

Encounters with Forest School and Foucault: a risky business?

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This paper tells the story of an encounter between two early years teachers and two Forest School workers, the growing tensions in their relationships and how these tensions were resolved. When analysed through a Foucauldian (poststructuralist) lens, the story can be read as a battle between dominant discourses—a battle exacerbated by the outdoor context in which it took place. Exploring the consistency and contradictions between these discourses enabled the teachers to make changes to their practice and to reconstruct their professional subjectivities in a way that more closely addressed their current interests and the requirements of the proposed Foundation Phase for Wales.

Introduction

In the UK, as in much of the developed world (Prezza *et al.*, 2005), concerns have been raised in recent years about the apparent decline in children's outdoor play—particularly their play within natural environments. Such concerns have been linked to issues such as the erosion of appropriate play spaces (e.g. Rivkin, 1998); the increase in 'stranger dangers' (e.g. Valentine & McKendrick, 1997); the move towards more home-centred leisure activities based around television and video games (e.g. Clements, 2004); and the increase in childhood obesity (e.g. Ebbeling *et al.*, 2002). At the same time, anxieties have been expressed about the perceived over-formalisation of children's early educational experiences (e.g. Cleave & Brown, 1991). Unsurprisingly, then, early years teachers are now being asked to introduce a more experiential, play-based approach to learning which incorporates a greater use of the outdoor environment (QCA, 2000; ACCAC, 2004; DfES, 2007; WAG, 2007).

One way in which schools are supporting children's play and learning in the outdoor environment is through an engagement with 'Forest School'. The Forest School concept, closely associated with the Danish early years programme, was brought to England in 1993 by staff from Bridgwater College, Somerset who visited Denmark and were inspired by the use that Danish schools made of the outdoor environment (Bridgwater College, n.d.). On their return, they established their own

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version of Forest School; since that time, around 50 Forest School projects have been set up across Great Britain (Archimedes Training, 2005).

This paper tells the story of an encounter between two early years teachers and two Forest School workers, the growing tensions in their relationships and how these tensions appeared to be resolved. When analysed through a Foucauldian (poststructuralist) lens, the story can be read as a battle between dominant discourses; a battle that was exacerbated by the outdoor environment in which this conflict took place. To set the context for this story it is important briefly to consider early years education policy in England and Wales in recent years as well as the key aims and approach of Forest School.

Early education policy in Wales

In the UK, the early years tradition, drawing on theories proposed by pioneers such as Rousseau, Froebel, Montessori and Dewey, upholds the centrality of ‘child-centred’, progressive education, which, in broad terms, sees the child as intrinsically curious and capable; values free play and first-hand learning, which both stems from individual children’s interests and cuts across subject boundaries; and views the teacher as a guide and facilitator (Kwon, 2002). While the term ‘child-centred’ has, over time, been appropriated by different groups of people who have shifted the definition to suit their own interests (Chung & Walsh, 2000), child-centred approaches reached the peak of official acceptance in the late 1960s. By the late 1980s, however, a concern to raise standards within a global marketplace (Soler & Miller, 2003) was reflected in the establishment of a National Curriculum and Assessment system within England and Wales for children aged 5–16 years (Education Reform Act of 1988): essentially through placing ‘subjects’ rather than the ‘child’ at the centre of the curriculum.

The National Curriculum exerted considerable influence on the development of a centralised curriculum for the early years, defined initially as ‘Desirable outcomes for children’s learning on entering compulsory education’ (SCAA, 1996). In Wales, following devolution in 1999, concerns about the early introduction of formal, sedentary activities (WAG, 2003), and the negative impact that this might have on children’s motivation to learn (Barton, 2002) led to proposals for the Foundation Phase for Wales (ACCAC, 2004). This drew on the ‘Desirable Learning Outcomes’ (ACCAC, 2000), and, paralleling developments in England, strengthened and made more explicit the commitment to active, play-based learning in both inside and outside environments. The Foundation Phase framework identifies seven areas of learning with specified outcomes linked to National Curriculum Level Descriptions, although it is maintained that these areas should not be approached in isolation but should form part of a holistic, integrated and cross-curricular approach with an emphasis on the development of skills (WAG, 2007, p. 6). Furthermore, it is personal and social development, well-being and cultural diversity that is seen to be ‘at the heart of the Foundation Phase’ (WAG, 2007, p. 6) with the child ‘at the centre of any planned curriculum’

