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The challenge to care in outdoor education - what Forest School offers. A response to McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006)

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ABSTRACT

This paper responds to a challenge to develop our understanding of an ethic of care in outdoor and adventure education. We are teacher educators who want to promote flourishing for all, through outdoor learning in local nature, as part of everyday life in primary schools. Integral to this complex and challenging task is a relational ethic of care. Previous research has drawn upon Noddings ethic of care to theoretically frame curricula in the Outward Bound adventure education organisation, making explicit the priority to care integral to adventure education. However, 'several difficulties' with Noddings theory were acknowledged. Through the lens of contemporary place-responsive and more-than-human epistemology, we extend Noddings ethic of care to provide a theoretical framing for this work. We illustrate this theoretical framing and possibilities for organising curricula as centres of care using findings from a recent ethnography of Forest School in one primary school in Ireland.

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Introduction

McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006) drew upon Noddings ethic of care to theoretically frame curricula in the Outward Bound adventure education organisation. Their purpose was to make explicit the priority to care integral to adventure education, and to underscore the importance of a robust theoretical underpinning to infuse outdoor and adventure education pedagogy more generally. Drawing from ground-breaking scholarship on a relational ethic of care (Gilligan, 1992; Noddings, 1992, 2005, 1984/2003), McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006) set out possibilities for organising adventure education curricula as centres of care for self, close others, distant others and the natural world, as Noddings suggests. McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006) then set out an exemplar curriculum framework for Outward Bound across the four centres of care, drawing on Noddings (2005) four components of modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation.

However, the authors also highlighted difficulties with Noddings relational ethic of care. These centred firstly upon her requirement for proximity in the caring relationship, and secondly, her humanistic paradigm, whereby '*the non-human drops largely out of*

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sight' (McKenzie & Blenkinsop, 2006, p. 98). They concluded their paper with an exhortation to the reader to engage with care ethics in outdoor and adventure education, given their concern at the dearth of an explicit commitment to care in education more generally. Helpfully, they set out some questions to guide this task, primarily centred upon the necessity for a relational ethic of care in outdoor and adventure education and on finding ways to extend an ethic of care beyond the proximate.

That is the challenge taken on in this paper. This response is situated within public primary (elementary) education in Ireland, where recent education policy has focussed upon flourishing and wellbeing as key measures of successful public education (Department of Education, 2023; Department of Education and Skills, 2019; Government of Ireland, 2022, 2024). Irish education policy defines flourishing and wellbeing as being present '*when a person realises their potential, is resilient in dealing with the normal stresses of their life, takes care of their physical wellbeing and has a sense of purpose, connection and belonging to a wider community* (Department of Education and Skills, 2019, p. 10). While the broadness of the definition is welcome, it lies firmly within the human sphere. We (the authors of this paper) believe progressive, nature-based outdoor and adventure education offers access to a more complete experience of wellbeing and flourishing, one that is inclusive of the natural world, one which enables an ethic of care to be practiced, and one which offers impacts beyond the outdoor learning session to lived experience more generally. It is appropriate that we explain our positionality at this point.

In our role as teacher educators, we are seeking to find a place in our schools for outdoor learning pedagogy which embraces nature as a co-teacher (Blenkinsop & Fettes, 2020; Cree & Robb, 2021; The Crex Crew Collective & Blenkinsop, 2018; Quay & Jensen, 2018). For us, this is an essential element of flourishing school communities. Our position is that flourishing must comprise mutually reciprocal benefits for *all* sentient beings, a more radical and inclusive vision than currently set out in Irish education policy. Joan, the first author, worked as a primary school principal in Dublin city until her retirement in 2016. Her PhD in 2022 explored the possibilities offered by Forest School as caring pedagogy in the primary school. She was a founder member of the Irish Forest School Association in 2016 and is currently chairperson. Orla, the second author, has worked in initial teacher education for over 15 years in both Ireland and the UK. She teaches across science education, sustainability, outdoor learning and local studies at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels. She has contributed to the development of the new curriculum specification in Social and Environmental Education in the updated Irish primary curriculum, through her work as a member of the curriculum development group.

While it should be obvious that human health, wellbeing and flourishing are inextricably linked with the Earth's living systems, mostly western society does not seem to act as if this is the case (See, for example, Bonnett, 2012a, 2012b; Bowers, 2001; The Care Collective, 2020; Orr, 2011; Pyle, 1993; UNESCO, 2015). Furthermore, as The Crex Crew Collectve and Jickling (2018) point out, education is a necessary partner in any transformational project of the scale required to address the current catastrophic crisis in the human relationship with Earth. This project is about harnessing pedagogical strategies to enable school communities to experience the presence and the power of nature, regularly, during school, through progressive pedagogy with(in) nature which promotes an ethic of care. This is a transformative vision of schools that places care at the centre of practice.

