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Reflective Paper

Research Title: Forest School and Nature Connection: Barriers to the outdoors for women and non-binary people.

## Literature Review

My research project emerged from a desire to connect with the emerging paradigm of ecofeminism within the field of environmental justice and outdoor education. Ecofeminism is an umbrella term that looks at the patterns that connect nature's oppression and patriarchal systems (Warren 2000) or the bringing together of the 'ecological superiority of humans and the cultural superiority of men' (Mallory, 2010, p. 309). When reading for my literature review, I focussed on the masculine history of outdoor education (Birrell, 2018; Cook, 1999) and the emergence of more feminine approaches which are more engaged in slow pedagogies (Lugg 1999), nature relatedness (Brügger et al. 2011; Lumber et al. 2017; Martin & Czellar, 2017; Restall & Conrad, 2015) and biophilia hypothesis (Wilson 1984). This initial research revealed debate around whether there is a move away from a masculine approach in outdoor education and to a more connected, feminine approach. Considering the apparent emergence of more feminine approaches and viewing the literature through the lens of ecofeminism, I explored research on the barriers for women when accessing the outdoors. I developed an in-depth understanding of the development of ecofeminist research and issues. Much of the research looked at barriers (Birrell & Gray, 2020; Mitten, 2018; Pike & Beames 2013), but what I found in this reading was a focus on the barriers to professional roles in the outdoors rather than the access to outdoor education, or access to the outdoors away from formalised process and learning. My review of ecofeminist writings, in particular, Gray & Mitten's (2018) 'The Palgrave International Handbook of Women and Outdoor Education', also revealed that there was research into what the barriers for women were but not how to remove them. I became aware that where ecofeminism usually places importance on being intersectional, the literature around intersectional feminism in

outdoor education is very scarce. I found very little written about women of colour and very little about those who identify as LGBTQIA+ (Barnfield & Humberstone, 2008; Mitten, 1997).

My initial review revealed significant gaps and led to ideas for a research project based around ecofeminism, exploring the barriers to the outdoors for those who lack privilege due to their gender and considering ways that they can be removed. With this in mind, I explored more feminine approaches to outdoor education. My professional role is in leading and training Forest School, a slow pedagogy focused on long-term relationships with nature, self-determination theory and nature connection (FSA, 2012). The vast majority who bring their children to Forest School sessions are women, so I started considering whether attending Forest School with their children would remove barriers to the outdoors for those who lack privilege due to gender. I could not find any research or writing in this area, so this was a noticeable gap. I found some new studies that revealed a positive connection between Forest School, nature connection, and pro-environmental behaviour (Barrable & Arvanitis, 2010; Barrable, 2019; Barrable & Booth, 2020). This linked very well with ecofeminism, which merges feminism with environmental justice, so I felt it was an area worth further investigation. The research I found specifically in Forest School was focussed on the nature connection benefits for children who attended and not adults, again revealing a clear gap in studies.

Nature connection is rooted in Wilson's (1984) biophilia hypothesis, which theorises that humans are drawn to nature because they are part of nature. Nature-relatedness is a psychological term that describes the human-nature relationship. My review showed that researchers had developed many scales to quantify this connection in support of the Biophilia hypothesis (Brügger et al., 2011; Lumber et al., 2017; Martin & Czellar, 2017; Restall & Conrad, 2015). These are based upon Nibet et al.'s 2009 seminal paper 'The Nature Relatedness Scale', which considered whether biodiversity loss is connected to human's disconnection from nature. When developing my research method, the literature review demonstrated that using a nature-related scale would be relevant for this project. This was the method used in all of the research I found on nature connection for adults (Capaldi et al. 2015; Frantz & Mayer 2014; Ives et al 2017) and children (Barrable & Booth, 2020; Bragg et al. 2013; Cheng & Munroe, 2012). I also studied literature on qualitative research methods.

This reading suggested that in-depth interviews were appropriate because they allowed for the exploration of 'issues, personal biographies, what they know about the topic, what they have experienced, how they feel about particular issues, their attitudes, opinions and emotions.' (Cohen et al. 2018, p. 535)

Overall, my literature review revealed significant gaps in the debate around the lack of gendered privilege in the outdoors. The gaps in the debate formed the rationale for my research project, which was to 'advance an understanding of the barriers that women and non-binary people face whilst accessing the outdoors and explore whether Forest School offers an opportunity to remove some of these barriers and increase nature connection.' I chose women and non-binary people as a group that experience a lack of privilege due to gender. On reflection, I should have considered including all groups that lack this privilege; cisgender women, transgender women, transgender non-binary people, and transgender men. I did not include transgender men; however, I now believe my research would have been more robust and ethical if I had.

