build confidence and resilience. They teach boundaries. Children are expected to make up their own mind about their capabilities (want to climb that tree? Go ahead, but only go as high as you are able to get back down) [...] team building.” (vinylandrecords, 13 November 2019, 17:02)

“[...] improves concentration, self esteem and resilience. Children feel confident they can keep themselves safe in a natural environment. They develop social skills, gross and fine motor skills.” (sevensseconds, 14 November 2019, 10:31)

On the other hand, FS contributes indirectly and variably (for example through indirectly helping develop that skill or through the enhancement of concentration) to the acquisition of knowledge that is traditionally given in the classroom.

“They get to identify plants and animals (science). They get to build dens and create things such as dolls etc from natural materials (art and d&T). They get to measure, plot and record the features in a specific outdoor space and then draw up plans for how to improve that space (maths) and present those plans to the rest of school (English).” (rock&roll, 13 November 2019, 18:07)

“And while FS might not directly benefit a kids ability to add up, or spell- I guarantee you it helps their focus in a classroom setting after having spent some free time outside. Which will help their ability to learn INSIDE a classroom.” (jedi123, 15 November 2019, 09:29)

By contrast, FS is also criticised for not cultivating important skills and knowledge or from taking time away from essential learning activities typically taking place in a classroom, thus revealing an opportunity cost of engaging with FS:

“DC still doesn’t know how to form letters correctly rather than the extended playtime that is forest school.” (sambapersob, 13 November 2019, 16:44)

“The Original Poster’s DC is in y1 and is spending 20% of school hours in forest school. So something else is being dropped to allow for this.” (vintage, 21 November 2019, 18:03)

“It’s potentially concerning if parents are expected to “make up” for lost academics with extra academic work at home. Because it’s the last thing anyone wants to be doing late at night after a hard day at work when kids and parents are tired. And because it makes it hard for children to rise beyond parental background and education levels.” (turtlesandlions, 15 November 2019, 01:43)

3.2.2. Nature Connectedness—Physical and Mental Health

Nature connectedness, mental and physical health, and calculated risks are especially pronounced in this thread, highlighting the range and variability of the perceived benefits of FS and revealing a second dimension of evaluation.

"The macro & micro benefits are many and varied: from being aware of the intrinsic importance of nature to healthy exposure to soil microbiomes (it's a scientifically recognised thing), and everything in between." (user567, 13 November 2019, 22:46)

"Forest school is great for kids' eyesight, activity levels, physical health, micro biomes, sense of adventure and so on." (turtlesandlions, 15 November 2019, 01:43)

"They have time to work through issues (physically, mentally and socially) and come out the other side... there is no other environment that does this [. . .] to make/take calculated risks and learn over time to overcome fears, anxieties etc." (MLpuppies, 15 November 2019, 17:13)

"[. . .] develop an interest in nature and the environment?" (abcd123, 13 November 2019, 16:51)

"[. . .] the benefit of a true forest school where freedom is the vital element knowing where you come from, who you are and how you fit into the world and what it is let's you grow faster." (nanterbeirut, 13 November 2019, 19:05)

The complaints in this case come from parents whose children already interact with nature, outside of educational establishments and within their daily life. Therefore, the perception of the parents is that additional contact with nature is not necessary:

"We are in a very rural area so these are not children who are strangers to fresh air!" (anythgoes, 13 November 2019, 17:16)

"My DC is out in fields every day on dog walks, climbing trees, building boats to go in rivers etc so i found her time there a bit pointless really, they just ended up cold and wet!" (mumsnetuser987, 13 November 2019, 16:54)

3.2.3. Structure

A third source of tension within parents' perceptions of FS is its structure. Some parents praise FS's flexible structure:

"It doesn't always have to be sat at a desk copying the teacher to be education.?" (nobodyhere, 13 November 2019, 17:14)

"[. . .] what may seem to you like 'rampaging in the woods' can actually have a lot of well thought out meaning to it." (what'sleftismine, 13 November 2019, 18:44)

"[. . .] the benefits of FS is that it is unstructured (apart from a few rules). [. . .] the children are not bound by walls but learn all sorts of social, physical, psychological etc skills way beyond what a classroom or home environment would give." (MLpuppies, 15 November 2019, 17:13)