Noddings the educator offers ideas on how to promote care in our schools in her extensive writings over many years (Noddings, 2005, 2013a). However, for us, as already stated, an ethic of care must include all sentient beings, a community of which we humans are but a part. We want to move schools towards a co-operative, co-teaching partnership with nature (Abram, 2017; Blenkinsop & Beeman, 2010; Blenkinsop & Fettes, 2020, 2021; Bonnett, 2017; The Crex Crew Collective and Blenkinsop, 2018; McKenzie, 2008), a position that is not explicit in Noddings writing. We, like McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006), believe Noddings ethic of care and her proposal that school curricula be organized around centres of care are helpful in meeting this challenge. The degree to which western education systems can adapt from within to this new model is moot and yet, the world-wide growth of progressive nature-based pedagogy is witness to possibilities for transformative change in education systems. The pedagogic challenge to care in this view is to incorporate a reciprocity to all relationships, towards being and living with(in) nature, a rebalancing away from human exceptionality. As Bonnett puts it, understanding this world and its moral demands '*requires ways of knowing it that allow it to show itself in all its facets*' (Bonnett, 2012b, p. 297). Explicitly acknowledging the sentience of nature requires an extension of Noddings relational caring beyond the humanistic paradigm and a listening stance towards the interconnectedness of all species. Extending a relational ethic of care to all sentient beings is a deeply challenging task for many, as Noddings own scholarship demonstrates. Yet this impediment must be overcome in order to help us unlock the possibilities of extending relational caring beyond the human and into everyday practice in our schools towards flourishing for all.

The terms nature and the natural world are used interchangeably in this paper in their generally understood meaning of all the animals, plants, landscapes and features of the earth not made or caused by people. The term more-than-human (Abram, 2017) describes the agency and interconnectedness of all beings, challenging anthropocentrism, or the supremacy of humans over nature. Outdoor education is used as a general term in its broadly accepted definition of learning that is experiential, takes place mostly outdoors and that at its core is about relationships between people and places (Smith, 2021). Outdoor education encompasses both adventure education and environmental education. In this paper, we use the term interchangeably with outdoor learning. Pedagogy is understood as the '*. . . instructional techniques and strategies which enable learning to take place . . . the interactive process between teacher and learner and the learning environment*' (Siraj-Blatchford et al., 2002, p. 28).

The paper is organised as follows. First, Noddings ethic of care and her vision of schools as centres of care are described. The second section critically appraises her ideas in light of the gaps identified by McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006), drawing from an eclectic but connected literature on place-responsiveness, children's relationship with the natural world, eco-philosophy, indigenous scholarship and post-humanist writing. The final part of the paper proposes Forest School pedagogy as an exemplar of an ethic of care in outdoor learning pedagogy, drawing on a recent Irish study (Whelan, 2022; Whelan & Kelly, 2023, 2024). Forest School is a progressive, nature-based pedagogy (Cree & Robb, 2021; Forest School Canada, 2014; Harding, 2021; McCree & Cree, 2017). The terms Forest School and Forest School pedagogy are used interchangeably in this paper. In Ireland, contemporary Forest School emerged from within the primary school sector in 2012 (Whelan, 2022). Six guiding principles underpin Forest School pedagogy. See Figure 1.

Time: Forest School is a long-term process of regular sessions; the cycle of planning, observation, adaptation and review links each session.

Forest: Forest School takes place in a woodland or natural environment to support the development of a relationship between the learner and the natural world.

Pedagogy: Forest School uses a large range of learner-centred processes to create a community for being, development and learning.

Intention: Forest School aims to promote the holistic development of all those involved, fostering resilient, confident, independent and creative learners.

Risk: Forest School offers learners the opportunity to take supported risks appropriate to the environment and to themselves.

Training: Forest School is run by qualified Forest School practitioners who continuously develop and maintain their professional practice.

Figure 1. The six principles of Forest School. Source: www.irishforestschoolassociation.ie n.d.

These principles are enacted most frequently as a regular (usually weekly) child-led, experiential pedagogical opportunity for the same group of children, facilitated by a trained Forest School leader (who may be the regular teacher) to spend a minimum of two hours in local nature during the school day (Cree & Robb, 2021; Harding, 2021; Young et al., 2016). The next section will describe and critically analyse Noddings ethic of care in light of the challenge McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006) have set.

Noddings relational ethic of care

For Noddings, caring starts from the premise that life is about '*caring and being cared for in the human domain and full receptivity and engagement in the non-human world*' (Noddings, 2013a, p. 174). This relational orientation means that an ethic of care must remain '*tightly tied to experience because all its deliberations focus on the human beings involved in the situation under discussion and their relations to each other*' (Noddings, 1988, p. 218). The 'one-caring,' the carer, displays engrossment and displacement of motivation during the caring episode, towards meeting the expressed needs of the cared-for. The response of the cared-for is crucial to establishing relational caring (Noddings, 1988). It is

the experience of being 'cared-for' which enables us to confirm the caring relationship in our lives. In turn we learn to 'care-for' intimate others (those with whom we are in proximity, what Noddings calls the private sphere), as well as learning to 'care-about' distant others, Noddings public sphere. The public sphere includes distant others, the natural world, and the cultural world of things and ideas.

In order to actualise this ethic of care in our schools, Noddings (2005) proposed a model of organising education around centres of caring for self, others, the natural world and the 'human made' world and the world of ideas, using four components of modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation. The role of the 'teacher,' as the one-caring, is to help children to be the recipients of care, a role which the child in turn will take on as they grow older. The primary concern for Noddings is the proximal connection between the child and the teacher, predicated on expressed needs, not '*the needs assumed by the school as an institution and the curriculum as a prescribed course of study*' (Noddings, 2012, p. 772). Too often we presume to know what the other requires. This is especially true of relationships where there is an unequal balance of power, such as that of the teacher and the student. Mostly, western education systems silence learner voices and indeed are places where the voices of nature have not yet even been recognised. Noddings is emphatic that the emphasis is always on relationship first; learning arises as a consequence of that relationship. This is the crux of Noddings relational approach. This is why relational caring at a distance is difficult and why Noddings is tentative in her inclusion of nature in an ethic of care. For her, the essential 'confirmation' of the caring relationship is not so evident and so assumptions can take precedence over expressed needs. Noddings is cautious about the reciprocity, the response, the confirmation of the cared-for offered by nature as McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006) highlight.