I found the research and debates in my field of study incredibly interesting and felt I had a firm grounding on which to build my rationale. When reflecting upon my literature review process, however, although I was thorough in my review of gender and the outdoors, I see that I needed to look further out of the outdoor education field itself. Including ecofeminist research and writing in the environmental justice movement would have been relevant to this study. For example, on further reading after my project, I found more research into queer ecofeminism in the ecofeminist communication field. Humphrey (2021) describes that research into ecofeminist communication explores 'queer ecofeminism', a theory that 'recognises the interconnectedness of oppressed identities, with special concern for how oppression has negatively impacted the gay, lesbian, and transgender communities.' My project suggested that further research was needed into transgender people, both binary and non-binary, and their additional barriers to the outdoors. This further supports the inclusion of more literature in the wider field. In addition, research into broader ecofeminism would have given me more profound knowledge of the further barriers LGBTQIA+ people experience when accessing the outdoors and made my research project design more robust and ethical.

I have learned a lot during the literature review about the validity and reliability of papers. I have also become aware of my own bias when searching for literature. Biggam, J. (2021) suggests that researchers should be aware of '*Language bias* (favouring English publications), *publication bias* (favouring particular publications) and *researcher bias* (favouring particular researchers).'

(p130). I have reviewed my references and can see that I have not read far enough into publications from different languages. However, I know that much of my reading was in Forest School, which is specific to the UK. I did not see evidence of a publication bias, but I reviewed many papers by Alexia Barrable. Barrable's work is very specifically on Forest School and Nature Connection, so it was very relevant to my field, but I could have looked further for alternate viewpoints and publications to strengthen my understanding of the debate.

## The Research

The first part of my research was to design and implement a questionnaire based on the nature-relatedness scale for the quantitative data collection. I chose to use the short NR-6 scale as Nisbet and Zelenski (2013) said that the results of the scale correlated with the full scale (p.8) but allowed faster and more efficient data collection. The scale was developed from Nisbet et al.'s 2009 seminal paper 'The Nature Relatedness Scale'. I published the questionnaire online and invited people to answer; the requirements were that they needed to be women or non-binary people over the age of 18 to ensure the participants were relevant to the study and could provide full consent. I asked the participants how long they had been attending Forest School and then asked them questions from the NR-6 scale. I received 38 responses. It quickly became evident that the data was unusable for my project due to the errors in my design. I shared the questionnaire via social media, but the majority of people who answered my questionnaire had high scores for nature connection whether they attended Forest School or not. I analysed this as it did not fit with all other research I had seen in the field and showed no correlation when I analysed the data in SPSS. When analysing the data, I realised the flaw in my research was in two parts. Firstly, most of the people I would connect with on social media will have a high interest in the environment and a high nature connection due to their interest in environmental issues. Secondly, I needed data to compare the result. Just recording their score after does not tell

me where they started before attending Forest School. My 'reflection-on-action' (Biggam 2021, p.159) suggested that I must ask the questions before the intervention and then follow afterwards to see if there was a positive correlation in the results (paired T-Sample). This was problematic as a Principle of Forest School is that it is a long-term process, covering multiple seasons, and I had a very short time for this research to be completed. I decided to re-run the questionnaire with the interview participants for my qualitative research as even though this would give less data, I knew that they attended Forest School sessions for a long time due to purposive sampling and, therefore, the results would be of high quality. I would ask them to think back to before they attended Forest School sessions, complete the questionnaire, and then repeat it, thinking about how they rate on the scale now.

I then collected my qualitative data using in-depth interviews (Cohen et al., 2018). I chose my research participants through purposive sampling to ensure reliability (Denscombe 2021) and a boosted sample (Gorard 2003, p.71) to provide a representation of non-binary people. In total, I interviewed five women and two non-binary people. Designing the interview questions was difficult as I wanted to keep the interview structure as exploratory as possible whilst ensuring that the data collection was ethical. I used the ten-stage sequence as outlined by Cohen et al. (2018 p.512-526)) which is based on Kvale's (1996, p.88) process. First, I thematised the goals of the research through the literature review. Next, I designed the interview and constructed the schedule. I chose to use open, direct, indirect, and non-specific questions to allow for the most significant exploration of the topic. I decided to use open-ended questions as they;

allow the interviewer to go into more depth if she chooses, or to clear up misunderstandings; they enable the interviewer to test the limits of the respondent's knowledge; they encourage co-operation and help establish rapport; they make a truer assessment of what the respondent really feels. (Cohen et al, 2018, p. 513)

On reflection, this was a good decision as, through the interview process, I found many themes that I had not considered before and allowed me to delve deeper. I also used anticipated and spontaneous probes (Beatty & Willis 2007, p.300) to support the participants in expanding on their answers. These worked incredibly well in the interviews and allowed me to explore emerging themes. I then looked at question formats and chose an indirect approach to explore the topic; Tuckman (1972) suggests that this approach leads

to more direct and open responses. I did find this to be true in the interview process, but on reflection, some of the discussion went off-topic, and I could have used more formal planned questions to bring this back. I used open-ended response modes in my design to allow for more exploration of themes I may not have considered while designing the research. I performed all of my interviews outside before and after Forest School sessions so that the participants were in relaxed and informal environments. Many of the participants said that they enjoyed the process and found answering the questions outdoors a therapeutic process. Being outdoors, I needed to pay more attention to ensuring confidentiality, but this was easy enough in my private woodland spaces. I used Cohen et al.'s (2018) guidelines for conducting interviews (pp.521-522) to ensure reliability and follow ethical principles. Overall, I enjoyed the data-collection process through interviews, as it was natural for me to feel connected with the participants. Exploring topics and using an indirect approach allowed for a feeling of safety and openness when exploring more challenging themes.