(WAG, 2007, p. 6). Significantly, the Foundation Phase is for children aged from three to seven years (the English Foundation Stage now being for children from birth to five years) ensuring not only that Reception class children are protected from the impact of the more prescriptive approaches associated with Key Stage One (KS1) of the National Curriculum, but also that throughout KS1 children are afforded more informal learning experiences. The Foundation Phase is currently being piloted in 42 settings: full implementation (across the three the seven age range) is due to take place in 2010.

Moving outdoors

It is beyond the scope of this article to make the case for outdoor play. It is worth emphasising, however, that one of the significant factors associated with play in the outdoor environment is that of risk. The consequences of risk-taking can be negative—resulting in loss or harm—and as Sharp (2004) notes, within the rising ‘culture of fear’ there is a tendency to protect children ‘from situations previously considered to be innocent and risk free’ (p. 91). As a result, many children are allowed little time for free play in the outdoor environment away from the gaze of adults (Valentine, 1997). However, while safety will be an important issue for all those working with young children, numerous writers (e.g. Lindon, 1999; Stephenson, 2003) have claimed that there is a need also to recognise the positive outcomes to be gained from engaging in risky activities, such as the development of self-esteem and self-confidence. In her study, Stephenson found that young children actually seek out physical challenges in their play: this was ‘an integral part of their drive to extend their physical prowess and so their independence’ (2003, p. 38). As a result, risk-taking, and learning how to identify and deal with risk, can be seen as part of children’s natural development and thus an important life skill (Stephenson, 2003).

Forest School

As noted above, involvement with Forest School is one way in which schools are able to provide children with opportunities for play, risk-taking and practical, experiential learning within a natural, outdoor environment. Although a number of academics (e.g. Murray, 2004; Davis & Waite, 2005) have begun to examine the Forest School concept as it has been established in Great Britain, there is, as yet, little research on Forest School published in academic journals. Furthermore, the Forest School concept appears to be developing and shifting as it is taken on by groups with other interests (Maynard, 2007a). Maynard’s (2007b) identification of the aims, approach and ethos of Forest School as they relate to young children drew on data posted on various Forest School websites as well as that collected through interviews with the two Forest School workers featured in this paper. It is assumed, therefore, that this account best represents their interpretation of the Forest School concept.

Maynard (2007b) suggests that the primary aim of Forest School appears to be the development of children's self-esteem, self-confidence and independence skills. A second aim is to encourage children to appreciate, care for and respect the natural environment. Children normally attend Forest School for a half or whole day a week, regardless of weather conditions and ideally throughout the year, so enabling them to experience the outdoor environment in all seasons. In the initial visits to the woodlands, they are encouraged to explore and play in the natural environment and to take part in games such as 'one, two, three, where are you?' (a form of Hide and Seek) as well as practical activities such as hunting for mini-beasts, using mirrors, collecting sticks of different lengths and sharing and acting out stories (Maynard, 2007b).

Maynard (2007b) notes that taking appropriate risks is an important element of the Forest School approach: it is argued that personal, social and emotional development is achieved through providing children with small, achievable and progressively more challenging tasks at which they are likely to succeed. In addition, once children understand basic safety rules, they are introduced to adult-size tools such as saws and loppers and may help to lay and light a fire—this is made possible by the high adult-child ratio (around one adult for every four children). Maynard (2007b) indicates that underlying this approach there appears to be a belief that children are naturally curious and capable, and that adults should be respectful and convey their sense of trust in the child's abilities.