Yet, Noddings acknowledges the deep need of humanity to affiliate with(in) nature (Wilson, 1984) as comparable to the need to care. She also acknowledges that we need to know more about how place contributes to meaningful education, describing sensitivity to place as *'universal'* (Noddings, 2002, p. 156). Following Dewey (1915), she is clear that there is no substitute for *'direct contact'* with animals and plants (Noddings, 2005, p. 124). In later work, drawing from Wilson (1984) on biophilia, she describes the lack of opportunities for children to spend time in nature as '*a form of alienation very like homelessness*' (Noddings, 2013b, p. 89). We suggest that this leaves open the possibility that consciously spending time in local nature can open up unforeseen possibilities regarding a more-than-human relational ethic of care. These kinds of proximate encounters with(in) local nature enable an ethic of care in a wider and more inclusive private sphere. The following section explores this in more depth.

Extending an ethic of care to nature

The priority to proximity highlighted by Noddings is shared by eco-philosophers and place-theorists in their emphasis on how places create space for us to become fully human, in the sense that there is a tenacity about the ways in which places exert their influence (Casey, 2001; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). Becoming more conscious of place in education is also about making pedagogy more relevant to the lived experience of school communities, by ensuring that schools are connected to, rather than isolated from, their communities (Mannion et al., 2013), something also prioritized by Noddings the educator. For the place-theorist, like

the care ethicist, proximity enables responsiveness. Therefore, it seems to us that Noddings requirement for proximity *can* enable possibilities for confirmation, the sense of reciprocity which Abram (2017), p. 268) describes, such that when we touch the: ' . . . *bark of a tree, we feel the tree touching us*' (his emphasis). In other words, Noddings has not considered sufficiently the moral significance associated with the intrinsic value of nature as sentient in her ethic of care.

Thus, we face the pedagogical challenge of finding ways to enable humans to more properly access the sentience of the natural world beyond the human. We acknowledge the complexity of experiencing nature as sentient for many of us adults. However, we believe Noddings ethic of care can be expanded beyond the humanistic paradigm. The following section will explore possibilities in that regard.

Bridging the (theoretical) gap

As already discussed, McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006) set out two difficulties with Noddings relational ethic of care. Regarding the first difficulty, proximity, they acknowledge Noddings concern that we cannot 'care for everyone;' at the same time, they point out how, in an increasingly connected world, we must appreciate the implications of our actions beyond the proximate, that is in Noddings 'public domain.' While Noddings does acknowledge this ethic of care in the public domain as 'caring about,' the *confirmation* of the caring relation by the cared-for, essential to her relational ethic of care, is not possible, or at least not as accessible. To explore their second concern (her humanistic philosophy) they draw on ecological caring perspectives (See, for example, the scholarship of Chet Bowers and David Orr) to bridge the gap towards overcoming resistance to universal flourishing. This, suggest McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006), will enable the '*leap of imagination*' required to envision this new way of being, pedagogically speaking.

As a starting point to our proposal that Forest School pedagogy offers possibilities towards closing these theoretical gaps, it is useful to focus on ways we as humans *can* engage with nature through a more-than-human lens. This facilitates an evaluation of the moral imperative upon us to care deeply *for* the natural world (Fien, 2003), a position shared by McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006). Since their 2006 paper, a substantial cross-disciplinary contemporary literature offers compelling evidence of the benefits of spending time with(in) nature as part of formal education (See, for example: Barrable & Booth, 2020); Barrera-Hernández et al. 2020; Chawla 2015; Kuo et al. 2019; Orr 2011; Roberts et al. 2020; Sheldrake et al. 2019; Sobel 2014; World Health Organisation 2016. Being with(in) nature also helps us to gain a better insight into all relationships (Blenkinsop & Fettes, 2020, 2021; Bonnett, 2012a; Chawla, 2002; Cornell, 1989; Goralnik et al., 2014; Gray, 2019; Orr, 2011; Plumwood, 1991; Taylor et al., 2012; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). The power of nature to restore, and to teach, is underlined in this compendium of research. This literature also underlines the sentience of the natural world, and acknowledges while it may be challenging to access for us humans, pursuing that challenge is an imperative. So, what kinds of pedagogical practice will enable us to access these insights and enable relational caring toward flourishing beyond the human?

Place-responsiveness

Any actions must involve experiencing or knowing (the proximity of Noddings) in the first instance, particular places, forests, animals or other nature with which one has specific responsibilities of care (the care-for that Noddings describes). This proximity is, as Bonnett (2007) sets out, '*a receptive sensing* [his emphasis] *that is less susceptible to abstract generalisation and objectification'* (Bonnett, 2007), p. 716). This resonates with Plumwood's idea of the ecological self, 'a *type of relational self, one which includes the goal of the flourishing of earth others and the earth community among its own primary ends, and hence respects or cares for these others for their own sake'* (1993, p. 154–155). This is a relational understanding which recognises the distinctiveness of nature but also the human continuity with it. This definition of relationality between sentient beings is helpful in moving forward our understanding of human relationality within the natural world.