After the qualitative data collection was complete, I transcribed the interviews and uploaded them to NVIVO to perform Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) through the lens of ecofeminist theory. I began by reading through the interviews and starting to code the different themes. These themes broadly broke down to 'barriers to the outdoors', 'benefits of forest school' and 'nature connection' and then further down within each of these themes. I had never completed a thematic analysis before and enjoyed the process, mainly as themes emerged that were either stronger than I expected or not expected. For example, I found that 82% of the codes under the 'barriers to the outdoors' were around fear of men – I expected this to be the biggest barrier, but the result was very significant. I also found a theme that I hadn't considered before: the idea that boys build communities outdoors as children through team sports, which is absent in most girls' lives. There was a suggestion that the lack of safety of community outdoors directly contributed to non-men feeling less safe and welcome in green and blue spaces. There was also a theme around the idea of Forest School allowing non-men to reclaim outdoor spaces, which had previously been unavailable to them due to fear. I found the technology challenging to navigate and had to spend a long time exploring all of the features of NVIVO before restarting my analysis with a better understanding. I need to read more about the benefits

and uses of the programme before I use it again to get the most help from it. It also took a lot longer than I expected to analyse seven interviews, which would need to be considered in a more extensive study.

I re-ran the quantitative data collection with the purposive sample during this interview process based on my reflections. I used a larger nature-relatedness scale, the Connectedness to Nature Scale, which has fourteen points (Kleespies et al., 2021). I decided to use a larger scale to give the data more reliability. I asked the interview participants to answer the questions on the scale, thinking back to before they started Forest School and then again about how they score now. I do not believe this was as reliable as completing the questionnaire before and after an intervention, but it was as close as I could get it with such a small time scale. If I completed a comparative questionnaire again, I would do this differently to ensure reliability. I analysed the data using SPSS, which I found relatively easy to use but needed support from Pallant's (2020) 'SPSS Survival Manual' to help me through the process. I conducted a paired-samples T-Test to evaluate the impact of women and non-binary people attending Forest School with their children on Nature Connection. A statistically significant difference was observed between the pretest ( $M=53.29$ ,  $SD=8.864$ ) and the posttest ( $M=66.86$ ,  $SD=4.259$ ,  $t=-3.919$ ,  $p=0.008$ ). The effect size, according to Cohen (1988) and Sawilowsky (2009) was very large (1.64). I then created a bar chart showing the average scores before and after attending Forest School.

## Ethics

Research ethics is a new topic for me as I did not study research in my undergraduate degree. However, I quickly picked up the core principles and felt that I designed my research well under the core ethical research principles of Transparency, Confidentiality, Voluntary, Do no harm and Impartiality. Before the participants took part in the questionnaires or research, they were fully informed of the purpose and outline of the research project, and consent was recorded by a check box on the online questionnaire and on paper for the interviews. I anonymised the data before loading it to SPSS and NVIVO; after the project, they were archived and kept in line with GDPR. Impartiality was the most challenging ethical principle to ensure I adhered to through the process as I knew the participants in the interviews. However, this also enabled me to ensure that the participants felt comfortable

that the interview process was confidential. Denscombe (2021) says that it is a key part of the interviewers job is to 'foster a situation in which participants feel at ease and sufficiently comfortable in the company of other group members to express themselves freely,' (p.233) and this was another area that was easier when knowing the participants. In future research projects, I may not know the group as well, and I will need to pay attention to ensuring the participants feel entirely comfortable and safe. I was also aware that the nature of the topic could lead to some difficult memories for the participants, and it was essential to ensure the process did not compromise the participant's emotional safety. I was prepared for these eventualities and carried with me information about charities and support networks for victims of abuse, thankfully, I did not need to give them, but I was glad that I had this ready.

## Conclusion

Overall, the research answered my question and suggested that fear of men was a dominant barrier in women and non-binary people accessing the outdoors, that attending Forest School sessions removed some of these barriers through the safety of community and that attending Forest School with their children increased nature connection in women and non-binary people. The research contributes to knowledge in my field as it was the first study to include non-binary people in an ecofeminist research project on removing barriers to the outdoors and nature connection. It also provided more data showing that the cultural superiority of men is a barrier for those without gendered privilege to the outdoors. The thematic analysis revealed a significant emphasis on the feeling of community being the most crucial factor when removing barriers. There is debate in Forest School about whether programmes need to be long term and the research suggests that this principle is incredibly important for those who attend.

The research also revealed questions about the further barriers for transgender people, both binary and non-binary, due to the lack of gendered privilege that cis-gendered women did not experience. The interviews with non-binary participants also revealed ideas around the concept that as Forest School is rooted in self-determination theory, whether the ethos allows the exploration of identity outside of societal gender roles. This is an area worth

further investigation and research and one I am considering taking further for my dissertation.

3190 Words

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