The research

This paper draws on the findings of a research project that evaluated a local Forest School programme. The programme involved a total of 25 early years children (16 children in a Reception class and nine children in a Special Teaching Facility), their teachers (Jenni and Sara) and learning support assistants. The children from the Special Teaching Facility, who were aged five to seven years, had a range of significant and complex learning difficulties. The primary school, which was situated in an area of social and economic disadvantage in South Wales, was not involved in the piloting of the Foundation Phase.

The key Forest School staff who took part in this programme were Mel, the project leader, and her assistant Polly. Mel was a qualified teacher while Polly had experience of working with adults with special educational needs. The programme began with three introductory sessions in the children's classrooms and in the school grounds. This was followed by 16 weekly sessions held in a local woodland.

The research focused on the following three broad areas:

- the impact and benefits of involvement in Forest School for the children involved;
- the organisation, structure and content of the Forest School programme;
- the philosophical basis of Forest School, its relationship to the class teachers' ways of working and that implied in the proposed Foundation Phase document.

Interviews with the teachers and with the Forest School workers were conducted at the beginning and end of the project. In the initial interviews, the teachers were asked about their understandings of Forest School and their expectations of, and feelings about their involvement in, the Forest School programme. The Forest School workers were asked about the Forest School aims and philosophy and the particular programme they were devising for the children in this school. These (and other) issues were revisited in informal discussions throughout the programme and in the final interviews when both the teachers and Forest School workers were asked to reflect on and evaluate their experiences. A follow-up discussion with the teachers was undertaken a few weeks after the end of the programme; this also was recorded and analysed.

In addition, the initial introductory session, which took place in the classroom, was observed as well as six sessions in the woodlands—time constraints meant that the outdoor observations focused mainly, although not exclusively, on the children and teachers from the Reception Class. Field notes were made and photographs taken as documentary evidence. At the end of the programme, the teachers and Forest School staff held an evaluation meeting and this was also observed and field notes taken. Finally, the Forest School workers provided the research team with a copy of their weekly notes and evaluations as well as photographs they had taken of the children involved in Forest School activities.

Poststructuralism and Foucault

In analysing data, I drew on poststructuralist ideas, particularly those of Foucault. This was, for me, a risky business: as Davies (2003) notes, in poststructuralist thought ‘you no sooner find a direction, as line of movement, than you are confronted with the fact that after all what you see is not what you thought at all’ (p. 142).

One important theme that runs through much of Foucault’s work is that of power (McNay, 1994). Foucault argued that in modern societies, power is not something that is owned and used by particular individuals. Rather, it is dispersed throughout society: it is silent and pervasive, flowing through a network of social practices and relations (Foucault, 1977). Thus while we are all governed, we also govern ourselves and to a greater or lesser extent may also govern others (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999).

Foucault notes that the circulation of disciplinary power is supported by the ‘distribution of individuals in space’ (1977, p. 141): this may require the use of an enclosure (such as a school). Within the enclosure, individuals (e.g. teachers and pupils) are distributed between different and visible ‘cells’ (e.g. classrooms) and their use of time and space is often regulated by means of timetables. Being focused on the production of docile bodies (Foucault, 1977), within schools, for example, children are taught how to sit (‘nicely’), to put their hand up to ask a question and to keep themselves clean and tidy: their bodies are ‘colonised’ through disciplinary power (Danaher *et al.*, 2000, p. 106).

Individuals are also subject to ‘hierarchical observation’: a visible, authoritative gaze, which is able ‘to see everything constantly’ (Foucault, 1977, p. 173). Foucault noted that a ‘relation of surveillance . . . is inscribed at the heart of the practice of

teaching' (p. 176): teachers watch pupils but are also themselves observed by headteachers, inspectors and parents. Importantly, Foucault (1977) maintained, whether individuals are actually being observed is unimportant, it is the possibility of being seen at all times that is enough to ensure that control is maintained: the normalising gaze being turned inwards and used by individuals to observe, evaluate and regulate their own behaviour. The idea of observation is also related to the rise and impact of the human sciences, which focus their attention on the human body and behaviour. Foucault noted that with the development of the human sciences came 'the power of the Norm' (1977, p. 184). That is, scientific method was used to observe, test and analyse human beings, determine what is deemed as normal, and 'to shape people towards a norm' (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999, p. 29).