Others criticise its lack of structure, as structure is taken to ensure both learning and happiness:

"Just running around for a day isn't really learning." (vintage, 13 November 2019, 23:30)

"Certainly they seemed happier higher up school with more structure and formal learning." (notsure, 15 November 2019, 10:48)

"I also wouldn't mind if they were doing activities like those mentioned upthread-skills such as knot tying, ladder making, fire lighting, making a camp and whittling. There is none of this. It is completely unstructured." (sambaperson, 13 November 2019, 17:04)

3.2.4. Inclusivity

A fourth dimension where tension *between* (and in some cases *within*) participants emerges is inclusivity. On the one hand, FS is discussed positively with regard to children with difficulties (learning, emotional or other) and their prospective participation and opportunities to learn and succeed:

"It's the one subject my dyslexic daughter was equal with the rest of the class" (abcd123, 13 November 2019, 16:51)

"gives those who struggle academically the chance to learn and to demonstrate their abilities and to shine" (rock&roll, 13 November 2019, 18:07)

"For reserved children or hyper children, Forest School can really help bring them out/calm them down, somehow!" (upintheair, 21 November 2019, 23:16)

On the other hand, FS is criticised for being less inclusive when it shifts the support needed through the burden of learning to the parents:

"It is also worrying about the children you don't get the support as well." (notsure, 15 November 2019, 10:48)

"What about the child of a Somali immigrant who can't speak much English—should they be left to languish because Mum can't really help them at home?" (turtlesandlions, 15 November 2019, 01:43)

3.2.5. Enjoyment

The last source of tension identified in the responses was in relation to children's enjoyment of FS. According to some views, this is perceived as an advantage of FS, that renders it both attractive and valuable:

"[...] downtime and outdoor play gives them fun and positive associations with school" (elephantfriend · 13 November 2019 23:04)

"They love it!" (vinylandrecords, 13 November 2019, 17:02)

"And it's not about 'fun school'" (jedi123, 15 November 2019, 09:29)

According to others, however, "fun school" is not real school; that is, children are not achieving important learning outcomes:

"Yes they enjoy it but tgeyd (sic) enjoy any afternoon that isn't 'work'" (anythgoes, 13 November 2019, 17:16)

"Sweden went down this route some time ago (i.e., moving more and more towards "fun school" where kids have a lovely time but don't learn very much in academic terms) and their outcomes have tumbled as these cohorts have grown up." (turtlesandlions, 15 November 2019, 01:43)

The tension on all these fronts is directly addressed by two approaches reflected in two corresponding types of statements. The first type of statement dismisses the tension and the complaints on the basis that some people can never be pleased:

"It's funny that there are so many parents on here who complain that children go to school too young and wish we were more like places like Finland, and then parents moan when they do things like Forest School which is more like what they do in Finland etc." (lostandfound, 13 November 2019, 16:58)

"Lostandfound-I was just thinking the same thing! Whatever schools do someone will complain." (adastra, 13 November 2019, 17:01)

"If they were in classrooms all day every day there'd be complaints about hot housing and only caring about academics. Schools can never win." (truelies, 13 November 2019, 17:16)

The second type of statement calls for a need for striking a balance between learning in the forest and learning in the classroom. Balance, of course, might mean different things to different people:

"A balance of "the right amount of forest school" is surely the most appropriate solution. [...] I think some people like to see the world in terms of Good Things versus Bad Things, so if forest school is good for kids' immune systems and sense of independence then it

“must be” good for maths and spelling as well. Doubt that very much.” (turtlesandlions, 15 November 2019, 01:43)

Regardless, it may be indicative of the power of this “balanced” approach that the final post of the user “sambaperson”, who started the thread “Forest school-Why? AIBU-probably?”, was the following:

“Thanks for the balanced approaches. As a poster said upthread it’s all about balance, not that I think FS is rubbish or useless ...” (sambaperson, 15 November 2019, 16:10)

4. Discussion

FS is an outdoor educational practice that supports children’s connection with nature, cultivates their intrinsic tendencies and skills (e.g., [35]), and supports holistic growth [6]. The role of parental influence and support is important, taking either the form of active involvement or a more passive gate-keeping form. Especially in early childhood educational settings, we would expect parents’ perceptions to determine to a large extent whether children would enrol and participate in FS in the same way that this happens for physical education [19]. Our qualitative study aimed to examine how parents view FS as well as uncover the dimensions of their evaluation of FS. The richness and freedom of expression sought to uncover parents’ genuine evaluations of FS, and, in turn, called for the use of data from forums [26].