Children and nature

Contemporary research on how children experience nature-based pedagogy have explored how children experience the natural world (See, for example Chawla et al., 2014; Fasting, 2019; Kraftl, 2015). These theorists all describe a mutuality and a relational communicative space that the children and young people experienced, through participating in Forest School, for example, beyond what the human teacher in the regular classroom could offer. Mycock (2020) describes Forest School as an edge space which enabled children, and (potentially) the adults working with them, access towards recognition of the agency of the natural world, echoing Froebel, nearly 200 years ago. He described the child, who *'attributes the same life to all about him. The pebble, the chip of wood, the plant, the flower, the animal—each and all can hear and feel and speak.* (Froebel, 1826 [1912], p. 50, emphasis added, cited in Urban, 2016, p. 117). Importantly, the affective and sensory qualities of such experiences subsequently influence later attitudes towards the outdoors (Chawla, 2002, 2015; Pyle, 1993, 2002; Waite, 2010). Through this kind of experiential learning comes a deeper understanding of how nature and human flourishing are inextricably intertwined and enable purpose and meaning in our lives. In turn a light is shone on the possibilities for relational caring to move beyond the human world, as advocated by McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006).

Post -humanist perspectives

Wals (2017) suggests that an interspecies vantage point offers a post-humanist version of Noddings ethic of care in his call for opportunities during school to enable children to, '*strengthen their relationality with the human, the non-human and the material*' (p. 162). This echoes McKenzie (2008) and her approach to socio-ecological pedagogy through intersubjective experiences. This is the idea of not just considering how walking in a stream feels for us but thinking too about how the streambed feels our footsteps (Piersol, 2014). When we extend the site of learning in this way, there are fundamental changes to the structure of the pedagogical encounter. This is an edgy, reflective space, between thinking and sensing. This is about making room for the voices of our places and their more-

than-human inhabitants in our pedagogy (Stickney & Bonnett, 2020). We must, as Pyle (2016) says, become less '*preoccupied*' so we can '*hear nature's music*' (p. 73). This is an '*ontological shift*,' the leap of imagination, that recognises an active role for nature as co-teacher, such that '*the world literally speaks to us, not in our own language, but in its own; we become, as it were, bilingual*' (Blenkinsop, 2012, p. 356).

An indigenous perspective

The contemporary (re)emergence of nature-based pedagogy has brought a renewed focus on indigenous scholarship and a deeper respect for aboriginal stewardship of the land over millennia (MacEachren, 2013, 2018), a perspective which can help us as adults and as teachers to engage with the challenge of extending an ethic of care set by McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006). Within the Māori world view of *tākaro* (play), for example, '*the world is an arena where Gods, birds and humans play and interact together with/in nature*' (Alcock & Richie, 2018), p. 84). In the Irish context, Magan (2020) laments the loss of old Irish words and the ways of life which are vanishing with them, towards an impoverishment in our language which in turn removes possibilities to access this kind of relationship with(in) nature. This fading language as Magan (2020), p. 12) says, '*not only describes things but also summons them into being, a language that communicates not only to others but to the psyche and the subconscious, a language that is deeply rooted in the environment and can connect us to our surroundings in remarkable ways*.' It is recognition of this interconnectedness of all sentient beings that opens up the possibilities for extending a relational ethic of care with(in) nature. In contrast, western education systems have sought to minimise indigenous perspectives on interdependence between species (Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1998), a cultural imperialism that has sought to stamp out indigenous values historically. It is high time western education systems take account of the lengthy reciprocal relationship between peoples and the land (Blenkinsop & Fettes, 2020). Tradition, as Bowers (2001) describes, is not an obstacle to be overcome, but a rich heritage of ideas, what he calls the '*historical continuities of the culture*' (p. 263). Indigenous pedagogy offers western education systems an appreciation of the unseen forces that drive our universe (Kawagley & Barnhardt, 1998), towards an understanding of the land as part of our being as humans (Blenkinsop & Fettes, 2020). Our lands and all their sentient beings have historical and cultural stories to tell, and as Wall Kimmerer (2020) espouses, we need to learn to listen.

Through consideration of place-responsiveness, children and nature, post-humanist perspectives and an indigenous perspective we have demonstrated ways that humans can engage with more-than-human nature in ways that value its agency, thus potentially enabling access to a relational ethic of care towards flourishing for all. This provides a theoretical bridging of the gap identified by McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006) in Noddings ethic of care. What follows is a research-informed narrative of Forest School as an exemplar of relational caring in schools in practice.

Forest School—an exemplar of relational caring in schools

McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006) drew on Outward Bound as an exemplar adventure education organisation and set out a curriculum for Outward Bound using Noddings centres of care. The final task for this paper is to offer the experience and understanding of Forest School pedagogy in one Irish primary school as an exemplar of how a relational ethic of care can theoretically frame outdoor learning in public primary schools towards enabling flourishing for all (Whelan, 2022; Whelan & Kelly, 2023, 2024) and thus extending the work of McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006). While Outward Bound, an immersive residential adventure education pedagogy, differs substantially from Forest School, nevertheless, the two share a core value of care and sit together within the broad church that is outdoor education.