For Foucault, then, knowledge is inseparable from power and also closely related to 'discourse' and 'truth'. Danaher *et al.* (2000) note that society is divided into many different social and cultural fields—e.g. education, politics and the family—with institutions distributed across these fields. Institutions—such as schools and universities—have a physical presence but are also constituted through hierarchical relationships (Danaher *et al.*, 2000). Each field speaks to itself and of itself through discourses (Danaher *et al.*, 2000): particular and shared 'languages', meanings and practices. For Foucault, while we are governed by a desire to know the truth—a 'will to truth' (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 42)—there is no truth to be found. Instead, there are many different ways of giving meaning to the world—many discourses—although not all carry the same weight or power (Weedon, 1997). Within fields of knowledge, what counts as truth is under constant challenge: as certain discourses are officially sanctioned by institutions, others are marginalised and silenced (MacNaughton, 2005). MacNaughton argues that officially produced and sanctioned truths 'resonate more powerfully in and through us' (2005, p. 29) and form regimes that govern what are held to be 'normal and desirable ways to think, act and feel' to the extent that 'it is difficult to imagine thinking, acting or feeling in any other way' (p. 32).

As a result, Poststructuralists do not see individuals as having an essential, coherent, stable identity—they do not have an 'innermost truth' (McNay, 1994, p. 5). Rather, individuals' sense of self—their subjectivities—are constituted and continually reconstituted through the many and varied discourses in which individuals participate (Davies, 2003, p. xii). Danaher *et al.* (2000) note that complex discursive flows produce a 'multiplicity of subject positions' (p. 43): individuals position themselves and are positioned by others in numerous and often conflicting ways (Davies, 2003), e.g. as a loving (or over-controlling?) parent, an independent (or rebellious?) daughter, an efficient (or authoritarian?) teacher and a committed (or radical?) environmentalist. As a result, Davies maintains, our subjectivities are not only complex and changing but also inconsistent (2003, p. xii).

Danaher *et al.* (2000) note, however, that while we are constituted as subjects by practices of power and normalisation, we can resist these practices—we can destabilise officially sanctioned truths (MacNaughton, 2005, p. 43). Dahlberg *et al.* (1999) note that through practising 'technologies of the self'—through making visible, deconstructing, problematising and questioning dominant discourses and the

constructions and practices they produce—it is possible to create spaces ‘in which alternative discourses and constructions can be produced and new boundaries created’ (p. 34).

The findings

In the initial interviews, Sara and Jenni maintained that they knew little about Forest School although they felt sure that the children would enjoy being outdoors. Jenni commented that she was ‘happy to fit in with what ever Mel and Polly wanted to do, with the proviso that it’s safe and suitable for the children’.

Mel and Polly also expressed a desire to work closely with Sara and Jenni. However, they also noted that, in their experience, teachers often had a very different approach from theirs and that, initially at least, this could cause some tensions and difficulties. Polly stated:

I’ve found in the past that it’s quite difficult for teachers to let go of the children’s hands. And . . . our aim is for a child to go off and explore. Teachers have difficulty with that because they like to have them where they can see them . . . they’re used to operating in a classroom where they need to keep them very disciplined . . . and we have less discipline, we don’t mind if they’re a little bit chaotic within a structure. We want the children to lead us in their learning, which is on its head compared with the school system . . . We set up games to allow the children to explore and . . . we find the teacher will come along and grab them by the hand and say come and look at this. And we don’t want that to happen.

