

Music Education and Forest School in Dialogue

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Abstract

In the context of accelerating ecological crises, education is increasingly called upon to reconsider its assumptions about human–nature relationships, knowledge production, and ethical responsibility. Forest School has gained prominence as an outdoor educational approach that foregrounds experiential learning, long-term engagement with natural environments, and relational ways of knowing. At the same time, music education has begun to more explicitly address issues of social justice, ethics, and ecological responsibility. Despite these parallel developments, sustained dialogue between music education and Forest School remains limited. This article offers a conceptual examination of the relationship between music education and Forest School, drawing on a selective narrative engagement with literature from music education, outdoor and environmental education, and ecomusicology. Rather than positioning music education as just an addition to Forest School practices, the article places these fields in dialogue as relational pedagogical practices shaped through sound, embodiment, and shared ecological contexts. Engaging with ecomusicology and a relational onto-epistemology, the article develops a conceptual framework that reorients music education away from anthropocentric and instrumental framings. Through the concepts of sound commons and response-ability, it foregrounds relational ethics and multispecies coexistence, contributing to ongoing debates in music education and outdoor education in the Anthropocene.

Keywords : *Forest School, Music education, Ecomusicology, Relational onto-epistemology*

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Introduction

In the context of accelerating ecological crises, education is increasingly called upon to rethink its underlying assumptions about human–nature relationships, knowledge production, and ethical responsibility. Environmental degradation, climate change, and biodiversity loss have prompted scholars across disciplines to argue that technical solutions alone are insufficient, and that deeper cultural and educational transformations are required to support more sustainable ways of living (Martusewicz et al., 2015; Foster et al., 2019). Within this broader landscape, Forest School has gained prominence as a form of outdoor education that foregrounds long-term engagement with natural environments, experiential learning, and relational ways of knowing (Knight, 2011, 2017). By situating learning within forests and woodland spaces, Forest School offers a pedagogical context in which children’s relationships with the more-than-human world can be reimagined.

At the same time, music education has increasingly engaged with questions of social justice, ethics, and cultural transformation. While traditionally positioned as a human-centred artistic practice, music education has begun to address broader social and political concerns, including equity, inclusion, and identity. More recently, scholars have also suggested that music and music education play an important role in responding to ecological challenges, particularly through their capacity to engage affect, embodiment, and relational forms of understanding (Titon, 2013; Forster & Sutela, 2024).

Despite these parallel developments, explicit dialogue between music education and Forest School remains limited. Music education and environmental education are often seen as separate domains. This article does not question why music education should be added to Forest School, nor does it position music education as serving or enhancing Forest School practice. Instead, it explores the dialogue between music education and Forest School as two relational pedagogical fields that share concerns with embodiment, environment, and ways of knowing. By placing these fields in conversation, the article examines how sound, music, and outdoor learning can be understood as mutually shaping practices within shared ecological contexts. This article also develops a conceptual framework for thinking about music education and Forest School as coupled practices, engaging with sound, ethics, and more-than-human relations in the Anthropocene.

Literature Review

What, then, might emerge from bringing music education and Forest School into dialogue?

Such a question is rarely asked. Taking the UK as an illustrative case, Forest School is a well-established and widely recognised educational approach, particularly within early childhood and primary education (Murray & O'Brien, 2005; Knight, 2017). While Forest School practice places strong emphasis on outdoor play, experiential learning, and sustained engagement with natural environments, explicit references to music education within this context remain relatively limited. A review of a range of official Forest School websites in the UK suggests that, although outdoor learning and environmental engagement are widely discussed, music is rarely addressed as a distinct or integrated area of learning.

At the national level, the UK's *National Plan for Music Education* and the primary school music curriculum set out ambitious aims for developing children's musical skills, creativity, and cultural understanding (Department for Education, 2022). However, these frameworks primarily focus on musical technique, performance, and artistic development (Viig, 2015), with little reference to potential connections between music education and environmental or outdoor learning. Ideas such as sustainability or nature-based approaches to music learning are largely absent from current policy discourse.

This separation may be partly explained through practical and structural considerations. Integrating environmental themes into music education would require the development of new curricular approaches within an already extensive programme (Hargreaves, 2011; Schippers, 2009), as well as institutional support for interdisciplinary teaching. In addition, educators trained in environmental education often have limited musical expertise, while music teachers may have little exposure to ecological perspectives or environmental pedagogy (Phelps, 2005; Westerlund & Gaunt, 2013). Any attempt at integration would therefore require careful and thoughtful engagement with both musical and ecological dimensions of learning (Allen, 2011).