Ethical and methodological issues

The data were collected as part of an ethnographic doctoral study conducted by the first author, acting as participant-observer, during 22 four-hour Forest School sessions in Bay School (a pseudonym) between September 2019 and March 2020. Hammersley and Atkinson (2019) define ethnography as the *'integration of first-hand empirical investigation with the comparative or theoretical interpretation of social organisation and culture*' (p.1). An ethnographic strategy of enquiry enables the participants' story to be told, but also enables the search for deeper meaning and analytic structure in the data in order to capture the social life and its complexities for participant groups (Van Maanen, 2011; van Manen, 2016). Ethical approval was granted from Dublin City University for the study and the research was carried out with full regard for the university protocols regarding participant selection, informed consent and assent, provision for anonymity, an explanation of researcher positionality, and data management. Validation was managed using multiple strategies (Bazeley, 2013; Wolcott, 1994). For example, data analysis used a recognised framework for thematic analysis (Miles et al., 2014; Saldana, 2016) to ensure constancy and traceability in the qualitative coding process. Low inference field notes and descriptors (Emerson et al., 2011) were adopted and recording devices and software helped to manage the organisation of the data and to provide an 'audit trail.'

An ethic of care as a theoretical framing for Forest School pedagogy

Figure 2 sets out relational caring as a theoretical framework for Forest School pedagogy. The wheel symbolises the idea of schooling as an integrated, interconnected whole, mirroring flourishing for all. The arrows symbolise the relational connection between all aspects of the framework. The hub of the wheel represents educational purpose. In this model, educational purpose is about care as foundational, as Noddings requires. The spokes of the wheel represent the six principles of Forest School. The extension of the site of learning that is 'school' to include local nature is represented by the darker outer wheel rim, place.

The focus in this model is on the relationality and reciprocity between people, place and purpose, in contrast to a focus on people, or place, or purpose. Forest School, practiced according to Noddings four components of modelling, dialogue, practice and

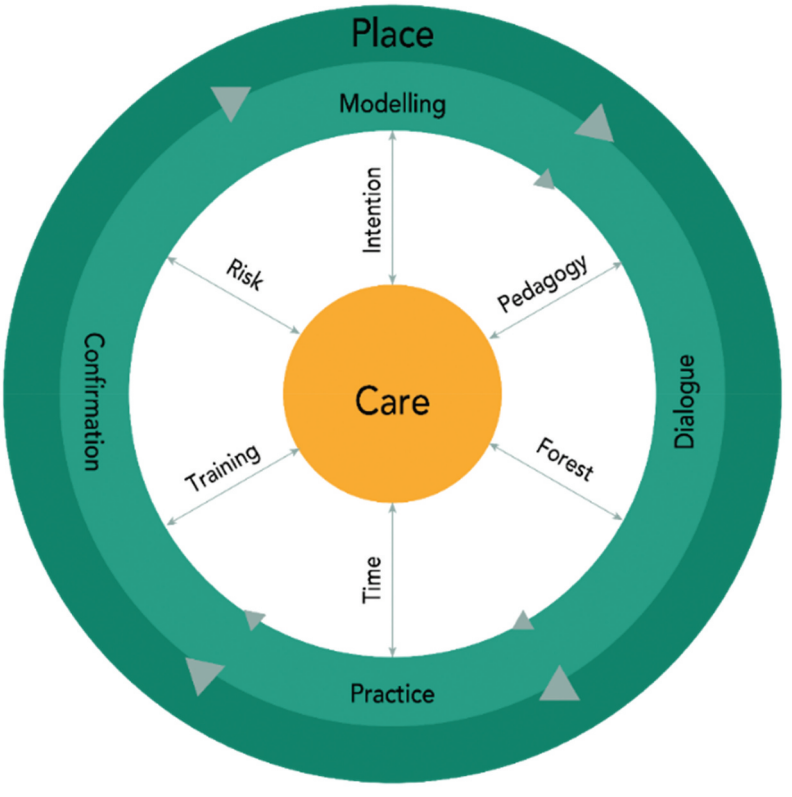

Figure 2. A theoretical framework for Forest School as caring pedagogy.

confirmation, with (in) nature, can potentially offer relational, caring pedagogy, which in turn enables an ethic of care to be extended to all sentient beings. The pivot of this model is care. Figure 3 sets out how we conceptualise Noddings centres of care in Forest School pedagogy to more fully reflect our position on nature as sentient. For example, care for close others is reworded as care for close sentient others. Care about the natural world and care about things and ideas are included as ways to enable dialogue and discussion about 'big ideas' or wicked problems to do with how we, as humans, continue to inhabit the earth, despite her warnings to us that we are close to an endgame. Having explicitly set out how Forest School can be theoretically framed through Noddings' ethic of care, we now set out how that might appear in practice—a key part of the challenge set for us by McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006).

Caring and the lifeworld of Forest School

McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006) set out a matrix to describe an exemplar curriculum for Outward Bound practice based on Noddings centres of care. We approach this task differently. We offer a narrative account of the lived experience of Forest School pedagogy for these participants, to enable you, the reader, to reflect upon this response to the original paper. This approach also maintains fidelity to the ethnographic methodology.

Figure 3. Centres of care in Forest School.

The narrative draws from what van Manen (2016) calls 'essential themes' as a way to consider lived experience or lifeworld. These include relationality (the lived relation we maintain with others and otherness), spatiality (how we experience being in a particular place), corporeality (how we experience our bodies) and temporality (how we experience time). The narrative aims to demonstrate how participating in Forest School pedagogy during the school day offers a way to deliver the regular curriculum in alignment with Noddings idea of schools as centres of care, while also extending *beyond* her groundbreaking scholarship to include the more-than-human. We hope this narrative also demonstrates how Forest School, theoretically framed within an ethic of care, can promote flourishing for all sentient beings. This narrative is not intended to provide a complete account of the experience and understanding of Forest School in Bay School—that is available elsewhere (Whelan, 2022). Rather, we invite you, the reader, to use this narrative to reflect upon the ideas in this paper, in light of the challenge set by McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006).