In the initial few weeks of the programme and even before the children’s first visit to the woods, tensions did emerge. Both Polly and Sara described one incident:

Polly: We had walked round the side of the school to collect sticks and we played the game ‘one, two, three, where are you?’ . . . and the point of this game is to allow the children to make their own decisions and to feel the excitement of taking the initiative . . . running ahead and finding their own groups. So the children were dragged along . . . ‘Right, we’re going to hide here’. It was an impossible situation.

Sarah: . . . the children ran away across the yard and I told them to stop . . . Polly didn’t like that. But a van was going up and down the drive. The clash was there immediately.

When reflecting on this incident, the teachers commented that they needed to keep the children safe and to meet curriculum targets. As a result, they maintained, they had ‘to set tight boundaries’ and ensure that there was a high level of control.

Differences between the approaches of the teachers and the Forest School workers were also evident during the initial visits to the woods. Field notes revealed that Sara and Jenni led the children onto the site in ‘crocodile’ formation, gathered groups of children around them to point out particular features of the woodland and held the children’s hands when they felt the terrain was particularly rough or challenging. As they had indicated, they appeared to have a high level of control and were both directive and protective. Polly and Mel, on the other hand, were observed to adopt a

quieter, more facilitative style. When children encountered practical problems or became involved in disputes they stood back and encouraged the children, sometimes quite literally, to stand on their own two feet.

As the programme progressed, the role of the adult remained a particular point of tension. Polly and Mel again commented that the teachers intervened in the children's activities in a way that was incompatible with their aims and approach. Polly explained:

Sometimes...I've been standing back for a reason...to let the children find out for themselves and I've had a member of staff from the school watch my behaviour and obviously gone, 'well she's not doing it so I've got to do it'. It's frustrating.

At the same time, the teachers appeared to become increasingly frustrated with what they perceived to be Mel and Polly's lack of intervention which, in their view, led to a lack of control and therefore, created unnecessary risk. Their frustration was particularly evident during an activity called 'The Bear Hunt'. In this activity, children were asked to follow a series of clues scattered around the woodland in order to find a hidden teddy bear. As part of this activity, children were allowed to run ahead of the adults and away from their usual base area. Jenni later commented:

On the bear hunt there were no boundaries set and the children just ran ahead. We had to stop them and bring them back—I was worried that they could get lost. Members of the public were on the site as well and the children weren't told where to stop or not to go in front of us. Polly and Mel think children have their own boundaries and that's where they'll stop. Well that can't be.

A second incident took place when the Forest School workers allowed the children in Sara's class to jump down from a tree stump that was near a barbed wire fence. Sara was unhappy about this:

The barbed wire. That worried me. I don't feel it should have been there. Where we were, was right to the side of the fence... they were chin height with this barbed wire. They found a tree they wanted to climb up and jump off. And I did intervene there.

As the weeks progressed, the declining relationship between the teachers and the Forest School workers became more apparent. Polly maintained that she appreciated that the teachers' aims were very different from her own but that while the teachers 'wanted to educate the children and get them to conform', she sometimes found the way in which they did this was 'disrespectful'. The teachers maintained that they felt their 'normal way of working' was being criticised and that their actions were often met with disapproval. Sara commented:

I don't think Polly always agreed with the way we handled our children. She wanted to let them be, let them do what they wanted to do. She would say 'let them go' so it meant following them. There were issues from her point of view—she probably thought we were being too restrictive. We had to make sure everyone was safe.

By the programme evaluation meeting these tensions appeared to have been put aside: the teachers and Forest School workers agreed that the children had benefited from their involvement in the programme, and Sara and Jenni maintained that the vast majority of the experiences offered to the children had been ‘appropriate’. The activities that were most highly rated by the teachers were those that focused on the development of practical skills and, in particular, those which the teachers could see as having the potential for supporting children’s learning within the statutory curriculum.