In this study, parents whose responses we analysed in the Mumsnet thread offered a descriptive account of FS. They mentioned the activities that children engage in, the countries that have traditionally developed FS and the frequency with which children attend FS. Moreover, and perhaps more significantly, they offered evaluations of FS. These evaluations can be placed along five dimensions: knowledge and skills, nature connectedness and physical/mental wellbeing, structure, inclusivity and enjoyment. Such descriptive accounts and references to these and other advantages and disadvantages of FS are not uncommon in the literature (indicatively, [21,36–38]).

However, this study unveils tensions along these five dimensions (positives or negatives) of their evaluations of FS. In particular, with regard to knowledge and skills, FS is perceived to cultivate certain important skills, such as bushcraft and physical skills, but can also be perceived to take away time from reading and writing, which may have to be compensated for by parents. With regard to nature connectedness and physical/mental health, the benefits seem straightforward, and the only objection is that FS does not add much for children who are already in contact with nature. With regard to structure, FS can be praised for its flexible structure but equally condemned for essentially lacking structure. With regard to inclusivity, FS is perceived to be inclusive for children with emotional and learning difficulties but not inclusive when it shifts the burden of learning support to parents at home. Finally, in relation to enjoyment, it is acknowledged that children enjoy themselves at FS. The only pitfall for FS is “fun school”, where the perception is that FS is all play and no work.

Our analysis further reveals two strategies for resolving these tensions. First, there is dismissal: complaints come from people who can never be pleased. Second, there is balance: FS has advantages and disadvantages and every parent and school should find the right balance between FS and more traditional classroom-based activities.

Previous writing on the parental perceptions of FS echoes some of these concerns. For example, Close [21] found very positive perceptions, although several parents whose children attended FS struggled to understand pedagogical and underlying principles of FS. Kahriman-Pamuk [22] reports overwhelmingly positive perceptions of parents with regards to FS, something that our investigation, in a wider sample of the parental population, does not support. Our findings are consistent with FS evaluations derived from publications and interviews with FS managers [36], although what is different in this case is that each dimension is not perceived as entirely positive or negative but its evaluation varies considerably, from positive to negative.

The tension that is revealed along all dimensions possibly has a root cause: parents are especially mindful of opportunity costs. Parents personally endure opportunity costs when they engage in their children's education [39], and they consider opportunity costs when they make schooling choices for their children, such as the time that their children could devote to other activities [40]. The tension revealed in our research may in the end reflect the parents' desire to make the most of the money and time invested in an educational activity, while taking into account other activities that could have been engaged in.

5. Implications

While there is research on factors influencing parents' satisfaction with the children's school (e.g., [41,42]), there is no relevant research on FS. By studying parents' perceptions in a naturalistic setting, i.e., an internet forum, we have identified factors of evaluation and potential sources of satisfaction and dissatisfaction. Our qualitative study can serve as a first step in constructing measures of parental satisfaction and informing FS officials and practitioners about ways to improve FS operation, involve parents and enhance their marketing efforts. While parents' views do not necessarily reflect the best educational practices, they are still an important factor in children's education, which have to be taken into consideration.

6. Conclusions

Our research identified five dimensions of parents' evaluation of FS: the acquisition of knowledge/skills, nature connection and physical/mental wellbeing, structure, inclusivity and enjoyment. Since the role of parents is significant for the encouragement and the facilitation of children's enrolment and attendance, the results of this study can serve as a first step in improving FS by considering parents' perceptions. Moreover, it can inform parental education and communication campaigns on the part of FS settings and practitioners that can focus on dispelling misconceptions of the pedagogical aspects of FS. By clearly communicating with parents and the wider public the research-informed and sound pedagogical practices that take place in FS, parents and other "gate-keepers" can have a more positive attitude towards FS and choose it when appropriate.

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