> The adults and the children described getting to know each other differently in Forest School. The children mostly addressed their teachers by first names in Forest School, although they used formal titles in the indoor classroom. Adults and children are dressed in similar outdoor clothing, wearing boots and carrying backpacks. The more formal communicative culture of their indoor classroom, for example children seeking permission to leave their seat, or before speaking, did not exist in Forest School. Rather, informality characterised how the adults and the children spoke to each other in Forest School. Calling out and shouting to each other by the children (and the adults) was accepted, expected even. The adults participated in the activities, made nature art, learned how to use the tools, set up the tarpaulins for shelter, shared lunch, sat into the circle and expressed gratitude. When it rained, or it was cold, or there were ants about, everyone, potentially, got wet, or cold or bitten.

Relationships between the adults prioritised collaboration. There was a mutual respect for their different roles and individual strengths. These adults shared their knowledge with each other in a democratic and inclusive way. There was an informality to their communication. Humour, fun and laughter were often heard as the adults interacted. This seemed associated with the wider collaborative culture fostered in Bay School. For example, teaching colleagues helped out at short notice, making on-the-spot arrangements regarding cover for colleagues participating in Forest School

The children, too, experienced Forest School as a collaborative, responsive, inclusive learning environment. Though the group of children was smaller than the regular classroom, they interacted with a wider group of peers and adults than they might on a regular school day, through the physical and environmental freedoms extended to them in Forest School. The children had opportunities to more fully work through misunderstandings and tensions in their friendships and relationships during Forest School, often without direct adult intervention.

In Forest School, nature was omnipresent—as a place, a space, a resource, a source of beauty, a challenger, a teacher, a friend. Being with(in) nature fostered curiosity, empathy, a sense of freedom, self-awareness, offering opportunities for agency, autonomy, choice, relaxation and restoration. Nature led the way regarding curriculum decisions during Forest School. Cold days meant lots of active games; wet days meant sheltering closely together; warm days were associated with relaxation and slowing down. Wind and storms underlined the power and the forces of nature. The appearance of tiny creatures like ants or worms could change the learning plan for the session. Nature provided freedom to move, to sit, to stand, to lie down, to climb, to crawl, to be still, in a way that is not usually available to children (or adults) in the indoor classroom. Nature communicated her presence through birdsong, droppings, fleeting glimpses of birds and insects as they flew, fed, listened, built nests; as leaves rustled and sunlight blinded or sent shadows, long and short; through raindrops pittering and pattering and occasionally battering; wind singing or howling; branches creaking and breaking and occasionally a dog or a squirrel joining the play. The forest supported children to be alone, to be in groups or pairs, to be with adults or not, to come together as a whole group, all the while being with(in) nature.

For the children, nature was welcoming and facilitative and fun. A very small number of children described adverse experiences in Forest School, mostly to do with very specific experiences, like getting stung or very wet or feeling cold. Forest School was associated with a sense of bodily integrity, a sense of freedom, associated with playfulness, fun, being trusted by, and trusting of, others. All sensory or bodily interaction was privileged in Forest School, unlike the typical indoor classroom. So, eating, talking, moving, as well as writing, making, thinking and singing, for example hold equal value as potential sources of learning. Being in Forest School facilitated embodied activity, moving, falling, running. There was autonomy regarding opportunities to regulate body temperature by moving to keep warm, to rest if feeling tired, to be alone or to work collaboratively. Children experienced the consequences of their choices, or the choices of their peers—how does it feel to slip on damp ground, to have leaves shoved in your face, to slide down a muddy hill, to manage your body in space. For the children, Forest School was associated with a visceral playfulness in the woods. The children demonstrated a playful and agentic connection with nature. The children played with her, embraced her, talked to her. When they jumped in puddles, the droplets of water rose to meet them. The leaves underfoot crunched louder and louder in response to the children's feet. The hills seemed almost to roll too as the children rolled with them, the children (and on occasion an adult) gathering speed and squealing, with joy and nervousness combined, as they rolled over and over, sometimes ending in tears, but mostly in exhilaration.

In contrast, there were tensions, inconsistencies and complexities in how this relationality was experienced by the teachers. Individually, they were at different stages of understanding.

> Teachers worried about their feelings of an absence of control in Forest School and how that might impact back in the indoor classroom. Children did not respond well to didactic teaching in Forest School. Sometimes, and for some teachers more than others, they were unsure when to intervene. For some observation was about monitoring and engaging in a type of surveillance.
>
> Yet, these teachers welcomed the opportunity that being in Forest School made available for a less didactic role; they found it restorative. This was a chance to reflect, to participate, to observe, to be, to collaborate, with(in) nature. These teachers were supported by the Forest School leader (who was not a teacher) in exploring and learning about Forest School as a pedagogy, and how it diverged from the pedagogies of the indoor classroom and enabled a wider and deeper range of progressive, sensory pedagogical experiences. This Forest School leader played a distinctive role in supporting relational understanding in Forest School that may not otherwise have been available to these teachers.

McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006) challenged outdoor educators to strengthen their pedagogical practices through making their theoretical commitment to care more explicit in their practice. They highlighted the importance of compassion and care beyond the local in an evermore individualistic world. For them, Noddings relational ethic of care, considered alongside an eco-philosophical perspective, offered possibilities for relational caring to explicitly frame pedagogical practice in Outward Bound settings. We have taken on their challenge to explore these ideas further and offer Forest School pedagogy as another way to explicitly frame care in outdoor learning pedagogy. The following section offers our reflection upon how Noddings four criteria of a relational ethic of care (modelling, dialogue, practicing and confirmation) and her centres of care (care for self, close others, distant others and the natural world) are represented in Forest School pedagogy in Bay School, as illustrated in the preceding narrative.

Modelling

The Forest School leader in Bay School, who modelled care for nature in her practice, impacted on the understanding and the experience of other adults, as well as the children. Modelling care for myself is about expressing my needs to the group, particularly regarding basic needs outdoors, to do with keeping dry, warm and safe. These children understood the importance of wearing the right gear. Modelling care is about being inclusive towards others in our language and behaviour. It is about offering help and being supportive for close others. Modelling care for distant others is about citizenship, commitment to community and activism. Modelling care for nature is about low impact activity, gratitude and appreciation, acting in an ethical way towards the environment and participating in and supporting environmental activism. Modelling care for ideas is about having opportunities to dialogue with others, and to be listened to, in various modalities. These kinds of opportunities enable us to grow in our understanding of the more-than-human world.

Dialogue

Forest School in Bay School is about a praxis-oriented approach to pedagogy in our schools. This approach to pedagogy is about problem-posing, predicated upon a relational stance. The teacher becomes the teacher-student and the students

become the students-teachers (Freire, 2017). The more sophisticated knowledge of the teacher is remade in light of praxis with the student. This is the dialogue Noddings (2005) describes as fundamental to a relational ethic of care. Agency, voice and autonomy are actualised through having these kinds of pedagogical interactions. Such pedagogy promotes reflective practice as integral to the learning episode, whereby expectations for the sessions, and how best these might occur in the particular setting are set out, reviewed and reflected upon, by all the participants. Praxis is about individual school communities thinking about their own response to the question of making more relational caring pedagogy available in our schools. It is about considering ways to disrupt and reimagine the powerful cultural institution of school. It is a commitment to being open-ended, open to possibilities and new beginnings (Greene, 1995). It is also a commitment that extends beyond one setting towards consideration of the meaning of education and the purpose of schooling more generally.

Practicing

Practicing Forest School pedagogy enabled these participants to make meaningful connections between each other and the natural world that would not otherwise have been possible. Forest School makes space for the big questions, to do with our being in the world, to be explored in our schools. This is a challenge for us as adults, less so for children. But given the role of the adult in the pedagogical relationship, rising to this challenge is non-negotiable. The challenge is finding ways to reawaken the playfulness of childhood in our daily lives and within our identity as teachers. Over time, and with caring for others, such as the Forest School leader in Bay School, teachers become more comfortable in situating their teaching and learning with(in) nature. Building this reciprocal ethic of care requires educators who have a sense of the possibilities in our surroundings; who place value on being present, on noticing, attuning our senses, attention, stillness, towards flourishing. This endeavour is about making the outdoors an ordinary place to be as part of schooling.

Confirmation

For Noddings (2005), confirmation is the essence of relational understanding. Confirmation is what confirms the expressed need of the other, the sense that another sentient being understands something about me and my response indicates affirmation (or not) towards growth and relationship. Confirmation supports my care for close others through experiencing the difference I can make to another from the response they offer. Nature offers response in abundance, as the children in Bay School demonstrated in their diverse and wholehearted engagement in Forest School. However, this is a skill that must be practiced intentionally over time (Noddings, 2005), akin to apprenticing ourselves to the outdoor place (Wattchow & Brown, 2011), to begin to 'feel' the important stories that must be shared. This practicing was how the adults in Bay School explored the ways in which Forest School pedagogy impacted on their identity as teachers, tentatively but consistently over the course of the sessions. Forest School offered the children opportunities to practice exercising their own agency to 'be.' This task is about building

authenticity in relationships in our education systems (Freire, 2017). Offering, and being offered, challenges, choices, feedback, support and encouragement from peers and adults with(in) nature can mean those learnings can be transferred from the forest to the classroom and beyond.

An ethic of care—theory and practice aligned

The edited narrative of the lifeworld of Forest School is presented as an exemplar of one type of outdoor and adventure education theoretically framed within a relational ethic of care which is inclusive of the more-than-human. The narrative describes some sense of an interconnected ecological whole (Plumwood, 1993) being fostered in Forest School. This feeling of oneness that children (can) experience in nature has been widely discussed in the literature (Bonnett, 2007; Fasting, 2019; Mycock, 2020; Stickney & Bonnett, 2020; Wattchow & Brown, 2011). The narrative is reminiscent of the vitality associated with being with(in) nature, a feeling of looseness yet embeddedness, a rightness that is engendered by these types of experiences, as Abram (2010) describes. For these children, and for the adults in varying degrees, their experience of Forest School resonates with the 'place-essentialness' Mannion and Lynch (2016) describe—the relational pedagogical interaction could simply not happen elsewhere.