In the final interviews, the teachers indicated that they had begun to question their normal ways of working and contrasted their essentially teacher-led approach—‘we’re so directive’—with that implemented by the Forest School workers. However, the teachers also recognised the constraints on their practice. Jenni commented:

At the end of the day we’re confined by the National Curriculum and we have targets and we’ve got to focus on those . . . Letting the child learn as it wants to . . . it’s a risk. And the parents want to see what the children have learnt.

For Sara, the challenge to her thinking was particularly problematic given that she maintained that her professional experience had shown her that this was the only way that the children in her unit made progress. She commented:

I’m torn. I’ve got this job to do and I can see the only way to do it in the classroom is to have structure and conformity . . . that’s me. But I would like to give these children a day a week or an afternoon a week every week where they’ve got opportunities for a lot more freedom.

A few weeks later, Sara maintained that she was now ‘attempting to loosen her control’: she ‘let go of children’s hands more’ and when it was raining ‘dressed them up and let them splash in puddles’. Indeed, both Sara and Jenni commented that they were now committed to making much greater use of practical, hands-on activities in the outdoor environment. Jenni commented:

Forest School does relate to my own philosophy in terms of the use of outdoors—I believe in that because children can get so much from it. I now think the curriculum we offer our children just isn’t suitable and the outdoor curriculum is more so. So what I’ve taken from this is using the outdoors more. Sara and I have an interest in outdoor education . . . we’re outdoorsy sort of people . . . and it’s given us loads of ideas which we can take on board next year even if we don’t take them into the forest. We want to develop the outdoor area here. We’ve got the equipment to make dens and we want to put a mud bath in. And take them for walks . . .

Discussion

When adopting a (poststructuralist) Foucauldian perspective, this story can be read as an encounter between the particular and conflicting truths spoken by and through the

teachers and the Forest School workers. As part of the school institution, the teachers (still working within the ‘Desirable outcomes’ and National Curriculum frameworks) spoke the discourse of teacher-directed learning in order to meet predetermined curriculum goals: this was ‘normal’ practice. They recognised that this required the exercise of authority and tight control over what the children learnt and the way in which they learnt it. For example, Sara and Jenni wanted to ensure that the children could be seen at all times, viewed teacher intervention as highly significant and were reluctant to allow children to take the lead in their learning.

In this respect, the teachers indicated that they also were aware of being observed; like the children, they were the object of the disciplinary gaze (Foucault, 1977). Thus, Sara referred to being ‘confined’ by the National Curriculum as well as by the expectations and judgements of parents. But control appeared important to Jenni and Sara for another reason: it resonated with the discourse of risk—both social anxiety about ‘stranger dangers’ (given there was public access to the woods) and the need to keep children safe from harm (from the van in the school drive and from the barbed wire in the woods). As a result, ‘letting go’—losing sight of the children and control of their learning—was perceived to be a risky business.

That the Forest School workers resisted the current dominant educational discourses is unsurprising. Being positioned outside the school institution—outside the flow of disciplinary power (Foucault, 1977)—they were more able to do so. Thus while the teachers prioritised curriculum content, the Forest School workers emphasised children’s personal, social and emotional development; while the teachers spoke positively of ‘intervention’, the Forest School workers referred negatively to ‘interference’; while the teachers stressed the need for control and, to an extent, conformity (shaping children towards the norm), the Forest School workers promoted individuality, independence and freedom.

In addition, the Forest School workers’ construction of the child (e.g. Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999) differed from that of the teachers. Within the discourses spoken by the teachers, children were positioned as weak: they needed to be protected and to be taught predetermined, officially sanctioned knowledge and skills. The Forest School workers, however, positioned children as strong: they were perceived to be individuals who were capable of looking after themselves and of directing their own learning. Unsurprisingly, then, while the teachers emphasised the negative side of risk-taking—the possibility of loss or harm—the Forest School workers stressed the positive benefits to be gained by engagement in risky activities.