More broadly, education in the UK has been influenced by neoliberal policy frameworks that emphasise measurable outcomes and economic value (Ball, 2016). Assessment practices such as the Early Years Foundation Stage Profile illustrate this emphasis on data and performance, which can privilege what is easily measurable over more holistic forms of learning (Takayama & Lingard, 2019). Within such contexts, music, the arts, and ecological

understanding may receive less attention, particularly when their value cannot be readily captured through standardised metrics.

From an academic perspective, as there is limited research specifically addressing music education in the context of Forest School, this discussion necessarily broadens its scope to examine the intersection of music education with related frameworks such as environmental education and outdoor education. Research across these fields provides valuable insights into how music and learning in natural environments intersect and inform one another.

In many cases, studies highlight how outdoor environments open up new possibilities for music education and experiential learning by expanding sensory engagement, imagination, and embodied experience (Adams & Beauchamp, 2018; Yanko & Yap, 2020). Music-making in outdoor settings has been shown to support children's emotional expression, social-emotional learning, creativity, and attentiveness, while also fostering more nuanced forms of listening and sound awareness through engagement with natural soundscapes (Publicover et al., 2018; Gray & Birrell, 2015). More broadly, research within music psychology and creativity studies suggests that engagement with nature plays a significant role in stimulating artistic imagination and creative processes (Ghiselin, 1985; ~~Harman, 2013~~; Piirto, 2011).

Conversely, music has also been widely recognised as a valuable contributor to environmental education. In various contexts, music and the arts have been shown to support the affective dimensions of environmental learning, including emotional engagement, value formation, ethical reflection, and motivation for pro-environmental behaviour (Ramsey, 2002; Králová & Kołodziejski, 2016; Hathaway, 2022). Creative and arts-based pedagogies, often incorporating music, have further been associated with embodied and multi-sensory learning experiences that foster deeper awareness of ecological interdependence and stronger emotional connections with the natural world (Gray & Birrell, 2015; Tan, 2023).

However, much of the existing literature continues to conceptualise the relationship between music education and environmental or outdoor education in largely unidirectional terms, positioning one field as supporting or enriching the other. Such approaches risk overlooking the deeper interconnectedness required for meaningful integration. Instead of treating music education and environmental education as separate domains, an emerging body of scholarship suggests that their relationship may be more productively understood as symbiotic, with each shaping and reinforcing the other through shared pedagogical values, relational practices, and ways of knowing (Bradshaw, 2018; Martusewicz et al., 2015).

Reconsidering Social Constructivism

The preceding discussion points toward the need for a deeper theoretical examination: what theoretical framework should underpin discussions of music education in relation to Forest School, and why? Addressing this question requires first engaging with the theoretical foundations most commonly associated with Forest School practice.

Forest School is commonly understood as a socially constructed form of outdoor education, grounded in social constructivist and experiential learning theories (Knight et al., 2024). As an educational approach situated at the intersection of nature and culture, Forest School is shaped by sociocultural, historical, and environmental contexts, rather than defined by a fixed or universal model (Knight, 2011, 2013, 2017).

From its origins and development, social constructivism has been widely recognised as the theoretical framework of Forest School. Emerging in Denmark in the 1950s, Forest School is rooted in the Scandinavian concept of *friluftsliv*, or “free air life” (Knight, 2013). In Scandinavian contexts, *friluftsliv* reflects a cultural orientation toward nature that emphasises holistic development and lived relationships with the natural world (Henderson & Vikander, 2007; Moser & Martinsen, 2010). As Forest School spread internationally, its principles were adapted to local environments and societal needs, demonstrating its flexibility across different cultural and educational contexts (Beery, 2013; Hofmann et al., 2018).

Due to its documented benefits for children’s physical health, mental well-being, and environmental awareness, Forest School has expanded across Europe, North America, Australia, and beyond (Knight, 2013). Its global adoption further illustrates how Forest School practices are shaped by the cultural, social, and historical conditions of the contexts in which they develop (Leather, 2018; Dean, 2019). For example, in the UK, Forest School has been influenced by industrialisation and Romantic ideals, framing nature as both a source of inspiration and a domain to be managed or utilised (Cook, 1999; Stevens, 2013). In contrast, in Denmark, Forest School emerged largely from practical childcare needs and emphasised harmonious living with nature through *friluftsliv* (Williams-Sieghedsen, 2017). These differing trajectories reflect contrasting understandings of human–nature relationships.

While social constructivism provides a useful framework for explaining such contextual variation, this article argues that it is insufficient on its own. Although Forest School is often described as taking different philosophical forms across contexts, closer examination

suggests that these differences involve underlying assumptions that extend beyond social constructivist explanations. In particular, social constructivism tends to centre human meaning-making processes, which may limit its capacity to account for the role of nature beyond a socially mediated context.