This relationality was supported by a mutuality in the adult and child experiences in Forest School that is less likely in the indoor classroom (Armbrüster et al., 2016; Barfod, 2018), towards more fully meeting Noddings criteria for caring relationships predicated on the expressed needs of the relational pedagogical encounter. The teachers experienced what Mannion et al. (2013) described as a less '*constrained*' (p.799) professional identity during Forest School. These experiences are fundamental to enabling adults, as well as children, to respond relationally to the challenges facing education systems raised in this study (Blenkinsop & Fettes, 2020; The Crex Crew Collective and Jickling, 2018; Wals, 2017). For the teachers in this study, there was no sense of a deficit in relationships between them and the Forest School leader that has been described in previous literature, whereby teachers were somehow seen as lacking because they did not fully engage in, or appreciate, the routines of nature pedagogy (Kemp, 2020; Kemp & Pagden, 2019; Maynard, 2007; Whincup et al., 2021). These teachers' experiences were more closely allied with acknowledging that Forest School pedagogy is different from the indoor classroom for them, but also that their understanding of these differences is deepened through participation in Forest School (Davenport, 2019; Kraftl, 2015; McCree, 2019). The Forest School leader can offer a distinctive perspective to the teacher, both in the forest, as mentor-in-action, and as part of the collaborative planning and review process within the framework of the regular learning and teaching activities of the school, as found in previous research on outdoor learning more generally (Blenkinsop et al., 2016; Hovardas, 2016).

Mostly positive and respectful peer and adult/child relationships characterised Forest School in Bay School, as previous studies found (Chawla et al., 2014; Sheldrake et al., 2019). This echoes Noddings' view that in a caring conceptualisation of schooling, classroom and behaviour management is less overt, more intuitive and enables children to manage their behaviour more effectively. Natural environments are associated with less stress, improved mood and restorative effects, which in turn creates more resilient,

Figure 4. Flourishing with(in) nature.

engaged learners. Forest School is a nature-based pedagogy; such pedagogy mitigates risk through its guiding principles of practice. However, as previously discussed, nature is generally less well understood by humans as agentic. As adults, we have, to different degrees, lost the playfulness of the child's ways of being in the world. Yet, being with(in) nature during Forest School enabled the staff there to extend their pedagogical repertoire even if they themselves did not always fully understand or experience nature as sentient. Forest School enabled this expression of vulnerability for these teachers and offered support towards overcoming their concerns.

Such a perspective resonates with the ideas of Rousseau (1762). Learning happens as we ripen with(in) nature, through experiencing the natural consequences of our actions. Indeed, being able to participate in experiential learning is transformational, given its rarity in practice in western schooling (Breunig, 2005). This kind of learning is associated with diverse outcomes that are unpredictable and so meaning-making requires time, space and social interaction. The teacher trusts the learner and vice-versa. The teacher is a learner and vice-versa. Nature is our helping hand, our anchor, our north star at all these different levels of engagement. See Figure 4, Flourishing with(in) nature.

Concluding thoughts

This paper set out to respond to McKenzie and Blenkinsop (2006) and their challenge to us to activate relational caring more explicitly in education. We have responded to that challenge through synthesising Noddings ethic of care and presenting Forest School as an exemplar of relational pedagogy in action, from our vantage point as teacher educators who cherish a wish for every child in primary school to spend time with(in) nature. Our experience is that Forest School can help us to (re)gain the momentum towards our schools as places where caring relationality is fundamental. In Ireland, tentative steps in that direction are being

demonstrated in emergent Forest School practice, a fleeting glance of possibilities ahead. While the evidence explored in this paper concentrates on how an ethic of care is effected through Forest School pedagogy, the ultimate goal is that all pedagogy across all school communities shares this philosophical orientation. The importance of thinking about how progressive, nature-based pedagogy, like Forest School, can help make space for responding to the big questions, to do with our being in the world, to be explored in our schools is underlined in this model. In turn this will encourage schools to prioritise caring, relational pedagogy with(in) nature. This is a view of schools as places where modelling, dialogue, practice and confirmation are the modus operandi of how relational caring is practiced, however imperfectly.

While this kind of pedagogy is in an emergent phase across western school systems, there are hopeful shoots as the worldwide interest in nature-based pedagogy demonstrates. In Ireland, contemporary curriculum reform across the primary (Department of Education, 2023) and early years (Government of Ireland, 2024) sectors is considerably more explicit than heretofore regarding prioritising relational pedagogy in our schools and integrating local nature and outdoor learning environments into daily pedagogy. There is also recognition of the challenging but essential task of achieving greater seamlessness and reciprocity across theory and practice in our schools (National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, 2022). Nevertheless, given the ongoing neo-liberal context of western schooling, introducing and maintaining the fidelity of progressive nature-based pedagogy is challenging. The pedagogic challenge to care in this view is to incorporate a reciprocity to all relationships, towards being with(in) nature. The story of Forest School in Bay School can act as an exemplar for other education communities who wish to explore relational, caring pedagogy with(in) nature. In Bay School, Forest School is an expression of a care ethic, however imperfect. For settings where there isn't such congruence, then introducing Forest School may be a way to explore these issues further.

We close this paper on a hopeful note. We thank Marcia McKenzie and Sean Blenkinsop for the inspiration their paper provided and for their ongoing scholarship in this field. We remember Nel Noddings (1929–2022) for her groundbreaking ethic of care which continues to inspire. And finally, we are grateful to the Citizens Assembly here in Ireland, which in 2023 recommended a referendum to amend the Irish constitution to recognise nature as a holder of legal rights, comparable to companies or people; to enable nature to flourish, and to be restored if degraded and to enable nature to be a party in administrative decision-making and litigation where the rights of nature are impacted (The Citizens Assembly, 2023). Would Noddings agree? We think so.

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