That the differing truths of the teachers and Forest School workers were brought directly into conflict was exacerbated by the context in which this encounter was located—that it was outside the classroom walls. The teachers’ and children’s subjectivities—their identities as teachers and pupils—appeared to be embedded within the physical structure and relationships that constituted the school institution (Foucault, 1977). Millei (2005) notes that the discourse of the classroom—e.g. how it looks, as well as its regulations, rules and routines—‘speaks’ particular power relations and expected ways of being and behaving. When working outside the enclosure of the classroom, and particularly when working away from the school

boundaries in the more open woodland, the children were less visible and less contained and, as a result, control was more problematic. In addition, when outdoors, it was the Forest School workers who claimed authority—it was they who normally made decisions about activities and experiences. Moreover, the activities they devised appeared to support the children’s resistance to disciplinary power—to becoming ‘docile bodies’ (Foucault, 1977): children were encouraged to interact more informally with adults, to run freely, to get dirty. Finally, within the discourses spoken by the Forest School workers, Jenni and Sara were positioned not as good teachers but as over-protective and over-controlling adults.

There was, however, a further complication. The Forest School workers may not have spoken the dominant educational discourse but their truths did resonate with what traditionally has been seen as ‘good’ early years education: a child-centred approach. In addition, the Forest School workers’ enthusiasm for the outdoor environment called out to Jenni and Sara who described themselves as ‘outdoorsy’ people. Both these discourses sat comfortably with the approach advocated within the proposed Foundation Phase guidelines. As a result, the teachers appeared to recognise that the Forest School approach did have some ‘cultural capital’ (Bourdieu, 1986).

While not intentionally practising ‘technologies of the self’ (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999), for the teachers, the encounter with Forest School made visible the discourse of teacher-directed, outcomes-based learning and the related discourses of risk (as negative) and control (as positive) that, in part, constituted their subjectivities: as Sara said: ‘that’s me’. These discourses ran in conflict not only with the truths spoken by the Forest School workers but also with other discourses with which the teachers were inscribed.

Exposing the commonalities, contradictions and conflict between these discourses may have been unsettling but it provided the teachers with a ‘space’ (Dahlberg *et al.*, 1999) in which they were able to reinterpret the children’s experiences in the outdoor environment and make changes to their practice. While not entirely embracing the positive view of risk-taking, they began to ‘let go’ a little and to incorporate more informal, practical and child-centred approaches to learning within the outdoor environment.

Conclusion

Adopting a Foucauldian lens enabled me to read the encounter between the teachers and the Forest School workers not as a personal conflict but as a battle between two dominant discourses: two educational traditions with different values, beliefs and goals. It also provided a way of understanding some of the challenges and perceived threats faced by these teachers when working with Forest School in the outdoor environment; particularly when they were away from the school ‘enclosure’. At a personal level, it enabled me to make sense of my own shifting and contradictory sense of self and, more fundamentally, through making visible the political nature of all knowledge, suggested why and how particular ideas, and an acceptance of what is

‘true’, ‘right’ and ‘normal’, can so effectively come to dominate and constrain our thinking, speech and actions.

An emphasis on the political is important: what we may see as ‘true’ knowledge, ‘right’ ways of thinking and being, and ‘normal’ power structures, can hide oppressive and unjust power relations. MacNaughton (2005) argues that, this being the case, we can fight for equity and social justice through seeking multiple perspectives and listening to the voices that dominant discourses have silenced: for example, the voices of children positioned by officially sanctioned discourses as vulnerable and in need of protection. Of course, in this study, a poststructuralist perspective was employed only as an analytical tool; the teachers were not attempting to ‘use knowledge tactically’ (MacNaughton, 2005) for this purpose. It may be significant, therefore, that, while the teachers reconstructed their professional subjectivities in a way that more closely addressed their current interests (Weedon, 1997), their new ‘truths’ also resonated with the latest officially sanctioned educational discourse: that embedded within the proposed Foundation Phase for Wales.

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