This limitation becomes evident in the adoption of Forest School in China, where it is not yet a commonly recognised educational approach. From a social constructivist perspective, Forest School in China must adapt to local social, cultural, and geographical conditions, resulting in a distinct Chinese model rather than a replication of Western practices (Leather, 2018). However, this adaptation occurs within a context shaped by competing conceptions of nature. A widely used policy slogan in China states that “green waters and green mountains are themselves gold and silver mountains,” framing nature primarily in terms of economic value. This view contrasts with Taoist philosophy, which emphasises harmony between humans and the natural world and understands nature as an interconnected and co-existing presence rather than a resource for exploitation (Zhuangzi, 2020).

Faced with these contrasting perspectives, a critical question emerges: should educational paradigms frame nature primarily through economic utility, or should they cultivate awareness of its intrinsic and relational significance? This tension suggests the need to move beyond social constructivism alone when theorising Forest School, and to consider perspectives that recognise nature as more than a social or cultural construct.

Ecomusicology and Relational Onto-epistemology

Ecomusicology serves as a perfectly suitable lens through which the onto-epistemology can be further clarified. Ecomusicology is defined as the study of music, culture, and nature in all the complexities of those terms (Allen, 2011). It has emerged as a response to contemporary environmental crises, seeking to understand how musical practices intersect with ecological concerns (Titon, 2013). As Allen (2011) notes, music, culture, and nature are “immensely complex words that are rich with contextual meanings” (p. 392), reflecting the intricate interconnections among these foundational concepts. In this sense, ecomusicology encompasses the key elements central to discussions of music education within Forest School contexts.

Ecomusicology is inherently interdisciplinary, connecting the arts, humanities, and sciences to address environmental and educational challenges (Allen, 2012). As a flexible field rather than a fixed discipline, it encourages innovation and cross-disciplinary dialogue. This openness fosters diverse research and deeper insights into music's relationship with the environment (Allen, 2011; Titon, 2013, 2020). As an interdisciplinary field, ecomusicology shifts from a purely anthropocentric humanities perspective to the broader lens of environmental humanities (Allen & Titon, 2019). It explores the interconnections between music, culture, and nature, highlighting how music is shaped by the natural world, built environments, and broader planetary systems. Music-making relies not only on human culture but also on non-human resources such as trees, rocks, birds, water, and even gravity.

Traditionally, musicology has been human-centred, but in the past decade, ecomusicology has expanded to include non-human communities, moving toward an ecocentric approach. Rooted in a sense of responsibility, ecomusicology seeks to understand sonic relationships among living beings and their environments while applying this knowledge for the well-being of the Earth and its inhabitants (Allen & Titon, 2019). The term ecomusicology can be interpreted in two ways: as ecological musicology, influenced by ecological science and adopting an ecocentric perspective, or as ecocritical musicology, shaped by literary studies and taking an anthropocentric approach (Allen, 2011a, 2011b; Titon, 2013, 2015). Rather than fixed binaries, these perspectives exist on a continuum, serving as conceptual tools to understand human relationships with non-human life and the abiotic environment (Allen, 2012; Allen & Dawe, 2015).

For the integration of music education and Forest School, this perspective suggests that its significance lies not merely in breaking down disciplinary boundaries within an educational space. Rather, it invites critical reflection on the boundaries themselves and on the processes of differentiation through which disciplines and educational practices are separated. As discussed in the earlier literature review, music education and Forest School are often positioned as unrelated and independent subjects, each serving human-centred educational aims. Yet, they are deeply interconnected, offering a way to rethink human positioning and responsibility within the Anthropocene.

Central to this perspective is Titon's (2013) concept of a relational epistemology, which emphasises interconnectedness, mutual care, and the primacy of relationships over individualistic or economically driven concerns. Within this framework, music becomes a

medium for creating relationships, cultivating shared spaces of meaning, and fostering connections between humans, non-humans, and their environments.

Drawing from ecomusicology, my research adopts a relational onto-epistemology, closely aligned with posthumanist perspectives. This theoretical approach provides a deeper and more expansive foundation for Forest School education, one that moves beyond the limitations of social constructivism. While social constructivism foregrounds the ways in which knowledge is co-constructed through human interactions, it tends to maintain an anthropocentric perspective, positioning nature as a backdrop rather than an active participant in the learning process. By contrast, a relational onto-epistemology offers a framework in which music, culture, and nature are not distinct entities, but co-constitutive forces engaged in ongoing interaction (Titon, 2013, 2015).

From a posthumanist perspective, knowledge does not emerge solely through human interpretation, but through ongoing intra-actions among humans, non-humans, and environments (Barad, 2007). Such an approach challenges neoliberal and reductionist views of nature as a passive resource, instead recognising the active agency of the more-than-human world. Within Forest School contexts, this framework supports an understanding of music education as grounded in relational, ecological, and ethical engagement, shaped through the dynamic interplay of human and non-human actors.

Sound Common, Ethics, and Response-ability

Within a relational onto-epistemological framework, questions inevitably arise regarding the decentring of the human. This challenge becomes particularly evident in Forest School settings, where children frequently encounter other living beings, such as ants or earthworms. While it is possible to acknowledge the agency of these small animals, children are often still positioned as the central participants in such encounters. Ethical reflection tends to default to anthropocentric frameworks, even when intentions are explicitly ecological. Multispecies encounters, however, are neither inherently harmonious nor symmetrical. Ants may bite children, while children can easily kill ants. These interactions do not offer clear moral principles or straightforward resolutions to ethical dilemmas (Haraway, 2011). The difficulty

lies in moving beyond human-centred empathy, which presumes hierarchical moral obligation, toward a relational, posthumanist perspective that recognises multispecies encounters as co-constitutive and contingent rather than morally ordered in advance (Haraway, 2023).

The concept of the sound commons offers a way of reconfiguring this ethical terrain. Drawing on commons theory following Ostrom (1990), a commons is neither privately owned nor governed by a single actor; instead, it comes into being through shared access and collective use. Applied to sound, the sound commons can be understood not as a stable or fixed collection of sounds, but as a relational acoustic field that is continually entered, inhabited, and perceived. Thoreau (1906) described such a sonic environment as one in which every being communicates within its own sonic territory, what soundscape ecologists later conceptualised as an acoustic niche. Within a sound common, biotic and abiotic entities coexist and interact within a shared acoustic space, embodying both sound equity and ecological rationality (Allen et al., 2014). If beings are granted the right to thrive, then the inhabitants of a sound commons should likewise be understood as having the right to communicate within their respective acoustic niches in an ethical way.

Barad's (2007) concept of *response-ability* provides a critical way to discuss ethics within a sound common. Rather than understanding responsibility as a pre-existing moral obligation possessed by an autonomous human subject, response-ability reframes responsibility as an emergent capacity that arises within relational entanglements. Ethical action, from this perspective, does not precede relations but is generated through them, as the ability to respond is co-constituted by the configurations of bodies, materials, temporalities, and environments involved.

This relational understanding of ethics is particularly suited to sound because permeability, blurred boundaries, and entanglement are not incidental features but constitute the ontological foundations of sound itself (Allen & Dawe, 2015). Within a sound common, intention and responsibility are therefore no longer bound by linear causality. Instead, they become distributed across multiple relational nodes operating simultaneously. Ethical attention shifts away from questions of who produces a sound and toward how sonic relations shape what becomes perceptible, actionable, or prioritised within a given world. Moral

agency is exercised jointly by human and more-than-human participants, as sound itself functions as forms of action, affecting, intervening, masking, amplifying, and reorganising acoustic relations. In this sense, sound is not merely media through which ethical intentions are expressed, but relational forces through which ethical effects are generated.

In Forest School contexts, this ethical orientation shifts pedagogical attention away from authorship, ownership, or control of sound and toward the relational effects of sonic practices. It invites a pedagogical shift that foregrounds sensitivity to how different species contribute to and are affected by a shared soundscape, rather than treating non-human beings as passive objects of observation (Allen & Dawe, 2015). Understanding response-ability through sound thus provides a basis for rethinking ethical Forest School practices. Grounded in relational onto-epistemology, this framework invites educators to reconsider not only how learning unfolds in nature, but also how humans position themselves within the world and in relation to more-than-human others.

Conclusion

This article has examined the relationship between music education and Forest School Education. Based on a relational onto-epistemology, the dialogue between these two fields has moved beyond disciplinary separation and instrumental framings, showing how music education and Forest School can be understood as interrelated practices.

Through engagement with ecomusicology, the concepts of sound commons, and response-ability, the article has reoriented ethical reflection away from human-centred intention toward relational effects and shared conditions of coexistence. In Forest School contexts, this perspective foregrounds attentiveness to how sound participates in shaping relationships among humans, non-human beings, and environments. Rather than offering prescriptive solutions, this discussion provides a conceptual basis for thinking about music education and Forest School as practices that invite ongoing ethical reflection, relational awareness, and response-able ways of being with the more-than-human world. Future research may further explore how these relational understandings of sound, music, nature, and ethics are taken up, negotiated, and enacted within diverse educational contexts.

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